

Difference as the Source of Meaning: A Critical Re-reading of Saussure's Theory of Linguistic Value

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1. Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* remains foundational to modern theories of meaning, yet one of its most influential and contested claims concerns the proposition that linguistic value emerges not through reference to external reality but through differences internal to the system of langue. By asserting that "in language there are only differences," Saussure reorients meaning away from naming and denotation, framing the sign as a relational entity defined by its position within a structured network of oppositions (Saussure 1915/1983). This shift inaugurated structural linguistics and, by extension, structuralist literary theory, granting language a scientific object of study in which meaning is produced by systemic relations rather than by correspondence to objects in the world.

Yet this radical reconfiguration also generates a crucial theoretical problem that this essay seeks to interrogate: if meaning is constituted purely differentially, what stabilises the identity of any given sign? Scholars have long noted that Saussure's negative definition of linguistic value simultaneously promises analytical rigour and risks semantic indeterminacy (Culler 1986; Joseph 2012). More recent linguistic and semiotic research continues to emphasise the productivity—but also the internal tension—of Saussure's model, suggesting that differential meaning challenges any assumption of fixed conceptual boundaries (Chandler 2017; Blevins 2020; Pérez-Montoro 2022).

This problem becomes especially visible when Saussure's framework is revisited through post-structuralist critique. Jacques Derrida, for example, extends Saussure's insight into *différance*—the perpetual deferral and dissemination of meaning—arguing that relational identity cannot be fully contained within a stable structure (Derrida 1976). Thus, what for Saussure was a clarifying theoretical move becomes, for Derrida, the very source of linguistic instability.

The purpose of this essay is to examine this tension at the heart of Saussure's theory: to evaluate how defining meaning as value produced by difference solves the limitations of referential theories, while simultaneously opening the conceptual space for post-structuralist challenges. By narrowing the focus to this single problem, the discussion aims to provide a precise and critically engaged re-reading of Saussure's contribution to modern thought.

2. Theoretical Context: Saussure's Concept of Value and Difference

Saussure's redefinition of linguistic meaning stands as one of the most consequential theoretical interventions of the twentieth century. Central to this intervention is his claim that linguistic value does not arise from the inherent properties of words nor from their correspondence to external objects, but from the differential relations that constitute the internal structure of *langue* (Saussure 1915/1983). This section outlines the conceptual framework essential for understanding this transformation, focusing on three interrelated components: (1) value as a differential phenomenon, (2) the distinction between difference and reference, and (3) the operation of difference within a structured system of oppositions.

2.1 Value as Differential

Saussure's notion of *value* (*valeur*) is inseparable from his broader structuralist reorientation of linguistics. Unlike traditional philological approaches that treated words as labels attached to pre-existing concepts, Saussure argues that a sign's identity is produced entirely through its differentiation from other signs. In his often-quoted formulation, "in language there are only differences," a sign possesses value only because it is *not* the other signs with which it coexists (Saussure 1915/1983). Meaning is therefore constituted negatively: a sign's specificity emerges from a network of contrasts, not from positive content.

Modern Saussurean scholarship reinforces this interpretation. Joseph (2012) emphasises that value is both relational and oppositional, arising from the systemic interplay between signifier and signified as well as between the sign and its neighbours in the linguistic system. Chandler (2017) similarly stresses that the differential model enables linguistics to treat meaning scientifically, since value becomes measurable through structural distinctions rather than metaphysical notions of essence. More recent work in theoretical linguistics suggests that this negative conception of meaning aligns with

contemporary understandings of semantic networks, where categorisation is determined by contrastive features rather than intrinsic qualities (Blevins 2020; Pérez-Montoro 2022).

This differential model marks a significant epistemological shift: language becomes a self-contained structure in which units have no independent identity outside the relations that constitute them.

2.2 Difference vs Reference

A second foundational component of Saussure's theory lies in his decisive break from referential models of meaning. Classical theories assume that linguistic signs derive meaning from their ability to denote objects or states of affairs in the external world. Saussure rejects this premise, arguing that reference is secondary to—indeed dependent upon—the relational structure of the linguistic system. The signified is not an objective entity but a conceptual difference produced within the system, just as the signifier is a phonic difference defined by its contrast with other sound images.

This perspective relocates meaning from ontology to structure. As Culler (1986) observes, Saussure establishes a linguistic epistemology in which “naming” cannot serve as the foundation of meaning because the conceptual content of a sign is already shaped by the network of differences that precede any act of reference. Jakobson's work on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes further clarifies this shift: linguistic units function within a matrix of selection and combination governed by oppositional relations, not by direct relations to objects in the world (Jakobson 1960).

