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The Concept of Value in Saussurian Semiology

Sandrine Bédouret-Larraburu
Pau and Pays de l'Adour University, France

Abstract
This article reflects on the concept of value, one of Saussure's key concepts in semiology: this notion allows Saussure to avoid the question of traditional signification, which would involve a restricted understanding of language as a set of signifieds (*signifiés*) that would communicate the idea of the speaker. "The essence of the fact", which is also "the essence of the language" appears as a complex tangle where the signs take on meaning in relation to others, hence the idea of value. This article proposes to analyze how the concept of value has led to the renewal of linguistics and resulted in the reinvigoration of its functioning. In order to do so, it will reflect on the meaning of the term value, before examining how it operates at the level of sound, word and literature.

Keywords: value, vitality, semantics, literature

> We do not find any significant difference between the terms *value, meaning, signification, function* or *use* of a form, nor even with the notion or content of a form: these terms are synonymous. It must be accepted however that *value* expresses better than any other word the essence of this concept, which is also the essence of the language system (*langue*) itself, namely that a form does not *have meaning* but *has value*: that is the crucial point. It *has value*, hence it implies the existence of other *values*. (WGL, p. 12)

This quotation raises questions first and foremost because it suggests equivalence among terms which we as linguists would like to see more precisely defined. The association of the terms "signification, meaning" contributes to the idea of a semantic conception of language. However, the introduction of terms like *value, function*, *use* leads us to think that the conception of the sign—and of language, more generally—covers broader domains in Saussure's theory. Moreover, the choice of the contrastive connector "however" nuances, even annihilates, this first reading, and ultimately gives more importance to the concept of *value*. I am interested in this concept because it is in fact a key concept within Saussurian semiology. Indeed, in Saussure's theory, which raises questions about language in different ways, the concept of *value* seems to be a central point. Finally, in this quotation, Saussure relies on "the essence of the concept", to establish the notion of value. This notion allows Saussure to avoid the question of traditional signification, which would offer a restricted understanding of language as a set of signifieds (*signifiés*) that would communicate the idea of the speaker. "The essence of the concept", which is also "the essence of the language system", appears as a complex web where signs make sense in relation to one another,

hence the idea of *value*. I propose to analyze how the concept of value has led to the renewal of linguistics and resulted in the reinvigoration of its functioning. In order to do so, I will reflect on the meaning of the term *value*, before then examining how it operates at the level of sound, word and literature.

1. Definitions of *Value*

> It [the form] *has value*, hence it implies the existence of other *values*. (*ibid.*)

In this sentence, the French term *valoir* is used intransitively and with its absolute meaning. The verb *valoir* is from *valere*, whose principal meaning is "to be strong, vigorous"[1], meaning which is then metaphorically extended to "to be powerful, to have value", which makes it possible to "establish, maintain, reign". This term also refers to the fact of being healthy, "of being fine", a seme we can find in certain polite phrases in Latin such as *vale, valete* which can be translated by "take care". If in modern-day French, *valoir* means "to be worth, to have price, merit, credit", the expression "*une forme vaut*" can be understood in an etymological way: "a form is healthy", that is to say, it is alive in its language; "the form has worth" because it is "fully alive". This idea is clear in the title of the 12th section of "On the dual essence of language" (*De l'essence double du langage)* "Life of language" (*Vie du langage*):

> Life of language may mean, firstly, the way language lives through time, i.e. the fact that it may be transmitted.[2] (WGL, p. 33)

The French word *valeur* dates from the 11th century, and comes from classical Latin *valorem*. As early as *La Chanson de Roland*, the term is used with a double meaning. First it means "what someone is valued for, their merit, their qualities" and metonymically it designates "courage"[3]. Since the 13th century, *valeur* has been used to talk about the measurable quality of something (for example, of goods, as they might be used in trading). In this respect, *valeur* means "equivalent of", with the idea of measure. For Alain Rey, the concept of value in Saussure's theory comes from this meaning: "Since the end of the seventeenth century, the idea of exchange has applied to language and value is the meaning of terms according to usage, today and since Saussure, according to their presence in a structure, for example the context or a lexical and semantic set."[4] If Rey's definition is squarely situated within the realm of signification, I would suggest that the notion of value is in fact more complex.

