

## Saussure's Critique of Sound Laws\*

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### *0. Introduction*

The notion of law in linguistic studies, with the rise of Neogrammarian movement, came to be not only a major issue of debate, but also a sign of the epistemological crisis that the comparative grammar had undergone. Although there are important works dedicated to the concept of “phonetic laws” in the historiography of linguistics (Wilbur, 1977; Causat 1978), Saussure's approach to this notion, which is borrowed from exact sciences, and criticizes its direct application in linguistics, has not been subject of a detailed study, despite Bouquet's (1997: 251-52) remark.

### *The notion of law and its application in linguistics*

The term German *Lautgesetz*, already used by Bopp, was in common use since 1850's. According to Schleicher, there were two contemporary schools of the linguistics: one that made the phonetic laws the foundation of its work (Curtius, Corssen, and Schleicher himself) and the other one that did not have any such worries (Davies 1998 : 171-72 ; Causat 1978 : 28).

Nevertheless, those are the Neogrammarians who are known for their insistence on the "absolute character" of the phonetic laws compared to mechanical laws. Although the adjectival "mechanical" contrasts with the “organic” in the first half of the century, it must be read as an anti-Schleicherian declaration in Neogrammarian literature (Davis 1998 : 252). Aurox is right when he says that « the apparition of historical and institutional point of view on language is not a result of the quarrel ; on the contrary, it is the apparition of this point of view which is the origin. » (1979 : 9-10) However, he does not give us a sketch of the emergence of the historicist views in linguistics. Therefore let's set to study briefly this transition from an organicist epistemology to a mechanistic one.

Thanks to its romantic background (Verburg 1950), the German comparative grammar conceives its object as a "fourth kingdom" in nature from the beginning, although there are some nuances in the conceptions of a Bopp, of a Humboldt (Reill 1994), of a Müller and a Schleicher (Tort 1979): what is an analogy at the outset becomes a real

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metaphysics toward the end, that is in Schleicher who thinks that the language is a real organic object and linguistics is part of the hard sciences (Tort 1979); the German comparatist leans on one of the most important discoveries of the century, i.e. Darwin's theory, in order to push the comparison toward a "scientific truth".

The first objections are raised by the comparatists of a diversity of nationalities: the German August Friedrich Pott who corresponded with Bréal, among others, in France (Leopold 1984 : 417), the French Michel Bréal and Gaston Paris, the American, W. Dwight Whitney.

Bréal, the untiring critic of the organicist metaphor, does not hesitate to reproach it even in his preface to the translation of Schleicher: "The ideas exposed by Mr. Schleicher will probably raise some contradictions among us, as they provoked some in Germany [...]" (Bréal 1868, quoted by Desmet-Swiggers 1995: 10) He maintained his position through all his work (Desmet-Swiggers 1995: 10). In 1866, that means before the release of *Language and its Study* (1867) by Whitney, he reckons language as one of the human institutions: "But the survey of the idioms, not more than that of the *institutions*, must not make us forget the object for which the man created them." (Bréal 1866 [1995]: 94; *my emphasis*.) And, in 1897, in his *opus magnum*, he continues to criticize the comparatist terminology:

L'abus des abstractions, l'abus des métaphores, tel a été, tel est encore le péril de nos études. Nous avons vu les langues traitées d'êtres vivants : on nous a dit que les mots naissent, se livraient des combats, se propageaient et mouraient. Il n'y a aucun inconvénient à ces façons de parler s'il ne se trouvait des gens pour les prendre au sens littéral. Mais puisqu'il s'en trouve, il ne faut pas cesser de protester contre une terminologie qui, entre autres inconvénients, a le tort de nous dispenser de chercher les causes véritables. (Bréal 1897: 3)

Whitney, having first received a formation in natural sciences, never gives in criticizing this terminology and conception; he pursues a conscious polemics with the theories of Müller and Schleicher throughout his career:

"The word [institution], no doubt, offends some, and seems to others derogatory to the dignity of its subject; but I believe that the more real nature and office of language are understood, and the more established and consistent the linguistic views of the educated become, the more its truth will be acknowledged. *I have used it often, partly in a kind of defiance* to those views which are decidedly opposed to what it implies [...]" (Whitney 1875: 722; *my emphasis*.)

"[Language] as having an independent or objective existence, as being an *organism*, or possessing an *organic structure*, as having laws of growth, as feeling tendencies, as developing, as adapting itself to our needs, and so on. *All these are figurative expressions*, the language of trope and metaphor, not of plain fact; they are wholly unobjectionable when consciously employed in their proper character, for the sake

of brevity or liveliness of delineation; they are only harmful when we allow them to blind us to the real nature of the truths they represent. Language has, in fact, no existence save in the minds and mouths of those who use it; it is made up of separate articulated signs of thought, each of which is attached by a mental association to the idea it represents, is uttered by voluntary effort, and has its value and currency only by the agreement of speakers and hearers.” (Whitney 1880 [1867]: 35)

He adds that this fact is not always explicitly acknowledged and even sometimes denied (by M. Müller for example) (Whitney 1880 [1867]: 35). Whitney postulates language as a human institution: “[...] language is a social institution, and exists primarily and consciously for the purpose of communication.” (Whitney 1875: 719)

It will be Whitney who will exercise more influence on the Neogrammarians and, eventually, on Saussure (Koerner 1980).

