Social Representation in a Saussurian Dynamic Perspective

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This paper highlights the Swiss linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure's explanation of the contradictory mixture of changes and stability, which is a salient trait of language. As long as this is what characterizes social representations as well, there are some fundamental similarities between Ferdinand de Saussure and Serge Moscovici. This paper points out in what sense, but also how they are different. Yet the fundamental question about uniting stability with changes is a core issue in cultural psychology. By pointing at the historical connections between Wundt and de Saussure, the conclusion is that social representations can achieve a deeper understanding by means of semiology and folk psychology, and find its basis in cultural psychology.

Keywords: Change, Stability, Semiology, Social representation, Folk psychology, Arbitrary sign.

Social representation can be regarded and analysed from several different perspectives. One crucial aspect is the perspective of the combination of changes and stability. This is probably the most recurrent premise Serge Moscovici is dealing with in his writings. However the vagueness he is criticised for (Jahoda, 1988) is very much related to this issue. The more one

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pledge for dynamics, changes and instability, the more vague the theory may appear, quite simply because our notion of preciseness is first of all related to stability. This is the trap into which scientific thinking in western civilisation is captured. Theoretical statements are general and as long as they form the basis for scientific knowledge, scientific knowledge has to appear as if it is universal and stable, and if not it is by necessity regarded as vague.

Yet already Wundt had problems with accepting the presupposition that thinking in general has to be stable and universal. This is the main reason for developing his conception of folk psychology. However this aspect of psychology was not an easy task for him either. Hence the aim from the very beginning was to combine experimental psychology with folk psychology, and he summarized this in his autobiography by characterising experimental psychology as a supporting discipline ("Hilfsmittel") in psychology (Wundt, 1920). Yet when it comes to folk psychology, Wundt defined it in terms of language, myths and habits (Wundt, 1902), which are the places where social representations are located too (Moscovici, 2000).

Yet to explain instability and changes can be done in many ways. One is for example the dynamic and semiotic model of meaning presented by Salvatore and Venuleo included in this compilation (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2013). The Peircian perspective is often presented as if it stands in opposition to a Saussurian perspective on the understanding of signs. There are certainly differences between the two scholars. Yet the differences do not primarily concern stability and instability in the sense that the point of departure for Ferdinand de Saussure was rather to give a valid understanding of the linguistic system as an apparent stable, but in fact changing entity. The role of de Saussure as a connecting link between Wundt and the psychology of the twentieth century, and not least as a decisive factor in the development of post-structuralism, is often underestimated. Hence in this paper, I will focus on de Saussure's theory on changes and instability in language and see how this can be combined with Moscovici's theories of social representations.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION ACCORDING TO MOSCOVICI

According to Moscovici, the main characteristic of social representations is that they are not stable. The instability is a result of two contradicting factors operating at the same time. These are given with the collective or shared representations on the one hand and the individual representations on the other. They are theoretically separated from each other, but they interact in a way, which makes them more or less inseparable. This is through communication

between the individuals. Although ideas are located and anchored in the individual, they do not emerge as complete before they are communicated. Hence the act of being shared among individuals provides their real existence. Thus it is easy to talk about the autonomous status of the individual, and at the same time talk about representations as something that is shared collectively in a certain and well defined group.

In this sense boundaries between the individual are clear and not clear at the same time. As long as the individuals are separated as autonomous entities, the boundaries between them are clear. However as long as social representations are shared, they are not. Yet the representations are related and produced in terms of what Moscovici calls the hypothesis of cognitive polyphasia, which assumes "our tendency to employ diverse and even opposite ways of thinking" (Moscovici 2000, p. 245). This is what creates the dynamic situation in social representations. The individual is located in a certain context; he or she is following certain norms and has certain aims and purposes. Those three aspects, specifically context, norms and goals are the constraining factors for the individual's representation. So when these are exchanged in a group they are modified and adjusted to a common understanding of the same phenomenon and the boundaries are slightly wiped out and blurred.