In the 17th century, within the sphere of economics, the idea of *valeur* meaning "price" developed in order to designate "the quality of a thing based on its objective or subjective utility". Within the domain of the arts, this word was used with the meaning of "measure": in the 18th century, in music, *valeur* referred to the duration of a note, whereas in painting it was used to qualify the degree of clarity or obscurity of a color.

Later, in the 19th century, *valeur* was used in science to mean the algebraic or numerical expression of a quantity. This meaning leads me to introduce a new quotation by Saussure, one which is very important in his thinking:

> Every sort of linguistic unit represents a relationship, and a phenomenon too is a relationship. So it is all a matter of relationships. The units are not units of sound, they are

> created by thought. The terms are all complex: (a/b) (a x b)
> All of the phenomena are relationships between relationships. Or this can be put in terms of differences: it is all a matter of differences brought into play in opposition to each other, and being in opposition confers value. (CLG, 1968, pp. 274-275, quoted WGL, p. XIV)

This notion of relationship provides a foundation for the algebraic value of a language because language is, as it were, an algebra,[5] and Saussure adopts a scientific point of view that derives more from mathematics than from life sciences[6].

The Larousse Dictionary of the 19th century puts forward the definition of *valeur* as "price attached to a person, an object", "its importance". The encyclopedic part of the dictionary entry[7] is concerned with economics and identifies a positive value, linked to the satisfaction people feel with the valuable product, as well as a negative one (related to the difficulties in obtaining this product). The value as defined in language by Saussure is a negative one, in the sense that it is established by difference:

> One cannot stress enough the fact that the *values* which basically make up a language system (a morphological system); a system of signals does not consist of either forms or meanings, of either signs or what they signify. They consist of the particular resolution of a certain general relationship between signs and meanings, based on the general difference of the signs *plus* the general difference of the meanings *plus* the previous attribution of certain meanings to certain signs and vice versa. (WGL, p. 13)

There is no justification in being more interested in signs than in meanings, more in forms than in meanings. Value is the relationship that arises between one (entity, phenomenon, form, etc.) and the other (entity, phenomenon, form, etc.): the difference in these relationships makes it possible to construct the value of the statement, the value of discourse, and in both cases it is this value which creates their coherence. Value is a question neither of the adequacy of meaning to thought, nor of sound to concept. According to Saussure, the value of the form resides in the complex relationship among phonic unity, thought and meaning. The question that I intend to address is then how to study these values, and to found a modern semiotics.

2. Differential Values: Phonetics vs. Phonology

> *Langue* depends fundamentally on differences. (WGL, p. 47)

The area of linguistics in which these differences are easiest to highlight is the study of sounds. Saussure's attitude towards phonetics[8] and phonology[9] remains ambiguous.

Chapter VII of the introduction of the CLG is entitled "phonology" (CLG, p. 55). It opposes phonetics, "the study of the evolution of sounds", to phonology "the physiology of sounds". In a long appendix (CLG, pp. 63-95), Saussure describes the phonological system of French. On the other hand, he expresses a great many reservations about this discipline, which he describes as "an auxiliary discipline to the science of language belonging to speaking" (CLG, p. 33). In conclusion, he excludes phonology from the field of linguistics.[10] Saussure develops two metaphors: acoustic impressions are compared to "the threads of various colors" of a tapestry and the phonatory act to "the act of dyeing flags so as to give the impression of green, red, black, etc., in the case of maritime signals"[11] (WGL, p. 176). These two comparisons

exclude phonology but reintroduce semiological systems: the Nautical code is thus considered as a semiological system just like the colored threads of the tapestry, considered as a work of art. Phonology is removed from linguistics because phonation is not a necessity for language[12]. Sounds as such do not interest the linguist:

> The best proof of the fact that only the acoustic impression has a value is that physiologists themselves would be incapable of distinguishing units within the vocal flux outside those units previously established via acoustic sensations. (WGL, p. 176)

Only the acoustic impression counts, it can be related to the syllable, or to the word. In any case, the acoustic impression is only valid if it makes sense. A succession of incidental acoustic units is not perceptible if the listening subject does not associate it with a meaning: the whole must make a system. This is why Saussure proposes semiology. At the same time, Saussure studies writing as a semiological system, which he considers to be just as interesting as the study of sounds. Speech does not need to be articulated,[13] it can just be written, which reduces the interest of phonology.