This change of conception leads to a crisis in the epistemology and one of its most important results is the debate caused by the Neogrammarians around the sound laws: as soon as the language is conceived as an object undergoing laws of movement comparable to those of mechanics, a new methodology is necessarily required (in other words, as soon as the metaphor is changed, the explicatory model also needs a change). Therefore, the *institutionalism* of which Whitney seems to be the champion is "the threshold that marks the starting point" of the new comparative grammar, as Caussat suggests (1978 : 25). It is the growth of the "realism" against the romanticism, following the expression that Delbrück uses in a retrospective article (city by Caussat 1978 : 24-25). Auroux (2000) emphasizes this metaphysical aspect of the quarrel: "The question is not so much about whether the phonetic laws act mechanically without exception, than to arrive at defining what is a language and if it is a natural or social object." (411)

### *Mechanical laws and sound laws*

On the other hand, the adoption of a mechanistic model in linguistics corresponds to a general tendency in the sciences of the time: the organicism and the mechanism also fight in other disciplines and it is the mechanism that wins a very decisive victory even in biology toward the end of the century (Allen 2005).

Cassirer situates the Neogrammarian movement in the historical German context:

[...] it is easy to see that in turning from Hegel to Haeckel he [Schleicher] merely exchanged one form of *metaphysics* for another. The actual step into the *promised land* of *positivism* was reserved for a later generation of scholars who, instead of attempting a total monistic or evolutionistic explanation of all reality, strove to apprehend the methodological problems of linguistic science in their special character, in their sharp and clear isolation. (1953: 167; *my emphasis.*)

As Cassirer notes, when the Neogrammarians emerged, the historical sciences and the sciences of nature were in front of methodological questions (Cassirer 1972: 116). It was, according to him, "positivism, to which seems to be confided once for all the solution of this problem." And its solution was to insert the concept of law in the domains of the knowledge (Cassirer 1972 : 116-17). Cassirer demonstrates the hegemony of the mechanistic model in the middle of the 19th century referring to Helmholtz (1972 : 118).

The first expression conscious of this new tendency, according to Cassirer, is in the famous speech of Du Bois-Reymond *Sur les frontières de la connaissance de la nature* (1872) (1972 : 118). From then on, the organicist conception, that does not permit the absolute necessity, is abandoned:

Now, however, since in natural science itself the idea of the organism seemed to have dissolved utterly into the concept of the mechanism, no room remained for such a view. It was held that though the absolute necessity governing all linguistic development may be very much obscured in complex phenomena, it must stand out clearly in the elementary phenomena, i.e., phonetic changes. 'If we admit of accidental deviations which cannot be brought into relation with one another' wrote one linguist of this period, 'we are, fundamentally saying that the object of our investigation, language, is inaccessible to scientific knowledge.' [Leskien 1876] (Cassirer 1953: 169-70)

The history of the quarrel on the sound laws is related in a short and anecdotal manner in Auroux (2000: 412-13) and of a detailed and bibliographic manner in Wilbur (1977: XXII-XXC). The essence of the quarrel is to question the implicit epistemology of the former comparative grammar, already contested by Whitney and Bréal. The absolute character of the mechanical laws of sound (essentially a tautological formulation, as Wundt and Saussure (...) indicated (Auroux 2000: 414)) is first defined clearly in the preface of *Morphological Investigations* of Brugmann and Osthoff (Eng. trans. : Lehmann 1967 : 197-207 ; Cassirer 1972: 119). We can summarize its fundamental propositions as follows:

- 1- The preface opens out with a critique of the former linguistics. The authors reproach it for not having a clear idea on how the speech "lives and develops".
- 2- The research program of the former comparative grammar is described as reconstruction of the Indo-European mother language, while its metaphysics of "degeneration" is criticized overtly.
- 3- A distinction between *written language* and *spoken language* appears in favor of the second where the notion of *communication* is raised. This distinction corresponds on the other hand to the distinctions between *ancient languages* and *living ones* and, eventually at a more abstract level, between *the letter* and *the sound*.

- 4- They often highlight the concept of "methodological principles", which reveals a new orientation in the history of linguistics.
- 5- In coherence with this, one finds an expression of a programmatic epistemology: "*it is necessary to have a science that undertakes to observe the psychological factors at play in many phonetic changes as well as in the so-called analogical formations.*" (1967 [1878]: 197)
- 6- They suggest that the linguistic mechanism possesses a double aspect: *mental* and *physical*. The phonetic change is thus defined as a "psycho-mechanical" process and the concept of *speaking subject* is called upon.
- 7- The two most important principles of the neogrammarian movement are suggested as "sound laws without exception" and "analogical creation."

The metaphysical and epistemological critique of the former comparative grammar is obvious in all these propositions, of which one might distinguish two epistemologically important features: a) the mechanistic model that inspires the notion "law without exception" (in opposition to that of *historical regularity*) and b) the Cartesian separation between the *bodily* and the *spiritual*. What is interesting from a historic viewpoint is the fact that one finds these orientations precisely in the general grammar of the 18th century, which essentially consists of three components: *the parts of speech, the theory of signs and the mechanics of languages*.

### ***Laws as a criterion of science***

When positivism begins to weigh more heavily in the scientific surroundings of the century, a science could not be defined anymore with regard to its object; some epistemological criteria are necessarily imposed (Utaker 2002): as soon as the language is conceived as an object intelligible and susceptible to formulate laws, linguistics proudly claims the title *science*. Henceforth, the epistemological nature of the sound laws is underlined more and more, first by Wahlenberg in 1855 (Auroux 2000 : 416) and, then, by the Neogrammarians and their supporters.

