



# General Grammar vs. Universal Grammar: an unbridgeable chasm between the Saussureans and Chomsky

Mohammad Amin Shakeri

## ► To cite this version:

Mohammad Amin Shakeri. General Grammar vs. Universal Grammar: an unbridgeable chasm between the Saussureans and Chomsky. *Le Cours de Linguistique Générale, 1916-2016. l'émergence*, Jan 2017, Genève, Switzerland. pp.3-10. hal-01773237

**HAL Id: hal-01773237**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01773237>**

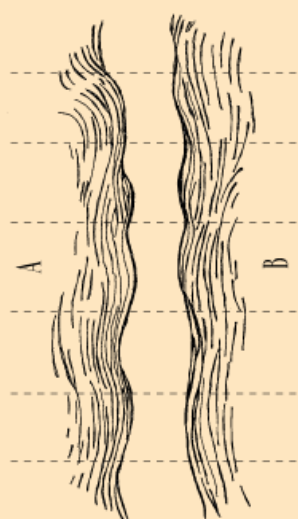
Submitted on 27 Apr 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Le Cours de Linguistique Générale 1916-2016

Genève - Paris • 2016 - 2017



## TRAVAUX DES COLLOQUES LE COURS DE LINGUISTIQUE GÉNÉRALE, 1916-2016. L'ÉMERGENCE, LE DEVENIR

Éditeurs scientifiques : Daniele  
GAMBARARA, Fabienne REBOUL.

Mohamed Amin Shakeri, « General  
Grammar vs. Universal Grammar: an unbridgeable  
chasm between the Saussureans and Chomsky »

Communication donnée dans l'atelier de  
Claire Forel, Genoveva Puskas, Thomas  
Robert, Giuseppe Cosenza, **Saussure-  
Chomsky : converging and diverging**, au  
colloque **Le Cours de Linguistique  
Générale, 1916-2016. L'émergence**,  
Genève, 9-13 janvier 2017.

CERCLE FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

N° D'ISBN : 978-2-8399-2282-1

Pour consulter le programme complet de l'atelier de Claire Forel, Genoveva Puskas, Thomas Robert, Giuseppe Cosenza,

***Chaussure-Chomsky : converging and diverging :***

<https://www.clg2016.org/geneve/programme/ateliers-libres/saussure-chomsky-converging-and-diverging/>



# General Grammar vs. Universal Grammar: an unbridgeable chasm between the Saussureans and Chomsky<sup>1</sup>

Mohammad Amin SHAKERI  
Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Iran  
[m.amin.shakeri@gmail.com](mailto:m.amin.shakeri@gmail.com)

## 1- Outline

As Harris (2003: 152-170) has illustrated -especially by his concentration on the notion of 'creativity'- 'Chomsky the Saussurean' is nothing but "an academic fable". This fable is a result of misreading -by Chomsky himself (1964) and also by others-, assimilating Saussure's *la langue* (in the singular form) with the generativist concept of 'competence' and, therefore, its grammar with the Universal Grammar (UG).

Chomsky's approach to deviant utterances, from his standpoint of individual psychology, never brings him to a concept of 'grammar' which function would also be to explain poems, puns and any kind of wordplay. The contradiction here is that, on one hand, he claims just to speak about the 'individual faculty of language' (which can lead to an infinite number of individual grammars), and on the other hand, his aim is to discover the UG which means "a framework of principles and elements common to attainable human languages" (Chomsky, 1986: 3) (which for him would be a concrete unique absolute one). This situation leads him to assume a completely transcendental postulate which claims that all human beings share an innate, genetically determined language faculty that contains/knows the rules of UG. As a result, Chomsky and others in the huge generativist camp concentrate their attempts on the search for a vouchsafed 'universal rule-and-concept system' which is a reproduction of an old traditional dream of a 'universal language of thought'. In a Saussurean perspective, this assumption, aside from its failure to observe the diversity and specificity of languages, is a metaphysical and, therefore, an incoherent basis for linguistic theory.

Basing linguistic theory on language acquisition or biological facts is not at all acceptable for Saussure because any understanding of the *faits de parole* and 'substantive facts' presupposes an understanding or an implicit definition of language which is, in Chomsky's case, the common modular understanding of language. The generativist modular conception of language, therefore, turns a deaf ear to the fundamental problems propounded by Saussure concerning the very essence of language, especially the arbitrariness of linguistic sign.