In this perspective social representations are highly embedded with ideology. The different forms of shared representations are related to a distribution of power, which can be regarded in a broad societal perspective in the sense that the distribution of representations is also regulated by the way society is structured. In a feudal pre-modern society for example the hierarchical structure implied that the representations were regulated by beliefs accepted from the top of the society (Duveen, 2000). In this respect the rise of modern psychology can form an illuminating illustration. When empirical psychology appeared as a well-defined part of metaphysics in the early eighteenth century, it opened up for subjectivity and observations in natural science. Yet very soon after empirical psychology had been presented, the influential Immanuel Kant argued for only accepting the pure sciences. This requirement excluded empirical psychology because observations were unacceptable unless they could confirm the pure theoretical reasoning. In this respect psychology was banished from the era of science for a while. Yet today we have neither problems with accepting psychology nor subjective observations in natural sciences. They are rather preferred approaches as long as they both satisfy certain criteria. However the discussion we still have around defining those criteria reveal the same distribution of power within the scientific society. In other words, there are

battles and discussions around what scientific knowledge is or is not, and those who are able to define the criteria posit at the same time a predominance in disposing the power.

This is also why the symbolic aspect of social representations becomes so important. Although behaviour is the observable expression of social representations and the distribution of power, it has to be understood in terms of its symbolic content. "The stimuli which elicit social behaviour and the responses engendered are links in a chain of symbols; the behaviour thus expresses a code and a system of values which are a form of language; or it could be said perhaps that it is social behaviour itself which constitutes a language." (Moscovici, 2000, p. 115.) This quotation not only reveals the behaviour as representing a content that has to be interpreted and understood. In addition it tells how to understand the symbolic interchange that is expressed through social behaviour. It refers first of all to "a code" and "a system" in addition to the suggestion that is not only comparable with language, but also constitutes a language itself. These aspects bring the associations towards the Swiss linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure, to whom Moscovici does not refer very much, but anyway seems to be influenced by.

THE SAUSSURIAN RELATIONSHIP TO PSYCHOLOGY

Some have criticised Ferdinand de Saussure for representing idealism and in that sense for being outdated (Billig, 1997). Yet the strength of this criticism depends on several factors, not least how to understand idealism. If one of the criteria is related to the use of the term 'system', then Moscovici has to be characterized as idealistic too. So instead of discussing labels, it is more interesting to concentrate on substantial matters in terms of what is actually suggested and meant. In this respect there is an interesting connection between de Saussure and Wilhelm Wundt when it comes to the relationship between psychology and the understanding of language. This relationship is partly related to the contact those two figures actually had: de Saussure did get his doctoral degree in Leipzig in 1880, he attended Wundt's lectures on the gesture (Blumenthal, 1973), and he is discussing some few, but fundamental aspects of Wundt's understanding of language. Hence this contact was not only a historical fact, but it is also traceable in some substantial matters de Saussure is discussing.

One of these matters is the aspect of change. This is a core issue in Wundt's folk psychology, and he tried to develop this in his lectures on the gesture. This series of lectures did not only inspire George Herbart Mead and Lev Vygotsky, but not least Ferdinand de

Saussure as well. In this respect it must be regarded as a basis for the understanding of social representations too. Yet when it comes to the relationship between de Saussure and Wundt, de Saussure is not only following up the aspect of change in language and culture, but he also criticizes Wundt for ending up with a psychological understanding of language (Nerlich & Clarke, 1998; Knobloch, 1992). This implies that Wundt understood language in terms of psychological representations rather than linguistic structures. Yet a reference to linguistic structures is not necessarily an essentialist understanding of language. It is rather emphasizing the fact that language does not have to be reduced to psychological explanations, but can be understood in terms of how it is organised by means of a self-sufficient system. In this respect the technical terms in the Saussurian semiology count as explanatory terms.