Brugmann and Osthoff do not hesitate to describe sound laws as the "base of our science" (1878 [1967] : 204). As for Leskien, to admit that the changes are contingent and not interconnected is to say that the object of linguistic research is not accessible to "scientific knowledge" (Cassirer 1972 : 119; Robins 1967: 183). Henry and Kruszewski, the partisans of the new school, are also in a hurry to put forward this determining character in relation to the future of language science. In his review of Merlo and Schuchardt, Victor Henry perfectly reflects the scientific conception of his epoch in affirming that "science is

the research of the general basis that is concealed beneath the heap of sporadic manifestations and apparent irregularities”:

Qui dit *science* entend par là précisément *la recherche du fond général et permanent qui se cache sous l'amoncellement des manifestations sporadiques et des irrégularités apparentes*, et la linguistique ne mériterait jamais ce nom, si elle ne savait faire le départ de ses constantes et de ses variables. (1886 : 222-23 ; *my emphasis*)

In a similar way, Kruszewski believes that the discovery of laws is the final goal of linguistic science (Koerner 1995 : XXI). And the field of linguistic phenomena is certainly subject to a number of laws in the general sense of the term (Kruszewski 1995 [1883] : 48). He adopts the Neogrammarian principles as a base, although they are not sufficient:

Next to actual science of language another more general [science], something like a phenomenology of language is necessary. 2) A certain foreboding of such a science can be asserted in part from a few writings by the Neogrammarians. Their principles however are still either unfit to build a science of this kind on or are insufficient. (A letter to Baudouin, May 3 1882, quoted by Koerner 1995 : XXII)

Thus, he arrives at a distinction between dynamic and static laws of phonetics.

On the other hand, a more general debate takes place between Tobler, Wundt, Maurice Bloomfield and F. Müller on the question whether sound laws are similar to laws of hard sciences, and which leads to a refusal of their identification: « One of them belongs to history while the other belongs to nature. And there is no necessity in history » summarizes Auroux (2000: 420). H. Paul, the theoretician of the movement, thus feels the need to differentiate them in his work of 1880 ([1978]: 62) in drawing attention to the necessity of a doctrine of principles for the *sciences of culture* (quoted by Wilbur 1977: LII).

The epistemological character of the debate is so evident that one of their leading opponents, Hugo Schuchardt, invites them significantly to have recourse to methodological logic in his response to V. Henry:

Comme il s'agit dans le cas présent d'un principe ou d'une méthode, j'ai supposé que le terrain neutre où nous pourrions nous retrouver tous, était celui de la logique. [...] seulement je lui ferai remarquer que la logique à laquelle m'en rapporte, n'est pas « la logique du syllogisme », mais la logique prise dans le sens que lui a donné M. W. Wundt, c'est-à-dire la science des méthodes (*Methodenlehre*). (Schuchardt 1886 : 295)

As Wilbur says, Schuchardt « [...] was far more unprejudiced and radical in drawing conclusions from what he saw than many followers of the neogrammarian doctrine who fancied themselves such revolutionaries.” (Wilbur 1977: LXXV) And he seems to be advocating a completely different epistemology:

On ne cesse pas de nous répéter : « Sans notre méthode, la linguistique ne serait pas une science et ne le deviendrait jamais. » La réponse est toute faite : « En bien ! qu'elle ne le soit pas, ou qu'elle ne le soit que dans le sens où l'est par exemple la météorologie »; car je ne vois pas pourquoi la linguistique devrait ressembler plutôt à *l'astronomie qu'à la météorologie*. (Schuchardt 1886 : 295 ; *my emphasis*.)

He shares Henry's wish that linguistics should make a “distinction of its constants and its variables”, but on the condition that “the phonetic transformation is not represented by an algebraic equation, but by a transcendental equation” (1886: 296). He specifies his epistemological position thus while answering the critiques that he received:

M. Paul m'impute le dégoût des méthodes en général, parce que je ne goûte pas la méthode néo-grammairien, laquelle me paraît trop commode et trop grossière. [...] Il ne paraît donc pas tenir compte de la protestation que j'ai élevée contre cette alternative du *cosmos* et du *chaos* des autres (p. 30) ; il ne paraît non plus avoir bien considéré ce que j'ai dit pour caractériser la méthode que je regarde comme la seule bonne (p. 33)<sup>1</sup>. Ce n'est que pour les exceptions aux lois phonétiques que les néo-grammairiens déclarent indispensable la recherche des causes ; moi, je pense que celle-ci doit se faire pour tous les phénomènes, mais surtout pour les lois phonétiques elles-mêmes. Les connexions causales sont les seuls faits vraiment acquis à la science. Il est absolument inadmissible de revêtir d'un caractère absolu des conformités phonétiques qui ne sont constatées qu'empiriquement ; elles représentent des probabilités qui s'approchent plus ou moins de la certitude, et c'est comme telles qu'elles doivent entrer dans nos calculs. (Schuchardt 1886 : 296-97)

Another critic of the new school, a Frenchman, P. Regnaud, objects also to the identification of linguistics with sound laws:

Une science sans criterium n'est pas une science, et nul criterium ne saurait exister en matière de science du langage tant qu'à côté des faits constants, c'est-à-dire soumis à des lois, on admettra de sporadiques, c'est-à-dire ayant une origine arbitraire. Faut-il ajouter que si la nature des choses était ainsi, il faudrait bien prendre son parti et renoncer à *faire de la linguistique une science positive*. (Regnaud 1885 : 501 ; *my emphasis*.)