How does Saussurean linguistics define its own grammar as General Grammar, and how does it deal with the common or universal linguistic facts which are the main goals for the Chomskyans? In the

---

<sup>1</sup> I strongly recommend reading the interesting paper by Fredrick J. Newmeyer in this volume. In his absorbing narrative, he provides a critical perspective on the theoretical relationship between Saussure's ideas and Chomskyan grammar, which is different from mine, but complementary to it.

present study, this is a main concern, which I intend to consider as a matter of ‘algebra of language’ and also as a question of typology by investigating the few indications by Saussure in the CLG and ELG and the explications given by Hjelmslev. From this perspective, we will find only the universal arbitrary structural rules in our search for a general framework/calculus susceptible to describe all possible languages and language types.

Finally, in agreement with Harris and De Mauro, we will claim that the Chomskyians and the Saussureans are in two fundamentally different paths in dealing with grammar, where the latter –and notably Hjelmslev- provides a broader possibility for theorizing language.

## 2- Introduction

This communication is going to deal with the core subject of the atelier “*Saussure-Chomsky: converging and diverging*” in a manner which seems to be a strong argumentation in favor of the divergence between these two mainstreams of Linguistic sciences –as it can also be interpreted from the title itself. By the way, beside the “convergence-divergence” debate, I hope I will be able to go a little deeper and provide some problematic epistemological and fundamental issues therein.

There are lots of problems to discuss on this topic, but I decided to narrow down my field to some basic and introductory issues. As a prerequisite to tackle this topic, I will first mention that reading Chomsky as a Saussurean is just an academic fable. But I won’t stop at this point. I’ll then mention some essential problems with Chomskyan approach to language. Afterwards, and as a conclusion, I’ll discuss how a Saussurean Grammar –which I preferred to label here as “General Grammar” (GG) - could/should/would deal with languages and ideas such as universals.

## 3- The Fable of “Chomsky the Saussurean”.

As Harris (2003: 152-170) has illustrated -especially by his concentration on the notion of ‘creativity’- ‘Chomsky the Saussurean’ is nothing but “an academic fable”. This fable, among others, is a result of misinterpreting Saussure’s *la langue* as the generativist concept of ‘competence’ and, therefore, its grammar as the Universal Grammar (UG). Here I’m not going to open a discussion either about the misreading by Chomsky and other generativists for or against Saussure, nor about the apparent difference between the notions of “competence” and “*langue*”.

Chomsky, as a neo-rationalist, insists that we are born with a rich and invariant conceptual system, a common biological property of human beings, labeled UG. This UG -of which one definition is “a framework of principles and elements common to attainable human languages” (Chomsky, 1986: 3)- consists of some hierarchical sets of parameters which allow a language (?)/ child to choose among the pairs of possibilities. Such a framework, as for Chomsky, is the innate biological one which we should find in a Universal Grammar. As this Internalized-Language is exposed to a linguistic environment (he doesn’t speak about society!) which is *per se* poor for constructing a language, we will have a language with all its language-specific facts, a secondary and posterior entity. As it’s obvious, this is far away from the Saussurean demand to understand language as a collective semiological totality.

I’ll get back to some essential elements of this problem, but first I would like to conclude this paragraph with a citation from De Mauro, who closes his critical edition of CLG by these words:

“To the dialectic between naturalness and historicity, between *langage* and *langues*, traced by Saussure, Chomsky opposes the attempt to reduce the world of multiplicity and historical

variety in the (presumed) immobility of nature, of biological heredity. The lack of interest in the ethnographic and semantic aspects, the absence of semiological perspectives, the lack of adequate deepening in the theory of arbitrariness, leave Chomsky and the Chomskyans no other way than this one. A path radically different from the one followed at the beginning of this century, by the silent and problematic research of Saussure.” (De Mauro, 1995 : 404; translated by the author)<sup>2</sup>

#### 4- Some fundamental/epistemological problems with Chomsky’s approach in a Saussurean perspective

Dozens of problems could be listed under this topic. I will just mention three of the most important ones:

##### 4- 1- Epistemology

The UG theory assumes a completely transcendental postulate which claims that all human beings share an innate, genetically determined language faculty that includes rules of UG. As a result, Chomsky and the others in the huge generativist camp attempt to seek a vouchsafed ‘universal language of thought’ or a ‘universal rule-and-concept system’ which is a revival of an old traditional dream. From a Saussurean perspective, this assumption, aside from its failure to observe the diversity and specificity of languages, is a metaphysical and, therefore, an incoherent basis for linguistic theory.

Aside from this Platonic innateness of a universal linguistic framework, there is another basic presupposition which can be described as a complete accordance between [if not to say a priority of] the results from analyses in pedalinguistics with all other aspects of the phenomenon of language which saturates the life of *le sujet parlant*. A pure Saussurean approach never believes in such presuppositions, because Saussure’s request was to construct a calculus for language, an algebra being free of any metaphysical and transcendent postulate or presupposition. In Bouissac’s words:

“Saussure’s epistemological strategy consisted of heuristically eliminating points of view that were important but not essential, that is, not specific to language alone. This is how he reached the notion of *langue* as the system of differential relations, or values without which signification and communication could absolutely not be achieved.” (Bouissac, 2010: 81)

In *le 3ème Cours*, we read:

“By distinguishing thus between the language [*langue*] and the faculty of language [*langage*], we see that the language [*langue*] is what we may call a ‘product’: it is a ‘social product’: we have set it apart from the operation of the vocal apparatus, which is a permanent action. You can

---

<sup>2</sup> The original French text is:

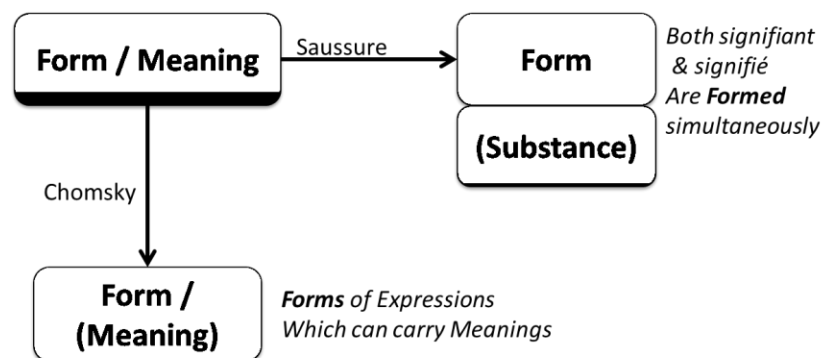
« A la dialectique entre naturalité et historicité, entre *langage* et *langues*, tracée par Saussure, Chomsky oppose la tentative de résorber le monde de la multiplicité et de la variété historique dans l’immobilité (présumée) de la nature, de l’hérédité biologique. Le désintérêt pour les aspects ethnographique et sémantique, l’absence de perspectives sémiologiques, l’absence d’approfondissement adéquat de la théorie de l’arbitraire, ne laissent à Chomsky et aux chomskiens d’autre voie que celle-là. Une voie radicalement différente de celle sur laquelle s’est placée, au début de ce siècle, la recherche silencieuse et problématique de Saussure. »

conjure up a very precise idea of this product - and thus set the language [*langue*], so to speak, materially in front of you - by focusing on what is potentially in the brains of a set of individuals <(belonging to one and the same community)> even when they are asleep; we can say that in each of these heads is the whole product that we call the language [*langue*]. We can say that the object to be studied is the hoard deposited in the brain of each one of us; doubtless this hoard, in any individual case, will never turn out to be absolutely complete. We can say that language [*langage*] always works through a language [*langue*]; without that, it does not exist. The language [*langue*], in turn, is quite independent of the individual; it cannot be a creation of the individual; it is essentially social; it presupposes the collectivity” (3ème Cours: 7-8)

From these important considerations, we can show the special Saussurean approach to the relations between mind, brain and society; an approach essentially different from the Chomskyan one. Getting into details and addressing the issues connected with this matter need a lot of space and could be done at another time. Here, we can settle for this and deal with the next element.

#### 4- 2- Form

The conception of “form” is in fact the essential and basic element which fundamentally differentiates these two approaches or paradigms. For Chomsky, for generativists, and generally for the majority of linguists, the concept of “form” comes into an opposition with “meaning”. While Saussure illustrates that the concept of “form” relates to the whole sphere of language, and he replaces the ancient habitual opposition with a “form/substance” pair, where the latter is nothing but an *amorphous mass*. “Any kind of linguistic entity represents a relation... [In language] everything is based on a relation” (cited in Engler 1968: 274). We can see this conceptual turn as a “rupture” in the history of linguistic science, since the “form” is no longer devoted merely to the “*signifiant*”, but also equally to the “*signifié*”(Figure. 1). It is obvious in his unfruitful efforts to apply Hamilton’s Quaternion in order to achieve a calculus for the sign system of language.



**Figure 1. Conception of “form” in Saussurean and Chomskyan grammars**

Chomsky and the Chomskians remain silent about this fundamental problem and keep following the tradition of “form/meaning” opposition (Figure. 1). This is the fact pointed out by De Mauro:

“[Chomsky] seems to have failed to realize that Saussure’s theoretical enterprise was aimed at getting back to basics; whereas Chomsky tamely accepted most of intellectual baggage of the Western grammatical tradition (concepts such as ‘noun’, ‘verb’, ‘subject’, ‘predicate’, etc.) and dressed it up in his own terminology” (cited in Harris, 2003: 160).

#### 4- 3- Irregularity

The next problem is how these two grammars cope with so-called irregularities in language. How do they deal with the entities habitually labeled as exceptions? These questions bring us back to the more fundamental problem of the “rationality/irrationality” of language. Although Chomsky has already occasionally referred somehow to a kind of irrationality of language (for example, in his *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966) where he cites empathetically Herbert by this phrase: “it is the nature of natural instinct [=the system of common notions] to fulfill itself irrationally, that is to say, without foresight.” (p. 100)), but the obvious purpose of his project is to “rationalize” the phenomenon of language, which gradually becomes more apparent in the last versions of his binarist grammar.

As anticipated, the rationalism of Chomsky leads to dealing with irregularities as exceptions, which should be seen as marginal irrational entities, and should be put aside from the central objective- the UG. We can find many citations on this matter. For instance, Chomsky declares:

“The systems called “languages” in common sense usage tolerate exceptions: irregular morphology, idioms, and so forth. These exceptions do not fall naturally under the principles-and-parameters conception of UG. Suppose we distinguish *core language* from *periphery*, where a core language is a system determined by fixing values for the parameters of UG, and the periphery is whatever is added on in the system actually represented in the mind/brain of a speaker-hearer” (Chomsky, 1986: 147).

So, we can see why most generativists merely tend to list exceptions, since they do not belong to the UG.

On the contrary, the Saussurean paradigm seems to disagree with such a rational approach to language. Besides, it’s nonsense to say that the notions of “core” and “periphery” languages for Chomsky are respectively the same as “*langue*” and “*parole*” for Saussure. In *3me Cours*, we have an important declaration about the two last notions:

“The language [*langue*] is a kind of secretion which is in any case perfectly distinct from the speech [*parole*] function that is necessary in order to produce this secretion.” (*3ème Cours*: 72)

Furthermore, Saussure frequently emphasizes and suffered from the irrationality of language –this became more obvious to us after the publication of his working papers. In many respects, language appears to Saussure as an uncontrollable, unclassifiable and wild dynamism. It is both rational and irrational. So a Saussurean General Grammar should welcome irregularities and exceptions as the structural entities of language and should be able to register them regardless of the “reason”.

#### 5- How could General Grammar deal with Universals?

In addition to what I have mentioned up to this point, I would like to address the two Grammars under consideration. But I feel it is better to first leave a comment under the subject matter of “*Saussure-Chomsky: converging and diverging*”:

The problem of converging, interpreting or producing any kind of judgment between these two approaches to the grammar, can be treated only by taking the standpoint of one of these two paradigms, or a third predefined and determined one. If we claim that we can do it on a neutral ground, it’s nothing but an illusion, since what is propounded by Chomsky, even if it is seen as a scientific revolution, is in fundamental accordance with our Western Common Sense, which is rooted in the individual, liberal and dual Cartesian “sujet” and which is reproducing itself day after



day in the new forms (such as neo-liberalism and so forth), while the ideations of Saussure and his structuralist efforts were the ones challenging this Common Sense. So, here, before and after, I choose the latter standpoint.

Now, Saussurean approach seeks to grasp language in its integrity, since language as a saturating system comes into existence only by virtue of its totality and of the negative mechanism of its entities. Hence, the similarities coming from the comparisons between languages are nothing but accidental and superficial facts compared to the idiosynchronic systems of languages. So, in this respect, how is it possible to have a panchronic linguistics? For Saussure, this question is linked with his attempts to grasp "*La double essence du langage*". In fact, our problem always comes back to this point: "What do we talk about when we talk about language?" Chomsky's claim to overcome this question, on one hand, relies upon those common accidental facts (which are hopefully being read as Core or Universal), and on the other hand, is based on a specific (read "rational") kind of individualist and psychological view which reduces language to one of the cognitive capacities (regardless of the claim which gives an essential status to it) - these bases lead him to propound the idea of UG.

But in a saussurean approach, the question goes with a pure exploration into the very heart of the language, which is usually interpreted from two viewpoints: as a phenomenological matter about encountering the monster called "language", or as a fundamental investigation aiming at achieving an algebraic autonomous linguistic science. Both, in their pure form, bring us to a comprehension of language as a totality which saturates its life (even in its common biological sense) and makes it possible, and lead us to introduce its facts as General ones. The second viewpoint, which I would strongly support, and which is best followed in the Glossematics of Hjelmslev, is that saussurean lineage which shows us that all the things we have the right to present as the grammar of a particular language are only the theoretical and arbitrary schemas and facts which make it possible to grasp the totality of language and introduce a system to it; these are exactly the Generals which are about to "construct" the General Grammar. So this is how one can approach the desire of Saussure: Providing knowledge of language, not as a representation of a physicalist-neuro-cerebral mechanism, not as an individual and rational psycho-cognitive capacity, not even as an object for phenomenology, but merely as a purely "linguistic" one (which I call "absolute immanency").

Finally, I summarize or conclude my overall view on the behaviors of these two Grammars in dealing with different languages, by some kind of graph which doesn't completely satisfy me. By the way, here (Figure. 2), in both levels of description and explanation, if we have 3 hypothetical actualized languages in a hypothetical sphere of the actualized languages, the UG seeks for a limited rational core system by virtue of all its postulates and presuppositions cited above, and from there it hopes to shed some lights on the periphery facts. On the other side, the Saussurean GG seeks for a holistic, General arbitrarily constructed system which can be projected not only to the actualized idiosynchronic systems under consideration, not only to the whole hypothetical sphere of actualized systems, but to the whole possibility by which it can describe or explain the rational and irrational life of language.

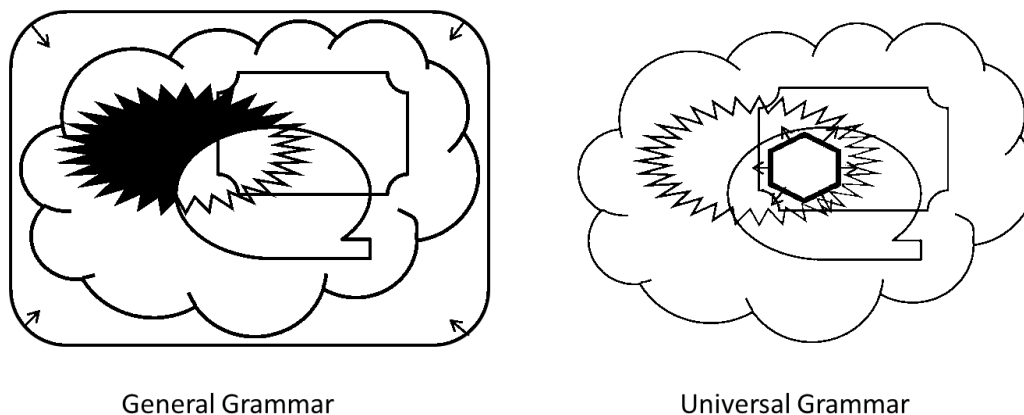


Figure 2. A tentative graph representing the basic behaviors of GG and UG

## Bibliography

Bouissac, P. (2010). *Saussure: A guide for the perplexed*. A&C Black.

Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1964). "Current issues in linguistic theory", in Jerry A. Fodor and Jerrold J. Katz (ed.). *The structure of language*. pp. 50-118.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1966). *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*. New York: Harper & Row.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1986). *Knowledge of language: Its nature, origin, and use*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

De Mauro, T. (1995). in Ferdinand de Saussure (éd. critique préparée par Tullio De Mauro ; postface de Louis-Jean Calvet), *Cours de linguistique générale*, pp. 400-4

Harris, R. (2003). *Saussure and his Interpreters*. Edinburgh University Press.

Hjelmslev, L. (1935). *La catégorie des cas: étude de grammaire générale*. Universitetsforlaget.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1961). *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Translated by Francis J. Whitfield. University of Wisconsin Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1975) *Résumé of a Theory of Language*. Translated by Francis J. Whitfield. University of Wisconsin Press.

Saussure, F. de. (1968). *Cours de Linguistique Générale. Critical edition by Rudolph Engler*. Vol. 1. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1993). *Troisième Cours de Linguistique Générale (1910-1911): D'après Les Cahiers D'Emile Constantin*= Saussure's Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1910-1911): from the Notebooks of Emile Constantin. Pergamon.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2006). *Writings in general linguistics*. Oxford University Press on Demand.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2011). Wade Baskin, and Perry Meisel. *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press.