The core term in this respect is the arbitrary sign. The fact that the sign is not motivated by imitations or any kind of similarities with what is given by nature makes it completely independent from anything else than itself. However this does not imply that the meaning is unpredictable. "In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behaviour or – what amounts to the same thing – on convention." (de Saussure, 2011, p. 68.) The meaning of a term is given through the way it is used in combination with other terms. It is not the term itself that constitutes meaning, but rather how the single term is used in opposition to other terms. This implies that the sound, the phonetics or the signifier form the point of departure. The meaning is not given by the sound, but the differences in sound provide the preconditions for generating meaning. This is why "signifiant" – the signifier is separated from the "signifié" – the signified. Without any differences in signifiant, there would be no differences in signifié. Moreover the meaning of a word then, is not fixed and given once and for all. The meaning is developed through conversations in terms of specifying something.

When we think about the way language is built up and developed, we normally think about the way terms refer to things in the world. The name "chair" functions as a substitute for a certain thing in the world. This says that the term itself is just a name separated and different from the reference. This is the substitution theory, which the nominalists developed in medieval time. Although there is an aspect of arbitrariness in this theory, this is not the same type of arbitrariness de Saussure is referring to. Conversely, his theory is not based on references, but rather on man's ability to think in abstract terms, and not least to have a dialogue in which specifications are made in the dialogical process. When we talk about "an experiment", for example, it is quite difficult to know exactly what is referred to. However

this depends very much on whom we are talking to. In some situations it would be sufficient just to mention the term and everybody involved would be satisfied with not specifying it. They would just think about a laboratory with some unspecified equipment and with no needs for specifying if this is a laboratory in physics or in psychology. However if there is a need for making this distinction, one has to specify. In the first round, this type of distinction would be sufficient. Yet if we have to do the experiment, it has to be specified even more, and very many psychological experiments are not even related to a laboratory, but rather to a controlled situation, which furthermore requires more specifications.

In this sense language is not a closed system given once and for all. It is rather an open system that develops when it is applied. Yet it is still a system in the sense that a language consists of a limited amount of meaning-constituting elements that generate an unlimited amount of meanings and expressions. This open system implies that language is always changing. The understanding of the term "experiment" today is quite different from the way Wundt applied it. However it is not only the terms that are changing by being used, but also the grammar. Old English consisted of datives and accusatives, but today the two forms have almost disappeared. This aspect of transformations and changes of language in a long run is the background for de Saussure's theory of the arbitrary sign. This is due to how Moscovici thinks about the social representations, and the most important argument for this concurrence is the fact that the sign is arbitrary. This implies not only flexibility and mutability, which is only one dimension of it, but language has also to be put "into its social setting" (de Saussure 2011, p 72), which forms the constraining factors that function as a guarantee for stability and immutability: "No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made; and what is more, the community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language." (de Saussure, 2011, p. 71.)

By this statement, Saussure is inquiring both the role of the community and the role of the individual. Language exists beyond both although it is at the same time a product of both. The reason is that "everyone participates at all times, and that is why it is constantly influenced by all" (de Saussure 2011, p. 74). This implies that we cannot talk about language as a social agreement or a product of a social contract. When all individuals are participating and make influences at the same time, it is impossible to tell who is the actual changer, and conversely; when individuals are influencing the language, it is hard to specify the community that actually makes the changes. In this respect language is something that goes beyond both the community and subjectivity, although community and subjectivity can be traced, but not

exactly defined through language. This implies that language is not based upon psychological representations, but rather that language generates these representations. The more correct formulation however would probably be that an individual's representations are to be regarded as a result of the individual's battle with other members of an unspecified community about having the power to define a certain understanding of a term, and by this developing an experienced ownership to the term.

If this specification can be accepted, we may sort out some characteristics of language as a basis for psychological representations: (1) Language is a self-sufficient system that constitutes itself; (2) The development of language is not depending on psychological representations; (3) The individual's development of language is to be regarded as a result of the individual's ability to acquire differentiated meanings given by the actual use of language in an unspecified community; (4) Psychological representations are evolved from the individual's participation in this community; (5) Psychological representations therefore are given in the individual, but depending on participating in a social community; (6) Psychological representations will by necessity change over a period of time due to the fact that language is changing.

As mentioned, there are many similarities between de Saussure's understanding of language and Wundt's understanding of folk psychology, specifically the gesture. Although the gesture must be characterised as an undifferentiated form of expression, the principle on which it is based is similar to language in the sense that meanings are created by the differences between the gestures. Before a small child has learned to talk, the conversation between grown-ups sounds as an undifferentiated mass of sound. This is why Wundt blames parents for misunderstanding the child when the child takes part in the conversation with its babbling. The parents think the child is trying to express something, whereas the child in reality only wants to participate in the sounding community, which is what a conversation actually is for a pre-verbal child (Wundt, 1902). The developmental psychologist Heinz Werner followed this up by presenting a theory on development based on the movement from the undifferentiated to the differentiated. In this sense the stage of babbling is when the child is on the way to develop "an awareness of sound patterns as verbal symbols" (Werner 1957, p. 137). Werner's understanding of language is also what Ernst Cassirer is referring to when he defines culture as the meeting point between subjectivity and objectivity. "Everything we know concerning the development of language in children […tell us that] observation and perception become 'objective' just to the degree that this linguistic energy succeeds in

clarifying, differentiating, and organising the mute undifferentiated chaos of particular circumstances." (Cassirer 1971, p. 59). In other words, the understanding of social representation in a Saussurian perspective may reveal some connections not only to fundamental issues in psychology, but also to a more fundamental understanding of culture.

THE SAUSSURIAN PROJECT AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The fundamental problem with bringing in a Saussurian perspective on social representation is that de Saussure is not including the ideological underlying meaning in language. The reason is that he focused on how to understand language as an independent entity, primarily released from psychology. Although it is natural to make a sharp distinction between structuralism and post structuralism, the borderline is in fact not that sharp. This is true if Michel Foucault is to be regarded as a typical representative for post structuralism. At least in his understanding of the discourse there are some aspects of the Saussurian principle of arbitrariness left. In his inauguration lecture at Collège de France in 1970, he is presenting his planned activities for the following years (Foucault, 1971). In this lecture he does not disregard his roots in structuralism completely. At a certain stage in this presentation of the aim of discourse analysis, he states that it "does not reveal the generic aspects of meaning, but rather disclose the game of constraining scarcity and the fundamental affirmative power" (Foucault 1971, p. 72 a.t.). This admittedly ends up in the opposite of what de Saussure and Cassirer wanted to highlight, which was the unlimited potential of meaning in language and culture. However Foucault applies the same principle of arbitrariness to reveal the limitations and narrowness in the formation of discourses, which he calls "the scarcity of affirmations". This is the opposite of the great potentiality embedded in language and it is what characterizes disciplines regulated by the legal and political systems. It is in this sense he is refusing the "signifier's monarchy" (loc.cit), which is a reinterpretation of a Saussurian term. In this respect he even admits that this is a sort of structuralism (loc. cit.).

SOME CONCLUSIONS

What have been pursued in this paper are the connections between three apparent independent approaches to culture, specifically folk psychology, structuralism and a neo-Kantian understanding of culture. Wundt, de Saussure and Cassirer have represented these

respectively. However the point has not been so much to highlight the connections between them, as to find a basis for a dynamic understanding of the relationship between culture and psychological representations. In this respect the three are pointing in the same direction, specifically that psychological representations are given by the individual, but at the same time are regulated by an unspecified community. Another point has been to demonstrate that the dynamic aspect of changes combined with apparently stability is what characterises human activity in general, and therefore has to be regarded as a salient trait of social sciences and humanities. In this respect it is about emphasising those aspects that may explain the forces that produces changes and stability at the same time. This is what Wundt, de Saussure, Cassirer and Moscovici seem to have in common.

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