As it is obvious in this passage, the stake of the debate is at the same time "to make linguistics a positive science". The argument that it proposes against this claim might appear inadequate for the moment, but the way chosen by Schuchardt, Regnaud and later by Saussure proves to be more consistent with the nature of linguistic material, as we shall see.

### *Kruszewski: static and dynamic laws of phonetics*

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<sup>1</sup> He proposes some sort of *diffusionism* : “En insistant sur la réalité de ces changements sporadiques, liés à la fréquence d'emploi, Schuchardt est parvenu à mettre en doute le dogme néo-grammairien, et à proposer une solution alternative valable, celle de la *diffusion lexicale*; d'après cette théorie, les changements phoniques dans le lexique sont graduels et progressifs.” (Swiggers 1981: 328)

The notion of law applied to the science of the language starts changing in the 1880's. H. Paul, for example, defines the phonetic law as an empiric regularity noted in history without any determinist implication, therefore without any explanatory strength (1978 [1885] : 62 ; cf. also Davies 1998 : 252). Cassirer finds an equivalent of this change once again in the evolution of mechanics itself (1972 : 119).

One can say, following Caussat, that the Polish school appears sufficiently critical as regards the Neogrammarian doctrine (1978 : 40-42). In his consciously epistemological reflection, Kruszewski draws attention to the necessity of the laws, but not in the sense assigned by the Neogrammarians:

We must agree either that all sound changes take place in a *completely regular way* or that the uniformities and regularities which we note in these sound changes are *only fortuitous or apparent*, while, in reality, the realm of sounds is a *chaotic realm* of phenomena which are not subject to any laws. Consequently we find ourselves in a position where we must postulate laws which have no exceptions or assume the absence of any laws. (Kruszewski 1995 [1883] : 88; *my emphasis*.)

Leaning on J. S. Mill and, therefore, on Comte, he ends up with a division of sound laws into static and dynamic laws, and in this way he distinguishes himself from young linguists of Leipzig :

On the basis of these considerations, I assume the existence of the following law: *any sound which occurs acoustically and physiologically under identical conditions is approximately the same among all individuals of a given dialect and time.* This is *the static law of a sound*. [...] we will consider identity and harmony *a static law of a sound system*. (Kruszewski 1995 [1883] : 56-7)

However, he is more prudent with what he calls dynamic laws:

Above we made the claim that the sounds of a given language, as well as their system and combinability, represent a certain uniformity which allows no exceptions. Do we have the right to assume the same kinds of absolute uniformity in the change of sounds and sound complexes? Do we have the right to accept *dynamic laws of the sound, sound system, and sound complexes*, parallel to the static laws which we accepted above? Given the present state of science, a search for direct proof of the existence of these laws would be in vain; however, there are indirect proofs. Leaving aside theoretical considerations which compel us to accept absolute conformity to laws on the part of sound change, we find these indirect proofs in the *uniformity*, so to speak, of the [geological] *deposits* of sound laws. [...] It is sufficient to ponder what has been said so far in order to come to the conclusion that the expression "sound law" is by no means exact. There are no independent, primary *sound* laws; only *physiological* laws are independent and primary. (Kruszewski 1995 [1883] : 70)



This conscious reflection seems to have inspired that of Saussure. However, the distinction of Kruszewski is only between the "laws" of sounds, whereas Saussure generalizes the distinction in question to all levels of linguistic analysis in concordance with his theory of value, conceiving the language as a system of dualities and differences. Saussure also adds a certain number of ideas completely foreign to the comparatist tradition. We are going to debate the originality of the Saussurian theory of laws in the following section, where we approach the respective influence of linguists as well as that of philosophers.

*Saussure: Synchronic, diachronic and universal laws*

Since the beginning of his linguistic career, Saussure dedicates a remarkable effort to the reflection on the notion of law, notably on its applicability to linguistics. His discourse constitutes a theory accompanied by some hesitations.

Let's start with a formulation of three principles that underlie the Saussurian theory of laws (see also Figure 1) :

- a) The term *law* cannot be applied directly to the science of language.
- b) The so-called diachronic laws are subject to temporal and geographical limits, and their emergence is completely "accidental". On the other hand, their imperative character resembles the laws of hard sciences.
- c) If one speaks of laws in linguistics, the synchronic laws are more appropriate for the use of the term, although they are not imperative. They express an order, a state of things that is also accidental.

Figure 1

	impératif	événement/accidentel	ordre/arrangement
Loi diachronique	+	+	-
Loi synchronique	-	-	+

The earliest text concerning the notion of law is a philosophical fragment written by the young linguist in his notebook of "Old Irish" course given by Ernst Windisch in 1876-77, that is the year when he arrived in Leipzig:

Ce mot de *déterminisme*, sur le sens duquel nous avons déjà fourni des explications, il nous faut encore le répéter, ce mot ne désigne rien autre chose que la cause déterminée ou la cause prochaine. Comme cette expression a été souvent mal comprise, il faut bien remarquer que ce mot *déterminisme* a une signification tout à fait différente de celle du mot *fatalisme*. *Le fatalisme suppose la manifestation nécessaire d'un phénomène indépendamment de ses conditions, tandis que le déterminisme n'est que la condition nécessaire d'un phénomène dont la manifestation n'est pas forcée: le fatalisme est donc*

*antiscientifique à l'égal de l'indéterminisme.* / Quand l'expérimentateur est arrivé au déterminisme des phénomènes, c'est à dire quand il a établi les conditions qui sont nécessaires et suffisantes à sa manifestati[on.] (Ms. Fr. 3974, quoted by Ahlqvist 1999: 176 ; *my emphasis.*)

This passage, which must be in fact part of a longer text, reflects on the *scientificity* while exposing the crucial difference between the determinism and fatalism. Not only it throws new light on the framework of thought from which the mathematical precision of the *Mémoire* came out, but also it testifies the fact Saussure that was preoccupied of the epistemological problems of comparative grammar from the very beginnings of his studies in linguistics. Without the least doubt, the debate of determinism is bound to the notion of law: determinism presupposes the existence of laws, while laws certainly imply determinism.

Saussure obviously follows the philosophical discussions on determinism that will lead to the emergence of the French historicism in linguistics. It is in the book of Claude Bernard that one reads the ideas that Saussure adopted and the expressions that he reproduced precisely in this fragment:

« Nous avons donné le nom de *déterminisme* à la *cause prochaine ou déterminante* des phénomènes. [...] le déterminisme diffère du fatalisme sur lequel on ne saurait agir. **Le fatalisme suppose la manifestation nécessaire d'un phénomène indépendamment de ses conditions, tandis que le déterminisme est la condition nécessaire dont la manifestation n'est pas forcée.** » (Bernard 1865, 383 ; *my emphasis*)

Bernard's thought that evokes once again the idea of « l'homme-machine » or the living machine (1865 : 131, 136, 161) causes a debate in the French surroundings, always resistant to positivism. Among the major protagonists, will be Boutroux, Cournot, Littré (1878) and Renan (1863), all well-known names in the comparatist circles of Paris. So, it is not astonishing that Saussure, the young member of the *Société linguistique de Paris* from 1876, knows about these epistemological discussions *à la française*, that is more or less Cartesian.

Consequently, he does not feel any antipathy toward the regularity of phonetic change which is qualified as having “a character of mathematical regularity” (Ecrits, 149 ; *nous soulignons*). That is why it merits the name law, says he (Ecrits, 269) However, he is conscious of the necessity to make a distinction between law and event or fact (Ecrits, 149) ; the laws belong to methodological sphere whereas language comprises of not laws but facts:

[...] plus on étudie la langue, plus on arrive à se pénétrer de ce fait que *tout* dans la langue *est histoire*, c'est-à-dire qu'elle est un objet d'analyse historique, et non d'analyse abstraite, qu'elle se compose de *faits*, et non de *lois*, que tout ce qui semble

*organique* dans le langage est en réalité *contingent* et complètement accidentel. (Ecrits, 149)

The accidental and temporary nature of sound laws leads him to criticize the immediate application of the term. In the context of hard sciences, the law, in the Galilean sense of the term «exists once for all and is not subordinate to conditions of time» says Saussure (1907 : 35). On the contrary, the concept in linguistics “cannot be defined unless the two things that the word represents are distinguished” (Ecrits, 228). These are synchronic and diachronic laws. But, later on, in a note *Item*, he arrives at a triple distinction: universal, diachronic and synchronic:

- 1° Les lois universelles de la langue qui sont impératives (**théorématique**).
- 2° Les « lois » phonétiques ! Aucun droit à ce nom.
- 3° Les lois idiosynchroniques, non impératives. (Ecrits, 104 (Items); **my emphasis**)

His *universalistic* conception is not well known and even sometimes ignored. So, I insist on it saying that he returns to this theme in the first lesson of his third course, actually at the end of his career:

[...] il faudra que de cette histoire de toutes les langues elles-mêmes se dégagent les lois les plus générales. La linguistique aura à reconnaître les lois qui sont en jeu universellement dans le langage et d'une façon absolument rationnelle, séparant les phénomènes généraux de ceux qui sont particuliers à telle ou telle branche de langues. (1910-11 : 185)

The universal and diachronic laws are considered imperative, whereas the synchronic ones (not phonetic, but also morphological and syntactic laws) are not, if not in a restricted sense:

Ici, *il y a loi, formule d'un ordre. Elle a un caractère impératif en ce sens que les individus ne peuvent s'en écarter*, cependant cet ordre est à la merci du lendemain. La loi au point de vue synchronique exprime l'ordre, mais *sans sanction*. [...] (CLG/E, I : 203 ; *my emphasis*)

In his second course, he illustrates synchronic laws that express a settled order with a gardening comparison:

Les exemples synchroniques quels qu'ils soient présentent une régularité, un ordre, mais il n'y a que cela : loi = arrangement = formule d'un ordre établi. N'a pas de caractère impératif. Elle a un caractère impératif dans ce sens que les individus ne peuvent s'en écarter, mais vis-à-vis de la communauté est absolument précaire, rien ne garantit sa stabilité. <Cet ordre est à la merci du lendemain,> aucune sanction n'est donnée : <demain> un dialecte grec peut <franchir l'antépénultième ; il choquera au début mais c'est tout.> Exprime donc un ordre tel qu'il se constitue :

c'est comme la loi d'un verger arrangé en quinconce ! C'est comme la loi en vieux-slave, celle qui dit que tout mot finit par une voyelle : quand elle tombe <(jazyk[u]> la loi est violée sans autre. Aujourd'hui des centaines de mots sont terminés par une consonne ! (1908-09 : 46)

And he questions again the legality of diachronic events with a musical comparison; his critique toward the phonetic or diachronic laws becomes clearer thus in focusing on the systemic nature of the langue: it is not words nor individual sounds that are changed, but a whole system of values through a unit:

Ainsi la loi synchronique c'est <simplement> ce qui exprime un ordre établi, mais on peut lui reconnaître le droit de s'appeler loi. (<On parle bien de> loi d'arrangement ! <Nous employons souvent ce mot pour dire ordre établi, compréhensible ;> le caractère impératif n'est pas indispensable pour qu'on puisse parler de loi !) Pour les lois phonétiques nous percevons une régularité *par illusion*. L'emploi du terme de loi en parlant de faits diachroniques est douteux, <suspect.> (1908-09 : 48 ; *my emphasis*.)

In short, the Saussurian principles are distinguished with their depth from those of the precedent linguists. On the one hand, one can by no means reduce the Saussurian reflection to the sound laws debate, although this is what could have inflamed it. And on the other, in an unpublished manuscript, "Note philosophique", Saussure records some works discussing the notion of law as it is used in sciences and philosophy. In the following section, I will try to explain what he owes to linguists as well as what he might have borrowed from philosophers.

### Sources

#### Kruszewski

I must admit that we are not in front of a simple question of influence. Although it is quite clear that his starting point is Kruszewski, there are some elements in his theory that we are not able to trace back to a possible influence. Saussure mentions not only static and dynamic laws on a phonetic level (which is the case of Kruszewski), but also on a grammatical level (morphological and syntactic); moreover, he adds a third category, that of universal laws. And the characteristics that he attributes to each type of law do not exist in the so-called Polish school of linguistics.

Figure 2

Lois statiques et dynamiques ; phonétique, morphologie, syntaxe ; lois universelles					
Kruszewski	+	+	-	-	-
Saussure	+	+	+	+	+

## Naville and Boutroux (?)

On the other hand, Saussure's negative approach toward diachronic laws coincides with the skepticism shown by some philosophers toward the so-called historic laws. Is it by chance or did the Genevan linguist in some way know about their thoughts?

An up-to-now unknown document published recently by Engler and the so-called "Note philosophique" leave no room to doubt that Saussure did not content himself with linguistic discussions on the subject and referred to certain philosophers' works. In the letter fragment written to Naville, Saussure exchanges ideas with the Genevan philosopher on the notions of law and facts:

C'est à dessein je pense que vous parlez au début des 'attitudes' et 'points de vue' de l'esprit, dans chaque sci[ence], mais non des opérations; en tout cas à dessein que les mots d'opération et d'expérience sont, si je n'ai pas fait erreur, absents du **livre entier**. La science synthétique, celle qui existerait après idéale exploration de tous les domaines par n'importe quelles voies, est la seule qui existe à vos yeux et qui devienne l'objet de la classification. Il me semble que ce principe est d'une justesse admirable. **Vous m'encouragez à l'appliquer plus hardiment** que je ne l'avais fait à la linguistique en particulier, quoique déjà porté []. En somme on peut dire que tout résultat tiré de l'observation de ce qui touche les *lois* (et non les *faits*) se résoud [*sic.*] après coup en des éléments qui auraient permis d'affirmer à priori la même vérité. Le défaut du raisonnement déductif et de la méthode constructive est uniquement dans le danger d'oublier un facteur ou n'en pas mesurer la valeur ; il est en soi <exempt du reproche[*b*] []>. Mais cela même crée un caractère de la loi, par opp[osition] au fait. [...] – La *loi* est ce qui est à la portée de notre raisonnement par la simplicité relative des facteurs, et le *fait* ce qui échappe par la trop grande complic[ation] de ces fact[eurs] []. (Document 1996 : Loi-fait, cité par Engler 2006 : 2135-36 ; **my emphasis.**)

This important text shows us that this exchange was quite profound and Naville exercised serious influence in encouraging the linguist to apply the concepts and findings of the philosophy of sciences "more daringly" in linguistics. Besides, we infer that Saussure had read the book of Naville (1901), registered also in the "Note philosophique" where the linguist listed a set of epistemological works. It is not astonishing that we find another book in this list, that of Boutroux (1895), which is dedicated entirely to the discussion of laws.

Naville's book opens with a tripartite classification of sciences : the first group consists of law sciences or « sciences théorématiques » ; the second group is composed of fact sciences, in other words historical sciences; and, finally, the third one is the group of sciences that regulate ideal action or canonical sciences. They correspond on the one hand respectively to the questions « what is possible ? », « what is true ? » and « what is good ? »

(1901: 12) and, on the other, to three sub-domains of mechanics:

Nous avons [...] trois groupes bien distincts de sciences relatives au mouvement.

- a) Mécanique rationnelle (Théorématique).
- b) Mécanique céleste (Histoire).
- c) Mécanique industrielle (Canonique). (Naville 1901: 21)

As it is evident from this classification itself, Naville does not accept historical science as a field of laws. He defines laws as the « canvas of reality »; whereas, the facts are « embroideries » that « are imposed » on this canvas (1901 : 16). « A law is a conditionally necessary relation, » says he (1901: 30). On the contrary, « the affirmations concerning facts » are, according to him, neither conditional nor universal; they are *considered* categorical and particular. In other words, facts are « realities diversified in space and changing in time » (1901 : 110). He also suggests that the distinction between facts and laws is perhaps the most important question of the whole scientific philosophy (1901 : 109).

As we have seen, Saussure recovers significantly this theme in the fragment letter written Genevan philosopher.

Emile Boutroux, the other philosopher quoted by Saussure, also insists that laws are conditional and expressing causality (1895 : 34), and he puts the accent on the fact that laws do not undergo changes (1895 : 37). This means that Boutroux adopts a position as critical as that of Naville on historical laws, and he arrives at the conclusion that it is not possible in fact to speak of such laws, because it is difficult to establish causal relations between historical facts that do not reproduce in the same way (1895 : 128-29).

If we put aside « Note philosophique », we cannot find any other reference to Boutroux in the *nachlass* of Genevan linguist; however, he uses an emblematic term belonging to Naville in his epistemological reflection:

1° Les lois universelles de la langue qui sont impératives (**théorématique**).

2° Les « lois » phonétiques ! Aucun droit à ce nom.

3° Les lois idiosynchroniques, non impératives.

Nous ne faisons point de **haute philosophie** sur le terme de *Loi*, nous le prenons tel que le donne l'usage commun, le sens de tout le monde. (Ecrits : 104 (Items) ; **my emphasis**)

The term « *théorématique* », as we have seen, is the adjective of first group of sciences in Naville's classification (1901 : 21); and these « universal laws » that Saussure proposes are completely consistent with the notion of law as it is interpreted and defended by Naville ; therefore, Saussure does not hesitate to borrow this original term from the philosopher. The term *événement* in Saussure is in a similar way an equivalent of *fait historique* in Naville. When the linguist says that « il faudrait dire : événement phonétique qui a sa loi » (1907 :

52-4), he certainly gets closer to the conception that Naville puts forward ; and that is how he comes to suppose, be it temporarily, the existence of anhistorical (or panchronic) laws that rule historical facts.

At this point, a remark of Gadamer is particularly relevant (v. Wilbur 1997 : ix) : he indicates that Neogrammarians' formulations of sound laws are tautological ; that is to say that the observed fact and its law formulated are identical ! The Saussurian distinction between event/fact and law is justified in this point of view.

As to the synchronic laws which describe a certain language state, the Genevan linguist curiously calls them laws without dwelling much on the fact that they are not imperative. It is due to his acceptance of the term *law*, in his own words, « as it is given by the common usage, in the sense that everyone understands it »; so, he defines it as a regularity observed both in diachronic change and in synchronic order.

Yet, Naville explicitly refuses law as regularity: “Quand on appelle lois les régularités constatées dans les mouvements des planètes, quand on parle de lois qui souffrent des exceptions [...], on montre qu'on n'a pas une conscience claire de la notion centrale de la science moderne” (Naville 1901: 25).

Thus, Saussure invents the two other terms in his classification, ignoring the fact that Naville's conception can only be in coherence with « loi théorématique ». Therefore, he is gone astray from the position that the philosopher occupies. Let us take a look at the physical comparison that he makes to illustrate this type of laws:

si on sépare – grand progrès ! – et qu'on applique loi aux rapports [ ], cela exprime simplement un ordre établi, *sans aucune force impérative* ; le sens de loi étant celui de « formule d'un ordre » de la même façon que je dis que **les particules d'un corps disposées en spirales**. Cela n'implique ni que ces particules *doivent être* en spirale, de leur nature, si une force antérieure dont nous n'avons pas à nous occuper ne les avait arrangées partout de cette façon, ni qu'elles *doivent rester* en spirale, si une force nouvelle les dérange ; mais simplement que, dans le moment présent, il n'est pas impossible d'apercevoir qu'elles *sont* en spirale et que c'est là leur ordre, leur *loi* présente. (Ecrits, 235 ; **my emphasis**)

Saussure obviously confounds here a law with a fact in its sense attributed by Naville and this comparison implicitly adopts that a law is identical with order. So, the linguist stays loyal to the old conception of science which identifies, in some sort of idealist orientation, the so-called constant order with laws – a position that Naville criticizes decidedly and sometimes violently. In his view, it is the order that changes, not the laws:

*La science moderne n'admet pas la constance de l'ordre. [...] L'ordre est sans doute une des données les plus apparentes de l'observation, il se peut qu'il soit un des éléments essentiels de l'univers ; mais il n'est pas constant, il change.*  
Dire cela, c'est dire que *l'ordre n'est pas la manifestation des lois*. Les lois ne changent

pas ; si l'ordre était leur réalisation sensible, il devrait être constant comme elles.  
(Naville 1901 : 26 ; *my emphasis*)

Yet, Saussure's thoughts can go along with Naville's refusal of constant order, when he admits that a language state is quite fragile in front of diachronic laws:

Cet ordre est précaire <par le fait qu'il n'est pas impératif.> Il existe tant qu'on le laisse exister. <La loi ne défend pas état de choses contre un changement.> Le jour où une autre loi, qui n'est produite, aurait supprimé quantité de voyelles en grec (s'est produite dans apocopes [...]), *la loi n'existerait plus*, elle est à la merci de toute loi diachronique qui la changera. (1910-11 : 339 ; *my emphasis*.)

After all, this identification of law with order introduces a gap between the two Genevan. And on the other hand, it is connected to the confusion of time (which is in question in dynamics) and history (which is supposed to have a considerable role in the linguistics of the epoch). Indeed, they do not have same effects in these fields; when we introduce time factor in mechanics, new laws are necessary *for the modified positions of identical objects*, whereas when we introduce history to study language change *it is the object itself that changes, not its position*; thus, it prevents formulating laws. Certainly, this line of reasoning takes to the question of identity of linguistic entities with which Saussure was preoccupied for a longtime. In the following passage, he reproaches philosophers for not having realized the philosophical importance of the problem:

Beaucoup plus grave est la seconde faute où tombent généralement les philosophes, et qui est de se représenter :

2° qu'une fois un objet désigné par un nom, c'est là un tout qui va se transmettre, sans autres phénomènes à prévoir ! Si une altération se produit, ce n'est que du côté du nom qu'elle peut être à craindre à ce qu'on suppose, *fraxinus* devenant *frêne*. Cependant aussi du côté de l'idée : []

Voilà déjà de quoi faire réfléchir sur le mariage d'une idée et d'un nom quand intervient ce facteur imprévu, absolument ignoré dans la combinaison philosophique, LE TEMPS. Mais il n'y aurait là rien encore de frappant, rien de caractéristique, rien de spécialement propre au langage, s'il n'y avait que ces deux genres d'altération, et ce premier genre de dissociation par lequel l'idée quitte le signe, spontanément, que celui-ci s'altère ou non. (Écrits, 231, (Status et Motus))

One might ask quite legitimately whether the time really has a role in language, if we put aside its written representation. In my view, language can support only a *historicized* temporality; and the linearity of sign that Saussure mentions in his Course has a temporality (without history) on the level of *parole* (or discourse). However, it cannot be studied within a mechanistic framework, too.

Consequently, the parallelism drawn by Saussure between the dichotomy of synchronics-diachronics and that of statics-dynamics (cinématique) loses here its validity.



Because, the linguistic material, and in particular the sound, does not have a *memory*, as Utker indicates (2002); it *deprives* the linguist not only of history, but also of *time*.

In fact, if we follow the imaginary parallelism between linguistic and mechanical laws, we end up with not synchronic and diachronic laws, but with universal laws that explain both a language state and its historical changes: in other words, when we try to determine what Latin sound becomes in a European language (just like the comparative grammar) we should arrive at a *universal* sound law which governs this change. In this regard, Auroux seems to be right when he suggests that the hypothesis of *panchronic* laws is *absurd*. (Auroux 2000 : 416)

So, such a notion, developed by the Genevan master towards the end of his career, is as problematic as the so-called diachronic laws. He adds it to his canonical classification of points of view in linguistics in a handwritten note where he uses also the term *métachronique*, a term proposed by Ottmar Dittrich in 1903<sup>2</sup>, that is a few years after the publication of Naville's book : « Il n'y a pas en linguistique différents points de vue qu'il serait loisible d'appliquer à son gré, mais deux points de vue forcés, résultant de l'objet même (synchronique et métachronique) ». An isolated "piece" of language might have only three forms of existence, says he: *panchroniquement*, *idiosynchroniquement* and *diachroniquement* (Ecrits, 263). And he gives an illustration in a lesson of 1908-09, where he tries to get rid of the time factor, where he obviously longs for liberating linguistic material from time; but, alas, he only arrives at non-linguistic, physiological entities (1908-09 : 35-36 ; 130-31).

### *Conclusion*

As a conclusion, I share Caussat's opinion that Saussure inherits many problems of rejuvenated comparative grammar along with its concepts (1978 : 45). He is attached in large measure to the conception of law formulated by Kruszewski. His familiarity with Naville's (and, perhaps, Boutroux's) philosophy does not suffice to surmount the problems faced by two generations of comparatists. Yet, he reflects on a different conception inspired and encouraged by Naville; I believe that this reflection must have given him the theoretical basis to criticize diachronic sound laws and to formulate in a way what he calls synchronic laws.

The stake was somewhere else; it is true that he partially discovered the heuristic value that this conception implicates; that is, he himself already indicated that a universal law can be formulated only about the non linguistic aspect of the linguistic material. However, its undiscovered value concerns the particular nature of language: it is the

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<sup>2</sup> *Grundzüge der Sprachpsychologie. Erster Band: Einleitung und Allgemeine Psychologie Grundlegung* (Halle . S.: Max Niemeyer) See the review of CLG by Schuchardt (in Normand et al. 1978: 177)

*négativité* of linguistic entities, which he recognizes notably in the “Essence double”, and of which the epistemological implications he could have looked for if he had had the time to develop the linguistics of *parole*.

*Négativité* being a characteristic of not the things but the words, language is not an ontological entity, but an epistemological one, if we adapt the expression of G. Tarde to our subject matter. It means that language is not an object that we can entirely generalize and formalize, simply because the law and the regularity are not the same thing.

In fact, what underlies the debate of sound laws is the question if linguistics could become a Galileo-Cartesian science or not; in other words, it was the validity of the mechanistic model that was at stake. And the ghost of this question was hidden behind the comparisons (for instance, that of astronomy and meteorology alluded by Schuchardt) and the sources of the debate.<sup>3</sup>

If Saussure had applied Naville’s advices more “daringly”, he would have confronted his paradox: to construct a positive science of negative entities.

Savas Kilic

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly, there were, on the one hand, institutional worries of the young linguists of Leipzig, and, on the other, the influence of positivism, notably on Kruszewski and Saussure.

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