On the other hand, Saussure is interested in phonetics as a historical science. The third part of the course is devoted to "diachronic linguistics" and essentially to phonetics. It makes it possible to establish morphological values essential for the study of the language. Let us recall that the two books published by Saussure during his lifetime, the *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* and his thesis *De l'emploi du génitif absolu en sanscrit*, fall within diachronic linguistics. The acoustic event must make sense to take on value: "Curiously, in many languages nasals appear intrinsically to represent a semiological quantity." (WGL, p. 25) One of Saussure's objectives is to show that language is constantly evolving, and after having criticized a number of causes generally referred to in treatments of these evolutions (law of the least possible effort, climate, race, etc.), he concludes that a large part occurs randomly. The phonetic phenomenon thus creates disorders in the language, for example, Latin that has undergone changes is rebaptized French, but the consciousness of the language, the consciousness of the speaking subject, counterbalances the phonetic modifications by analogy[14]. For example, the speaking subject uses paradigms of prefixes and suffixes to make the language evolve.

Thus, phonetics is encompassed in the value of the language because the historical evolution of a language is linked to its strength, its vitality; phonetics allows for the study of such evolutions and makes it possible to explain the differences that allow to go from one word to another. Phonetics is inseparable from the mechanisms of signification and plays a key role in morphology, the first system of values claimed by Saussure. Finally, phonetics gives language its temporal value, a relation to history, whose importance should not be underestimated in Saussurian theory.

3. Value as Signification: Lexicography vs. Lexicology

> *Langue* depends fundamentally on differences. The failure to see this, the relentless pursuit of positive values, condemns one, in my view, to skirt the true facts from one end of a linguistic study to another, to bypass the decisive elements involved in all the various approaches to language. (WGL, p. 47)

In referring to positive values, Saussure is referencing the work of the lexicographer, who writes dictionaries. This is also one of the paradoxes of Saussurian thought: Saussure knows the history of words, knows how to rely on etymology and yet denigrates this science that he considers to be more philology than linguistics. As François Rastier[15] demonstrates, Saussurian semiology breaks with ontology by uniting that which pertains to the senses (which would be of the order of sound) and that which concerns intelligibility (which would be of the order of meaning). All units are two-sided and the union between these two faces may vary from one speech event to another, from one word to another. So, "[language consists] of a set of negative values or relative values existing only by the fact of their opposition".[16]

These relative values relate to the associative relationships defined by Saussure as "memory-related" (CLG, 1985, p. 171). The speaking subject chooses a sign rather than another relative to a known set. Saussure raises the question of synonymy. For him, wanting to exhaust the ideas contained in a word is a perfectly illusory enterprise.

Language is not a series of listings, and defining the meaning of words or signs does not interest the linguist. The discourse in which the differences will materialize seems much more relevant to analyze. In discourse, we can also observe syntagmatic relations, in which "any unit acquires its value simply in opposition to what precedes, or to what follows, or to both" (*ibid*.). Saussure's study of Saturnian legends and verses reveals this concern with investigating signs as they are used in textuality and in the chain of discourse. Such an approach allows Saussure to study all that is of value, that is to say, all units that signify, be it the letter (for example, as the goal of the anagram), the symbol (in the legend), etc..

This negative value of signs explains the fact that words have no literal sense or figurative meaning. Value is built in the consciousness of the language, or at least of the speaking subject, since Saussure establishes an equivalence between the two. There is no hierarchy in the lexicon or in language: discourse is valid, exists or does not exist. It is understood or not understood, which clearly complicates the work of the lexicographer:

> Language cannot proceed as the grammarian does; it is from another point of view and the same elements are not given to it; it does what the grammarian thinks are errors, <but> that are not, because there is sanctioned by the language only what is immediately recognized by it. (CLG, 1968, p. 415, n° 2759)

The semiology of Saussure is thus constructed through the conscious activity of the language and not through the estimated value attributed by the grammarian. This type of linguistic analysis focuses less on particular units than on the system as a whole, which makes sense and is understood. The importance of the context in Saussure's semiology opens the way to a linguistics of enunciation[17], much more so than to structural linguistics, based on syntax, (an area that was of much less interest to Saussure than phonetics and lexicology, which he envisioned as a whole).