Contemporary theorists continue to highlight the implications of Saussure's anti-referential stance. Makoni and Pennycook (2022) argue that the differential conception of meaning exposes the cultural and ideological assumptions embedded in naming practices, demonstrating how linguistic categories reflect systems of distinction rather than universal truths. This reinforces Saussure's claim that reference is not an anchor of meaning but a product of structural relations.

2.3 The Structural System of Oppositions

Saussure's emphasis on difference acquires its full significance only when situated within the structural system of langue. For difference to function as the constitutive principle of meaning, it must operate within a closed and synchronically analysable system. Langue is therefore conceived as a network of interdependent signs whose relational positions define their value. Each sign's identity is both systemic

and negative, emerging from the set of oppositions that shape the conceptual and phonic dimensions of language.

Structuralist thinkers built extensively on this insight. Barthes (1977) demonstrated that cultural phenomena—from fashion systems to narrative structures—could be analysed through differential relations analogous to linguistic value. Rimmon-Kenan's work on narratology similarly extends Saussure's model to literary structure, illustrating how narrative functions through oppositions such as presence/absence, voice/silence, and order/disorder. Such applications underscore how the system of oppositions provides a methodological foundation not only for linguistics but for broader semiotic analysis.

Recent scholarship in cognitive linguistics and semiotics continues to affirm the relevance of this structural orientation. Researchers emphasise that categorisation, metaphor formation, and semantic extension all rely on contrastive structures that mirror Saussure's differential logic (Pérez-Montoro 2022). Even in computational linguistics, meaning is increasingly modelled through distributional patterns—echoing the Saussurean notion that identity is relational, not referential.

Conclusion of Theoretical Context

Together, Saussure's concepts of differential value, the primacy of internal relations over reference, and the systematic structure of oppositions provide the intellectual foundation for the central theoretical problem explored in this essay. By defining meaning as a function of difference, Saussure resolves the limitations of referential theories but simultaneously sets the stage for critiques that question the stability and completeness of such a system. These tensions become even more pronounced in post-structuralist developments, which challenge the very possibility of a closed structure capable of stabilising meaning.

3. Critical Discussion: The Problem of “Meaning Through Difference”

Saussure's account of linguistic value as a function of difference has exerted enormous influence on structural linguistics, semiotics, and literary theory. Yet it also generates a central paradox: the same principle that clarifies how meaning operates within a structured system simultaneously destabilises the identity of signs. This section critically examines that paradox by considering the strengths of

Saussure's model, the theoretical vulnerabilities it introduces, the critiques arising from within structuralism, and Derrida's post-structuralist reworking of difference as *différance*.

3.1 Strengths of the Differential Model

Saussure's differential conception of meaning represents one of the most elegant solutions to the long-standing problem of linguistic reference. By detaching meaning from any direct correspondence with external objects, Saussure establishes language as a self-contained symbolic system whose intelligibility depends on structural relations. This move not only frees semiotics from naïve referentialism but also provides a coherent explanation of how meaning remains stable across speakers who do not share identical experiences of the external world (Saussure 1915/1983).

A non-referential account of meaning

The first major strength of the differential model is that it offers a non-referential, internally coherent explanation of meaning. Linguistic signs no longer rely on pointing to objective entities; instead, they acquire value through the negative space created by their differences from other signs. This model is more epistemologically robust, as it recognises that conceptual content is linguistically constructed rather than discovered. Culler (1986) notes that Saussure's theory "demystifies" meaning by situating it within a relational system rather than attributing it to metaphysical essences.

Semantic coherence through structure

A second strength is the model's capacity to explain semantic coherence in terms of structural organisation. Because each sign's identity is relational, meaning becomes predictable within the system: the set of oppositions that define a sign also constrain its possible interpretations. This insight enables linguists and literary theorists to analyse meaning not as an accumulation of individual definitions but as an emergent property of the system as a whole. Chandler (2017) argues that this structural coherence is what makes semiotics analytically powerful, as it allows interpretation to be grounded in formal relations rather than subjective intuition.

Opening the door to structuralist methodologies

The third strength is methodological. Saussure's relational principles were foundational for the development of structuralist approaches across disciplines. Jakobson's paradigmatic and syntagmatic

axes, for instance, formalise how oppositional relations organise linguistic structure (Jakobson 1960). Similarly, in anthropology, Lévi-Strauss applies differential analysis to kinship systems, myth, and ritual, demonstrating that cultural meaning emerges through binary oppositions—nature/culture, raw/cooked, life/death—whose internal contrasts mirror linguistic relations.

Barthes extends this logic to narrative, photography, fashion, and ideology, arguing that cultural artefacts operate as signifying systems governed by differential structures (Barthes 1977). These applications illustrate the methodological fecundity of Saussure's insight: by privileging structure over reference, scholars across fields could analyse meaning as a network of formal relations rather than as a reflection of external reality.

Thus, Saussure's differential model possesses considerable explanatory and methodological strengths. Yet precisely because meaning is defined relationally, the model also introduces the central theoretical problem explored in this essay.

3.2 The Central Theoretical Problem

Saussure's reorientation of meaning around differential relations resolves one problem—how to theorise meaning without reliance on external reference—but it produces another: if meaning exists only through difference, then meaning becomes inherently unstable.

Meaning as relational and potentially unstable

The claim that signs have no positive content raises the question of what stabilises meaning. If identity is entirely relational, depending on what a sign is *not*, then any change within the system threatens to alter the value of all signs. Saussure himself acknowledges this fragility when he observes that linguistic systems are both arbitrary and historically contingent (Saussure 1915/1983). Modern commentators argue that differential meaning, though theoretically elegant, is ontologically precarious because no sign possesses intrinsic identity (Joseph 2012; Pérez-Montoro 2022).

The dependence of identity on the entire system

A second aspect of the problem is the systemic dependency of meaning. Because linguistic value is holistic—each sign is defined by its position within the entire network—its identity can never be

isolated. As Makoni and Pennycook (2022) observe, this dependency means that meaning is never fully self-identical: it always derives from a constellation of contrasts.

The implication is that meaning becomes both arbitrary and fragile. If the linguistic system shifts—whether through semantic drift, cultural change, or contextual variation—then the value of signs shifts accordingly. Meaning cannot be anchored to stable reference points, nor can it be fixed within the system itself, because the system is dynamic.

This theoretical tension—between structural rigour and relational instability—lies at the heart of Saussure’s most enduring problem and sets the stage for critiques both within and beyond structuralism.

3.3 Critiques from Within Structuralism

While structuralist thinkers adopted Saussure’s principles, many also exposed limitations inherent in the differential model. These critiques do not reject Saussure but highlight the constraints of conceiving meaning as a function of a closed, synchronic system.

The closed-system assumption

Saussure’s emphasis on *langue* requires bracketing history, context, and power. The linguistic system is treated as autonomous, insulated from social forces. Yet many structuralists recognised that this abstraction limits explanatory power. Barthes, for example, acknowledges that while structural analysis reveals the underlying codes of cultural forms, it risks ignoring how these forms are historically produced and politically embedded (Barthes 1977).

In anthropology, Lévi-Strauss’s structural analyses were criticised for universalising binary oppositions and downplaying historical variation. Later critics argued that his models, while formally elegant, obscure the material and political conditions shaping cultural practices.

The problem of static synchronic analysis

A second critique concerns temporality. Saussure’s synchronic focus excludes diachronic processes, yet meaning is constantly reshaped through usage, social change, and historical contingency. Mink (1970) and Hardy (1968), though writing in the domain of narrative theory, similarly highlight the tension between structural coherence and historical dynamism. Their observations reflect a broader concern that static models cannot fully account for the fluidity of meaning.

Contemporary linguistics reinforces this critique. Studies demonstrate that semantic categories evolve through pragmatic use, cultural negotiation, and cognitive adaptation (Blevins 2020). Thus, Saussure's differential model, while analytically powerful, may oversimplify the dynamic processes that shape linguistic value.

Together, these critiques from within structuralism reveal that meaning cannot be fully contained within a stable structure—an insight later pushed to its theoretical limit by Derrida.

3.4 Derrida's Challenge: Différance

Jacques Derrida's intervention represents the most consequential reworking of Saussure's concept of difference. While Saussure intends difference to *stabilise* meaning by providing a systematic account of value, Derrida argues that difference inherently *destabilises* meaning because it involves not only opposition but also temporal deferral.

From difference to différance

Derrida takes Saussure's insights seriously but radicalises them. If meaning arises from relational differences, then meaning is never present in itself but always constituted through what it is not. Derrida terms this process *différance*: a simultaneous differentiating and deferring that prevents any sign from achieving full self-identity (Derrida 1976).

Where Saussure sees differential relations as the condition of possibility for stable meaning, Derrida sees them as evidence that meaning is perpetually deferred, never arriving at a final or "proper" identity.

The endless deferral of meaning

Derrida argues that because every sign is defined by its difference from other signs, and because those signs are themselves defined by further differences, meaning becomes an infinite chain of relational traces. No signifier can stabilise the signified; instead, the signified is always already a signifier in another differential relation.

This deferral disrupts Saussure's structural closure. The system cannot be truly self-contained because signs inevitably refer beyond the system to other contexts, histories, and traces. Pérez-Montoro (2022) notes that Derrida's insight anticipates modern cognitive and computational models of meaning where semantic boundaries blur and categories overlap.

Contamination by traces

A further implication of *différance* is that no concept can be pure. Every sign is “contaminated” by the traces of other signs that constitute its difference. This undermines the structuralist belief in distinct oppositions. Binary pairs—such as speech/writing, presence/absence—break down under Derrida’s analysis because each term contains the trace of the other.

Difference as destabilising

Thus, while Saussure intended difference to enforce structural clarity, Derrida shows that difference produces structural instability. Where Saussure posits oppositions as stabilising distinctions, Derrida reveals that those oppositions depend on unstable relations. Meaning is never present, never fixed, never final.

Conclusion of Critical Discussion

The problem of “meaning through difference” emerges from the internal tensions of Saussure’s model. Differential value offers a powerful explanation of how meaning is generated without reference, and it supports influential structuralist methodologies. Yet its reliance on relational identity renders meaning fundamentally unstable and dependent on a dynamic, historically shifting system.

Structuralist critiques point out that Saussure’s closed-system assumptions cannot account for contextual, historical, and political forces. Derrida takes this critique further, arguing that difference entails not stability but perpetual deferral. Meaning does not crystallise through oppositions; it disperses through traces.

The hinge between structuralism and post-structuralism thus lies in the interpretation of difference itself: for Saussure, difference produces order; for Derrida, it reveals the impossibility of final order. This theoretical tension forms the core problem the essay seeks to interrogate.

4. Legacy and Implications

Saussure’s differential theory of linguistic value has exerted an influence far exceeding the boundaries of linguistics. By proposing that meaning emerges not through reference but through relational difference, Saussure provided an intellectual foundation that shaped major twentieth-century

theoretical movements and continues to inform contemporary debates. This section examines the legacy of Saussure's model through structuralist extensions, post-structuralist transformations, and its relevance to emerging paradigms such as artificial intelligence and digital semiotics.

4.1 Structuralist Extensions

Saussure's insistence on the primacy of internal relations became the cornerstone of structuralist methodologies across the humanities and social sciences. In semiotics, his differential logic was extended by theorists such as Barthes, who argued that cultural objects—from fashion systems to advertisement images—function like linguistic signs, acquiring meaning through relational structures rather than inherent significance (Barthes 1977). Barthes's early work demonstrates how mythologies, everyday artefacts, and even gestures operate within networks of signification whose intelligibility depends on socially constructed oppositions.

Anthropology likewise integrated Saussurean insights into its analytical frameworks. Lévi-Strauss reinterpreted kinship systems, culinary practices, and mythologies as structured codes governed by binary oppositions. These oppositions—raw/cooked, nature/culture, local/global—demonstrate how cultural meaning is produced through formal contrasts that echo linguistic difference. Although later criticised for universalising such binaries, structural anthropology showed how Saussure's relational model could be applied to domains far removed from linguistic study.

Narratology also assimilated structuralist principles. Scholars such as Rimmon-Kenan argued that narrative meaning emerges through structural relationships among plot units, temporal sequences, and perspectives. These relationships function within a semiotic system in which narrative events gain significance only in contrast to alternative possibilities. In this sense, structuralist narratology extends Saussure's claim that meaning is relational and differential, revealing its applicability to textual and cultural forms beyond language itself.

Thus, structuralism not only adopted but amplified Saussure's principles, transforming difference into a methodological tool for analysing meaning wherever it appears.

4.2 Post-structuralist Developments

Post-structuralist thinkers inherit Saussure's model but transform it in ways that foreground instability, plurality, and the impossibility of fixed meaning. Their work underscores how Saussure's insights, though formulated within a structuralist paradigm, contain the seeds of its own undoing.

Kristeva, for instance, reconfigures Saussure's linguistic distinctions into a psychoanalytic framework, distinguishing between the semiotic (rhythmic, affective, pre-symbolic) and the symbolic (structured, rule-governed). Her theory demonstrates that meaning is not solely a product of structural differences but emerges through the interplay between bodily impulses and linguistic law. This reflects a shift away from the structuralist closure of Saussure's system toward an open, heterogeneous model of signification.

Barthes's later work likewise moves beyond structuralist determinacy. In *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes rejects the idea that texts possess a stable, analysable structure. Instead, he foregrounds the plurality of meanings produced through the reader's engagement, dispersing authorial authority and transforming difference into a generator of textual excess. This shift—from structure to play—marks a clear departure from Saussure's stabilising intentions.

Foucault, although not traditionally aligned with linguistics, draws on the Saussurean insight that meaning is produced through systems rather than individual subjects. Yet he redirects this insight toward discourse, power, and historical formations. In Foucault's view, differences do not arise from abstract linguistic structures but from historically contingent rules that determine what can be said, by whom, and under what conditions. Thus, he extends Saussure's relational model while integrating history, power, and institutional practice—precisely the dimensions Saussure bracketed.

Post-structuralism therefore both inherits and transforms Saussure's differential insight. Where Saussure sought stability through structure, post-structuralists expose the instability inherent in differential meaning, demonstrating that systems cannot fully contain the semantic forces they produce.

4.3 Contemporary Relevance

The continuing relevance of Saussure's theory becomes particularly evident when considered in relation to contemporary technologies and epistemologies. Nowhere is this clearer than in artificial intelligence and computational linguistics. Modern AI language models, such as GPT architectures, operate not through reference to external objects but through the analysis of relational patterns within

vast corpora of linguistic data. Meaning in these systems emerges through differences—statistical contrasts, contextual associations, and distributional relations across the dataset—rather than through direct connections to real-world entities.

This operational logic mirrors Saussure's claim that meaning is generated through internal relations within a system, not through external reference. Indeed, computational models of language rely on differential distribution: the meaning of a word is inferred from the company it keeps, a principle famously articulated in Firth's dictum but conceptually rooted in Saussure's relational framework. Contemporary semantic modelling—whether through embeddings, vector spaces, or transformer attention—shows that meaning is an emergent property of relational contrasts across linguistic networks.

Beyond AI, Saussure's framework remains central to debates in cognitive linguistics, digital humanities, and cultural analytics. Scholars argue that digital environments amplify the relational nature of meaning, as algorithmic classifications, social media discourse, and multimodal communication all depend on systems of difference rather than fixed referential anchors. Pérez-Montoro (2022) notes that the instability of digital signification reflects the very dynamics Derrida attributes to *différance*, suggesting that Saussure's legacy extends into domains he could not have foreseen.

Thus, the problem of meaning through difference is not an outdated structuralist dilemma but a foundational issue in contemporary thinking about language, representation, and knowledge production. Saussure's insight remains profoundly relevant precisely because meaning today—whether in human discourse or machine computation—is increasingly understood as relational, dynamic, and context-dependent.

5. Conclusion

Saussure's proposition that meaning arises from difference rather than reference constitutes one of the most transformative interventions in modern linguistic theory. By redefining the sign as a relational entity whose value derives from its contrasts within the system of *langue*, Saussure resolved the long-standing problem of how meaning could be grounded without reliance on external objects or metaphysical essences. His differential model provided the conceptual foundation for structuralist

methodologies across linguistics, anthropology, semiotics, and narratology, offering a scientific framework for analysing meaning as a systemic phenomenon.

Yet, as this essay has argued, Saussure's solution simultaneously generates a deeper and more enduring theoretical difficulty. If meaning is differential, then it is inherently relational; if it is relational, then it is potentially unstable; and if stability depends on the coherence of the system, then any variation—historical, contextual, or structural—threatens the identity of signs. Post-structuralist thinkers such as Derrida sharpen this tension by demonstrating that difference entails not only distinction but also deferral: meaning is never fully present, never self-identical, but always constituted through traces of what it is not. In this sense, the very principle Saussure introduced to stabilise meaning becomes the mechanism through which meaning disperses.

Saussure therefore occupies a unique position in the intellectual history of language. His insights both inaugurate structuralism and undermine its aspiration to systematic closure. By exposing meaning as a function of difference, he opens a theoretical horizon that makes possible—and perhaps inevitable—the post-structuralist critique. In this way, Saussure stands as a transitional figure whose legacy continues to shape contemporary debates about language, interpretation, and the conditions under which meaning can be said to exist at all.

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