4. The Value of the Literary Text: A Relationship with History

The question of whether literature is a semiological field for Saussure remains open. Nevertheless, we have seen that Saussure compared acoustic impressions to the colors

of a tapestry (considered as a work of art), and on several occasions, he compared the phrase to "the activity of a composer of music (and not to that of a performer)" (WGL, p. 64[18]). These two artistic domains (tapestry and music) are indeed regarded as semiotic systems[19], whereas literature does not seem to be studied as such. Michel Arrivé rightly points out that Saussure's theoretical research on semiotics coincides with his work on Germanic legends and mythology, and links the units of objects he discovers with words, constructing both a semiotics of language and a semiotics of writing.[20]

What about literature then? Saussure considered it in its documentary aspect (ELG, 2002, p. 173). Saussure avoids passing judgment on literary works, as he considers it out of the question for him to offer an estimation of the literary value of the documents used. However, some comments are found in the *Cours* and the *Écrits*. In particular, he is very rough on French poetry. He considered it as a "*rimerie*", which is a pejorative word to mean "bad riming verse". In his drafts for his French poetry course on versification, he wrote that he had very low regard for this form. He is particularly unfair to Racine, who is generally recognized as one of the most famous French classical poet:

> Wondering at the magnificence of certain things by Racine, it seems to me at all times that I will see the <frame of the> French verse explode, and that the torrent will finally overflow, bursting the dikes, but what a fundamental mistake this turns out to be when we see what follows.[21]

Unsurprisingly, he condemns the tragedies of the 18th century:

> Is there anything more appropriate, more reasonable, and more deeply satisfying at least than seeing this cold French verse continue to be used to serve all the cold productions of the eighteenth century, among which I include all the tragedies by Voltaire first and foremost. A second opportunity was given to modify French verse when the revolution of the Romantics broke out, who were certainly not kind towards any of the traditions and believed themselves to be fearsome[22]

Saussure's sentence stopped there: Does he mean that the Romantics saw themselves as fearsome revolutionaries? Was he thinking of Hugo, who "wanted to twist the neck of this silly Alexandrine[23]"?

Saussure prefers other poems, especially the *Nibelungenlied*.[24] As is visible in the preceding quotes, his commentary seems very ambiguous about what literature is: a text is considered as literature if it is very old ("as for Homer, the precedence of date with respect to literature") or because the poem offers an original form. Nevertheless, we understand that the double relation to the historical event and the transmission of this event constitutes the value of the legend. Moreover, literature whose transmission relies on the written modality does not allow this freedom of the text that the legend enjoys, due to its oral status. Literature does not function as a semiotic system because of the conditions of its reading. That is what seems to come out of his commentary on *Don Quixote*:

> The reading of *Don Quixote* continually alters what would happen to Don Quixote as soon as he was allowed to continue on his way without recourse to Cervantes, which amounts

> to saying that these creations do not pass either the test of time or the test of socialization; they remain individual, unable to be assimilated to our [ ] <Important: It's not like a word. There is no need to compare.[25]

Literature and perhaps even more strangely, poetry, gives the value of a language at a particular time. When he proposes his French poetry course on versification, Saussure is looking for a French form which may be compared with anagrams. Chloé Laplantine[26] shows that these forms are necessary to install a language in social history: they are valuable in the sense that they have historical significance. He thus shows his interest in the rules of poetic language in so far as they are accepted by poets and readers, that they are socialized, and beyond that for language in so far as it is inseparable from its formal unconscious, that it is an "inevitable and profound psychological sociation".[27]

The value of literature is related to the conscious and innovative activity of the language, which he proposes to study as a historical science. If a "*language system* is a social fact" (WGL, p. 120), that is to say, according to Durckheim's criteria, characterized by generality, externality and its coercive power, the fact of language itself is presented as contingent, accidental. The continuity of the language, inscribed in the continuity of history, which can undergo crises and revolutions, does not prevent language from undergoing transformations. Literature allows these transformations. While in the notes for his course, literature was described as a "monument", a memory of a state of language, it allows the event, something new that just may happen: "But all these facts, large or small, in which language is entwined with the lives of a people, with their political, social, literary life, are not, I repeat, or are only rarely what one might call the life of language itself"[28] (WGL, p. 98), by which it is healthy, it is worth something!

Value thus appears as a fundamental concept of Saussurian semiology: borrowed from the lexicon of economics, the term is resemantised by its etymology. It takes on meaning as a synonym for "vigor", and the value of the language expresses its vitality. Its meanings belong to algebra and show that Saussure devised a science detached from the philosophy of his time. The algebraic model allows him to establish the notions of "differential value" and "negative value". This allows him to distance himself from two disciplines: phonology and lexicography. These disciplines are for him ancillary disciplines that he excludes from semiology, a new science that he conceives in a wider sense, as a system: "(Semiology = morphology, grammar, syntax, synonymy, rhetoric, stylistics, lexicology etc., *all of which are inseparable*)[29]" (WGL, p. 26). There remains literature, whose value could be related to language; unless it is the value of the language, which is related to its literature, as a necessary, historical and vital accident.

Notes

1 Article « valeo, ui, itum, ere », Gaffiot Dictionary, p. 1644.

2 « On peut entendre par vie du langage premièrement le fait que le langage vit à travers le temps, c'est-à-dire est susceptible de se transmettre. » (ELG, 2002, p. 54).

3 Article « valeur » in *Dictionnaire historique, Le Robert*, p. 3992.

4 « Depuis la fin du XVIIe siècle, l'idée d'échange s'applique au langage et *valeur* se dit de la signification des termes suivant l'usage, aujourd'hui et depuis Saussure, suivant leur appartenance à une structure, par exemple le contexte ou encore un ensemble lexical et

sémantique », *ibid.*It is my translation.

5 « La langue est pour ainsi dire une algèbre qui n'aurait que des termes complexes », CLG, 1985, p. 168.

6 "There was a time, gentlemen, as you know, when the science of language had convinced itself that it was a natural science, almost a physical science. I do not intend to demonstrate how profoundly illusory this position was, but to assert that the debate is now well and truly closed." (WGL, pp. 97-98)

7 Article « valeur », Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe siècle*, p. 747.

8 We define « phonetics » as study of sounds in themselves in their materiality from the point of view of their emission and their reception. It is the study of sounds in speech. (Neveu, 2000, p. 81)

9 We define « phonology » as the study of sounds from the point of view of their distinctive function in the language system. It is the study of sounds in the language. (Neveu, 2000, p. 83)

10 « toute question phonologique est pour nous absolument située HORS DE LA LINGUISTIQUE » (CLG, 1985, p. 177)

11 « l'acte du teinturier qui aura préparé les drapeaux pour donner l'impression du vert, du rouge ou du noir » (ELG, 2002, p. 248)

12 « Consider, for example, the production of sounds necessary for speaking. The vocal organs are as external to language as are the electrical devices used in transmitting the Morse code to the code itself; and phonation, i.e., the execution of sound-images, in no way affects the system itself. Language is comparable to a symphony in that what the symphony actually is stands completely apart from how it is performed; the mistakes that musicians make inplaying the symphony do not compromise this fact. » *Course in General Linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure* Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, In collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, Translated, with an introductionand notes by Wade Baskin, 18 ; and further « Just what phonational movements could accomplish if language did not exist is not clear; but they do not constitute language, and even after we have explained all the movements of the vocal apparatus necessary for the production of eachauditory impression, we have in no way illuminated the problem of language. », 33.

13 Cf. Michel Arrivé, « Saussure : un langage sans voix ? », *Saussure retrouvé*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016, pp. 39-55.

14 « Heureusement l'effet de ces transformations [phonétiques] est contrebalancé par l'analogie. C'est d'elle que relèvent toutes les modifications normales de l'aspect extérieur des mots qui ne sont pas de nature phonétique./ L'analogie suppose un modèle et son imitation régulière. *Une forme analogique est une forme faite à l'image d'une ou plusieurs autres d'après une règle déterminée*. » CLG, 2016, p. 286.

15 François Rastier, *Saussure au futur*, Les Belles Lettres, coll. Encre marine, 2015. Cf. the chapter « le signe saussurien existe-t-il ? », pp. 63-105.

16 « [la langue consiste] dans un ensemble de valeurs *négatives* ou de valeurs *relatives* n'ayant d'existence que par le fait de leur opposition. » (ELG, 2002, p. 77)

17 We can underline how the manuscripts of Saussure are close to some articles of Benveniste although he could not have read them. Cf. S. Bédouret and C. Laplantine, 2014.

18 ELG, 2002, p. 95.

19 We can link these comparisons to Benveniste's reasoning in "semiology of language", which makes the difference between the three domains by the opposition between semantics and semiotics: music is composed of significant units whereas art figuration has no unity. They are semiotic systems where "signifiance never refers to a convention that

is identically received between partners". Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale,* 2, Gallimard, coll. Tel, 1974, p. 59.

20 Michel Arrivé, « de la lettre à la littérature : un trajet saussurien », S. Bédouret et G. Prignitz, *En quoi Saussure peut-il nous aider à penser la littérature?* Pau: PUPPA, 2012, pp. 40-41.

21 "devant la magnificence de certaines choses de Racine, il me semble à tous moments que je vais voir éclater le <cadre du > vers français, et que le torrent va enfin déborder de son lit, en faisant sauter les digues, mais quelle erreur au fond en voyant la suite". End of f°57, manuscript of Genève library, Ms.fr 3970/ f. It is my translation.

22 "Y a-t-il rien de plus approprié, de plus raisonnable, et de plus satisfaisant au fond que de voir continuer ce froid vers français pour servir à toutes les froides productions du 18e siècle, parmi lesquelles je comprends l'ensemble des tragédies de Voltaire en premier lieu. Une seconde occasion fut donnée de modifier le vers français lorsqu'éclata la révolution des romantiques, qui ne furent certainement pas tendres pour une seule des traditions et se crurent terribles "End of f°58, *ibid*.

23 Victor Hugo, "Quelques mots à un autre", *Les Contemplations*, 1885.

24 « Ce qui fait <la valeur, incomparable> immensité du Nibelungenlied, ce n'est pas comme pour Homère l'antériorité de date sur une littérature, car le texte <peut passer pour être> de 1190 et à peine antérieur à des productions comme le Biterolf, mais c'est donner la légende en sa forme originale et <ENCORE> PRISE <comme une ? qui se dit> AU SÉRIEUX".What makes the "incomparable value" immensity of the Nibelungenlied is not, as for Homer, the precedence of date with respect to literature, for the text <can be considered as> of 1190 and barely prior to productions such as the Biterolf, but is it giving the legend in its original form and <STILL> TAKING <as one? Which is said> SERIOUSLY. "A. Marinetti e M. Meli, *Ferdinand de Saussure : le leggende germaniche*, Este (Padova), libreria editrice Zielo, 1986, p. 441.

25 "La lecture <de Don Quichotte> rectifie continuellement ce qui arriverait à Don *Quichotte* dès qu'on le laisserait courir sans recours à Cervantes, ce qui revient à dire que ces créations ne passent ni par l'épreuve du temps, ni par l'épreuve de la socialisation, restent individuelles, hors d'état d'être assimilées à nos [ ]
<Important : Ce n'est pas comme un mot. Il n'y a pas lieu de comparer [ ] ", A. Marinetti e M. Meli, *op. cit.,* p. 193. Cf Pierre-Yves Testenoire, « littérature orale et sémiologie saussurienne », in S. Bédouret et G. Prignitz, *En quoi Saussure peut-il nous aider à penser la littérature?,* p. 62-64. It is my translation.

26 Chloé Laplantine, « À propos du cours de versification française », S. Bédouret et G. Prignitz, *En quoi Saussure peut-il nous aider à penser la littérature?, op. cit.,* pp. 148-149.

27 Jean Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, p. 119.

28 « Mais tous ces faits, grands ou petits, par où la langue se trouve mêlée à la vie des peuples, à la vie politique, sociale, littéraire, ne sont pas, je le répète, ou ne sont que de temps à autre ce qu'on peut appeler la vie de la langue elle-même. » ELG, 2002, p. 149.

29 « Sémiologie = morphologie, grammaire, syntaxe, synonymie, rhétorique, stylistique, lexicologie etc., le tout étant inséparable) », ELG, 2002, p. 45.

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About the author

Sandrine Bédouret-Larraburu (sandrine.bedouret@univ-pau.fr) is a lecturer in stylistics and linguistics at the University of Pau et des Pays de Adour (France), and she is member of the ALTER laboratory. Her works concern the forms of poetry. Recently, she has published *Rimes et vers français* (Garnier, 2017). She is the author, with Violaine Boneu, of *Le Spleen de Paris by Charles Baudelaire* (Atlande, 2014). Concerning the relations between linguistics and literature, she has co-edited collective works with Gisèle Prignitz on Saussure (2012), with Chloé Laplantine on Benveniste (2015) and with Christine Copy on Antoine Culioli (2018). She directs the "linguist and literature" collection at the Presses Universitaires de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour.