

## **SAUSSURE'S TREASURE, HUMILIATION AND OTHER (NEO)LIBERAL TROPES**

### **O TESOURO DE SAUSSURE, HUMILHAÇÃO E OUTROS TROPOS (NEO)LIBERAIS**

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**ABSTRACT:** While driving its stake into the ground of political economy of language, this paper does two spatiotemporal jumps in order to shed some light on how particular liberal – hence politico-economic – ideologies travel. It first goes back a hundred years ago, to Geneva, and pursues a novel reading of Saussure by delineating his liberal picture of language. It then moves to 2013, in Lima, and looks at some possible consequences of Saussure's inaugural abandonment of social relationships. In addressing a contemporary scene of humiliation – where young indigenous Peruvian Yaqui Quispe is humiliated by Universidad del Pacifico in its reappraisal of her entrance exam – the paper claims that Saussure's liberal reified view of social relationships is a fiction that most speakers of the world languages cannot afford.

**KEYWORDS:** Saussure. Locke. Yaqui Quispe. Linguistic Liberalism.

**RESUMO:** Ao fincar seus referenciais no terreno da economia política da língua(gem), este artigo realiza dois saltos espaço-temporais de forma a lançar luzes no modo como ideologias liberais (e, assim, político-econômicas) viajam. Primeiro o artigo viaja para Genebra, cem anos atrás, e tenta delinear uma nova leitura de Saussure como autor liberal. Depois, retorna ao ano de 2013, em Lima, Peru, e tenta vislumbrar implicações possíveis do gesto Saussuriano de abandono das relações sociais (atrelado ao seu princípio de que a *parole* toma conta de si). Ao abordar uma cena contemporânea de humilhação, o artigo propõe que a visão liberal e reificada de Saussure sobre relações sociais é uma ficção cujo preço a maioria dos falantes das línguas do mundo não podem arcar.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Saussure. Locke. Yaqui Quispe. Economia política da língua.

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### INTRODUCTION

It is now a truism that linguistic form bears a close relationship with economic and political formations. Language use is so intertwined with the workings of capitalist economy that the former's failure also explains the collapse of entire financial markets (APPADURAI, 2016). Linguistic forms, accents and genres also have an economy of their own (IRVINE, 1989; BUCHOLTZ, 2006; HELLER, 2010; BLOMMAERT, 2010).

While driving its stake into the ground of political economy of language, this paper will do two spatiotemporal jumps in order to shed some light on how particular liberal – hence politico-economic – ideologies travel. First, the paper goes back a hundred years ago, to Geneva, and pursues a novel reading of Saussure by delineating his liberal picture of language. Second, it moves to 2013, in Lima, and looks at some possible consequences of Saussure's inaugural abandonment of social relationships (embedded in the idea that *parole* takes care of itself). I address a contemporary scene of humiliation, in which a young indigenous Peruvian, Yaqui Quispe, is humiliated by Universidad del Pacifico in its reappraisal of her entrance exam. I claim that Saussure's liberal reified view of social relationships is a fiction that most speakers of the world languages cannot afford.

Inquiring into the liberal formations of Saussure's linguistic enterprise, the paper also draws two ethical implications for contemporary linguistics. One, Saussure's picture of "language as a self-contained independent system at the agency of the individuals who speak it, linked to similarly discernible communities limited by identifiable borders" (FABRÍCIO, 2014, p.10) also has a politico-economic dimension, germane to liberalism's proper way of

producing subjects: by disregarding their social positioning in the name of “equality”. Two, attention to this particular coveted correlation formation of linguistics as a science may help us tackle the problem of how contemporary linguistic and politico-economic regimes, by disguising their liberal formations, legitimize certain social relationships – humiliation, for instance.

It remains that the disguise of language’s constitutive and crucial role in creating social relationships, premised on the norm that these relationships take care of themselves, amounts to leaving fundamental human attachments to their own chance. Especially when these attachments turn out to be wounded ones, Saussure’s pioneer interdiction comes to the fore, which demands that current language scholars tackle it critically as well as ethically.

## SAUSSURE’S (AND LOCKE’S) LINGUISTIC LIBERALISM

It is not easy to position Saussure in a particular tradition. As Lahud (1977, p.32) points, if on the one hand Saussure is in many ways innovative, on the other certain parts of his *Cours de Linguistique Générale* “simply repeat the ideational semiologic tradition which considers the sign as a dual entity of an essentially representative nature”. Saussure’s modernism thus stands at the hybrid and unstable confluence of his reading of the semiologic tradition, his training in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century comparativism, the breach with the tradition by his demarcation of language as a synchronic object, and his simultaneous unwillingness to founding a new tradition (BENVENISTE, 1966).

Saussure’s revolution consisted of his proposing of *langue* as a “self-contained whole and a principle of classification” (p.9). This type of artifact was more influentially and carefully molded as a “totality” in Saussure’s classes of general linguistics between 1906 and 1911 in Geneva. Bauman & Briggs (2004) argue that language had already emerged as a modern domain in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, when John Locke extracted it from the realm of indexical affairs where gendered, racial, sexual, and class belongings abound. But Locke was without the scientific mechanism which the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and its modern political imaginations would endow Saussure with. He then embraced Locke’s purified object – *langue* – as an analytically static and bounded space, an institution “which admits no order than its own” (p.25), thus immune to the speaker’s rather heterogeneous, “willful and intellectual” command of *parole*.

Saussure’s picture of *langue* as an institution of its own order and *parole* as the Locke’s linguistic philosophy and thus charged with a liberal sensibility. One of the founders of liberal political thought, Locke is less known for his theoretical preoccupations with language than for his philosophy of liberalism. But his picture of language presented in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) was profoundly influential for understandings of language in modernity (BAUMAN; BRIGGS, 2004). Now, while several authors (de MAURO, 1972; AARSLEF, 1982; HARRIS, 1987) agree that it is unlikely that Saussure must have read Locke at first hand, the parallels between the latter’s linguistic philosophy and some principles of Saussure’s *Cours* are striking. Gauging the ascendance of Saussure’s imaginations on language, Aarsleff (1982, p.25) is “forced to assume that there is a demonstrable connection, a course of coherence that links Locke, Humboldt and Saussure.”

Let me briefly sketch Locke’s politico-economic picture of language under four rubrics. One, ‘economic transparency’ is the principle whereby Locke imagined that, in its social circulation, words ought to be able to “excite in the hearer exactly the same idea they stand for in the mind of the speaker” (LOCKE, 1680: Book III, Chap IX, §4). This type of mind-reading would only be possible if speakers observed that language, “the great conduit”, serves the purpose of making “known one man’s thoughts and ideas to another”, something that ought to be done “with as much ease and quickness as possible” for the perfect

transmission of “the knowledge of things” (Book III, Chap X, §23). In failing to abide by these aims, men speak imperfectly. Note that Locke’s endeavor was a prescriptivist one: he wanted to free society from the “abuse of words” and therefore attempted to persuade his emerging modern audience – a group from which “children, idiots, savages, (...) illiterate people” and a great part of humanity were excluded – about the importance of communicating their thoughts transparently, easily and quickly. From the very outset, the market of linguistic circulation, where speakers would indulge in the economic transparency of language, was only free for a circle of citizens who would be able to rationally meet the therapeutic criteria carefully spelled out in the Book III of the *Essay*. Non-moderns would then be doomed to “fill one another’s heads with noise and sounds; but convey not thereby their thoughts, and lay not before one another their ideas, which is the end of discourse” (Book III, Chapter IX, §6).

Two, ‘contractualism’ stands for the principle that in all languages “common use, by a tacit consent, appropriates certain sounds to certain ideas” (Book III, Chapter II, §8). For Locke there was no natural connection between the mysterious bond of a certain sound to a corresponding idea, so speakers had to comply with the arbitrary production of the bond imposed by a common language. Whatever the power of an individual in the public sphere, she couldn’t by herself produce the bond between sound and meaning. The language contract is thus the linguistic counterpart of the social contract, a liberal narrative crafted by Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau and other liberal thinkers concerning the individuals’ surrender their idiosyncrasies to the rules of the public order as a condition of possibility for society.

Three, ‘arbitrariness’ is a principle of signification internal not only to Locke’s imaginations of language, but also to the protestant tradition where he belonged. Mahmood (2009) comments on the dismay experienced by Protestant missionaries when they first encountered non-Christians for whom linguistic and semiotic practices were not the abstract denotation of a divine figure but its performative embodiment. Imbued with a Lockean linguistic ideology according to which the material sign is only arbitrarily attached to the idea it denotes, early proselytizers preached on the category mistake that one commits in failing to understand that material objects are not the incorporation of gods and other divine entities but rather the arbitrary abstraction of them. Locke’s insistence on the non-natural bond between the sign and the thing it signifies is thus a metapragmatic attempt to locate the use of words and the circulation of language in the ideational and non-material realm of rationality. His therapeutic discourse was carved in a way that it would ultimately prevent disputes and violence between men.

Four, artifactualism stands for Locke’s pioneer detachment of language from the indexicality of everyday language practices. As noted above, Locke’s prescriptive discourse on language was meant to free language from its imperfections and possible abuses. Bauman & Briggs (2004) claim that the new boundaries that language came to acquire under Locke were accomplished through the process of ‘purification’ (LATOUR, 1993, p.10-11) i.e. the modern operation by means of which modernity’s fundamental separations (e.g., humans and non-humans, the natural world and society, discourse and its reference) are enacted. Carefully freed from its specific ties to people’s diverse forms of belonging in the world, as well as from particular ideologies that cast language not as representing the world but as making it, Locke molded language as a perfect artifact for modern operations. Locke’s production of language as an artifact is the principle that best embodies the politico-economic facet of this modern picture of language. The liberal implication in this picture is that, since language was freed from the blinkers of society and the material world, it was the individuals’ duty to discipline their ways with words. From Locke’s crafting of his construct, language “could thus perfectly embody the liberal ideology that purportedly judges individuals on the basis of their own individual actions” (BAUMAN; BRIGGS, 2004, p.59).

## PAROLE TAKES CARE OF ITSELF

In matters of *parole*, Saussure (1916, p.13) taught us, “the individual is always master”. It follows that how one speaks is a question of one’s “willful and intellectual” relationship to *parole*, a realm posited by the Geneva linguist as standing outside the linguist’s affairs. The task of the analyst is to describe the rules applying to the purified artifact that Saussure referred to as *langue*. In the myriad economic tropes on which Saussure nests his description of *langue*, perhaps the metaphor of the “treasure” best explains his liberal spelling out of the linguistic market:

If we could embrace the sum of word-images stored in the minds of all individuals, we could identify the social bond that constitutes *langue*. It is a treasure deposited through the practice of *parole* in the subjects of a given community, a grammatical system virtually existing in each brain, or better yet in the brains of a group of individuals; for *langue* is not complete in any individual but only within the mass (p.13-14).

Deployed early in the *Cours*, the metaphor of *langue* as a treasure freely deposited in the mass of individuals is arguably one of Saussure’s best explanations of his liberal stance toward language. This image appears in ‘The Object of Linguistics’, a chapter that reaffirms most of Locke’s above-mentioned principles and directs the linguist’s attention to that which is not merely “accessory and more or less accidental” (*parole*) but “essential” (*langue*). Like a statesman, the linguist should have a say not in the realm where individuals’ freely perform their speech but only in the latter’s abstract regulations. The linguist’s action should therefore be restricted to safeguarding the distinctions and demarcations that render speaking possible. Compare the Saussurean model of the linguist’s attitude toward speech action to Harvey’s portrayal of the role of the state in relation to the free market in neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (HARVEY, 2005, p.2)

Note that according to Harvey the “role of the state is to create (...) an institutional framework appropriate to [liberalism’s essential freedoms]”. We’ve learnt from Austin (1962) that verbs like ‘to create’ and ‘to state’ overlap in many ways. Both have an illocutionary force, i.e. an ability to produce a certain effect in the world. Austin says: “Surely to state is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce (...) ‘Stating’ seems to meet all the criteria we had for distinguishing the illocutionary act (p.133).” I want to suggest that Saussure, in stating that the institutional framework of *langue* stands for the latter being a radically formal and non-subjective order (one that “is not a function of the speaker; [...] a product that is passively assimilated by the individual”), necessarily distinct from *parole*’s heterogeneous and agentive practice, amounts to the very creation of *langue*’s institutional framework. As we know, Saussure’s institutional framework elected internal linguistics – the field “which knows only language on its own” – as linguistics proper. Lifted out of the world of practice, *langue*, as Bloommaert (2013) claims, is a fragment of language, an artifact that would later become a normative measure for the entirety of language.

## FREEDOM FOR WHOM?

As a trope of liberal thinking, Saussure's image of language as a treasure deposited in the collectivity of brains in a society evokes liberalism's fundamental notion of equality. Yet in liberalism, equality only functions as long as it remains abstract or unpoliticized. In Wendy Brown's formulation, once the materiality of social belongings comes to the fore – in the form of markers of difference as race, gender, sexuality and class – liberalism's primary stake on equality is immediately broken. Liberalism has to withdraw "difference" from its conceptual apparatus just so the equality between individuals may stand still. For Brown (1995, p.56), the materiality that marks the different other as non-modern (i.e., non-male, non-white, non-European) is only rendered visible as long as it is trivialized ("as in homosexuals who are 'just like everyone' else except for who we sleep with") or positioned as a supplement or "partial outsider to the 'we'" (as in blacks who are just 'different' inasmuch as our frontiers are clearly demarcated).

Brown adds that liberalism's unpoliticization or erasure of "the substantive conditions of our lives" in its ideal of equality is actually a *particular interested political and economic position*.

Unlike Locke, Saussure locates difference in the structural functioning of the linguistic sign. Yet his notion of difference remained formal and apolitical, restricted to his imagination of *langue* as an artifact stripped from the world of human activity. Saussure actually borrowed from economics a concept that would help him unpack the question of (formal) difference in language, namely the notion of 'value'. He explains his pairing of linguistics and economy as follows: "Here as in political economy we are confronted with the notion of value; both sciences are concerned with a system for equating things of different orders – labor and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other". Not to be confounded with signification, the value is a pure formal differentiation between a linguistic sign and the other signs in the closure of the system; signification is then to be conceived as an emerging consequence of the sign's value. In Saussure's own words: "When [values] are said to correspond to concepts, it is not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not (p.117)."

Lahud (1977) points that Saussure in making recourse to value seems to solve the problem of how a community of speakers univocally associate a sound-image with a concept. Yet his solution amounts to the dislocation of the problem for the domain of social psychology. In other words, as Saussure explains, that French speakers all associate the signifier *juger* with the signified "to judge" has to be explained not within an understanding of language as a prefigured nomenclature for correspondingly pre-existing concepts but as the arbitrary "system of pure values" which makes the association possible. *Juger* as a stable association of sound and meaning among French speakers is thus a value emerging out of "its relations with other similar values, and (...) without them the signification would not exist" (SAUSSURE, 1916, p.117). As Lahud claims, the gap in the theory of value, or yet the dislocation of the problem for the science of social psychology, is to be located in Saussure's disinterest for explaining how at the level of pragmatics (in *parole*) speakers make relatively the same associations between sound and meaning. Note that his example on the formal emergence of *juger* as a sign belongs in the level of *langue*, the domain to which the liberal thinker of language should restrict herself.

In proposing that *langue* is an exteriorly coercive entity to which the speaker passively attaches as the embodied and political markers of one's belonging in the world don't matter in this radically autonomous institution, Saussure therefore positioned action in

speech as a supplement. This is all the more evident in his disciples' placing in the *Cours*' Appendix of his discussion on the influences of geopolitics in language diversity, his insights on matters such as language spread and the relation between language and ethnology and history. Throughout the *Cours* his acknowledgement of a domain of action between individuals is either trivialized or positioned as a realm of free-will external to linguistics.

To use a Wittgensteinian metaphor, as long as "language goes on vacation" from practical human action in Saussure's liberalism, it becomes a reified artifact in a political and economic linguistic "vacuum". Here is Lukács' explanation for the rationale of reification in capitalism:

a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people (*apud* CROWLEY, 1990, p.31).

Saussure thus embraced the liberal autonomy of relations between people in such a way that they turned to be not ethical relations but 'phantom' relations. Wandering by themselves, these social relations are of no interest to linguists. In other words, in privileging *langue* as an object of inquiry over *parole*, Saussure sidestepped language's fundamental feature as a realm of constitution of social relationships (compare to AGHA, 2007). In this sense, the radical exteriority of *langue* as the territory where the linguist would couch her understandings of language implies the abandonment of the speakers to their own chance in the realm of *parole*. The Lockean economic transparency that Saussure reiterates in his imagination of the speech circuit explains this type of abandonment: the coercive exteriority of *langue* eliminates all individuals' traits in the very moment they decode an utterance. It remains that the singularity of a speaker and the ethics of the relationships she engages with others are ultimately matters of free-will.

I will next delineate some contemporary implications of Saussure's normative abandonment of the speakers to a liberal belonging in *parole*. I examine the landing of Saussurean politico-economic ideological tropes in Peru, more precisely in the racial profiling of Yaqui Quispe, an indigenous Peruvian who was humiliated when applying to the Business Engineering program at Universidad del Pacifico.

## WOUNDED ATTACHMENTS

Born in Huancavelica, a poor city in the Western chain of the Andes, Yaqui Quispe applied in 2013 to the School of Business Engineering at Universidad del Pacifico, in Lima. As she narrates to several outlets, the university originally sent her a letter of admission, with a copy to the Ministry of Education as she qualified for the government's grant Beca 18. However, in her visit to the university for paperwork, the staff mistreated her while maintaining that there had been an administrative error resulting in her receipt of an acceptance letter. In the university's telling of the case, Yaqui Quispe "did not obtain the minimal grades" for admission in the course of Engineering (UNIVERSIDAD DEL PACIFICO, 2013). Her initial complaints within the university resulted in the rector offering her a grant for a pre-university preparation instead, which Yaqui did not accept.

Dismayed at the racialization she linked to the university's reconsidering of her entrance, Yaqui, her family and fellow Huancavelica townspeople organized a protest in front of the university campus. Holding a banner with the inscription "Racistas Discrimandores," Yaqui says she will not "study in this university because there is racism here" (BUENOS DIAS PERÚ, 2013a). For the university, the gap between their sending of an admission letter

and her enrollment visit is to be filled with an “administrative error”; for Yaqui Quispe, however, it is to be filled with her racialization. In her framing of the university’s reappraisal of her admission, it is precisely her othering as indigenous that makes her unfit to participating in the disembodied loop of liberal subjects. Internet user Alejandro Ordoñez, for instance, commented on a News report about the case that, “[i]n this institution, people from the countryside are not allowed to study, especially if they have surnames as: Quispes, Ocrosopomas, Huamanes, Chillitupas, Huasasquiches, Huallpasuas, etc. Here only study: Gastelumendis, Mulders, Alan Garcias, Belaundes, Nicolinis, and they should preferably be white” (PERÚ21, 2013).

In addition to being racialized, Yaqui Quispe was silenced as she couldn’t enter the bureaucratic speech circuit of the university. If speech and interlocution in the free market of *parole* are conditions of possibility for one’s figuring as a modern subject, the multiple denials of the university to have her as an interlocutor reveal precisely that she lacks the credentials to be a proper modern speaking subject. To the Commission of Social Inclusion of Peru’s Congress, she said “they did not want to help me, they laughed at me (...) There were other students who received the Beca 18. They were well dressed. They didn’t even look poor. To them the university gave information, at the same time that I was ignored” (PANAMERICANA, 2013). The university president also denies her entrance in this modern communicative circuit. After speaking for 30 minutes in the hearing, he walks away upon learning that Yaqui would be the next to testify. “I don’t want to listen to her, because she makes me feel bad,” he tells the journalists after leaving the room. Yaqui, in tears, then begins the narration of her racial profiling by the university.

In the circulation of this story, her non-modern speaking traits very rapidly combined with liberal understandings of her lack of intellectual merit. Readers’ comments to the circulation of her story abound. Within these, it is impressive how liberal ideologies of speaking and citizenship cast Yaqui as the icon of an indigenous past that does not belong in the country’s current meritocratic modernity. Pepita Jimenez belittles Yaqui for her lack of economic and linguistic resources: “As a matter of fact, this girl doesn’t have money, you can tell by her speaking and I don’t mean her accent but the way she expresses her ideas.” Alicia Ibáñez blames Yaqui herself for allegedly trying to masquerade her “ineptitude” with discrimination: “she doesn’t look naïve. discrimination??? of course, now that it is a trendy topic everyone will disguise their ineptitude as discrimination. this girl makes me feel shameful, she can’t simply acknowledge that she couldn’t enter the university. STUPID” (PERÚ21, 2013).

Abandoned in the free market of liberal ideas surrounding this private university in Peru, Yaqui Quispe, in spite of the case’s reverberation in the media, fell mentally ill and was internalized in a psychiatric hospital. Wounded in her very condition as human being, Yaqui couldn’t handle the psychic repetition of the injury. In front of the hospital Emilio Valdizan, in Lima, reporter Carmen Herrera reads an excerpt of a letter Yaqui addressed to Peru’s president: “Because of this situation, I tried to kill myself more than 10 times. This is owed on the one hand to the injustice and on the other to the fact that I won’t study at Universidad del Pacifico, which was my dream” (BUENOS DIAS PERÚ, 2013b).

Yaqui’s case demonstrates that, in a liberal market of communicative and economic resources, the others who are cast as non-moderns may not strive in the phantom objectivity of a speech circuit that, as liberal, is infused with utilitarian and self-interested attachments. The potential violence of the latter might have played a role in the resulting illness of Yaqui.

In closing, I would like to touch on yet another aspect that, as Claudia Lemos (2009, p.207) puts it, “linguistics has to put aside in order to define the principles ruling languages and to describe the so-called natural languages”. The abandoned aspect Lemos is referring to is the efficacy of symbols, which concerns the psychic binding of the subject to speech and

the esthetic effects of poetics. Yaqui's humiliation is nested in liberalism's instrumental, utilitarian and meritocratic views of the Other, many of which are imbued in current artifactualized linguistic ideologies (BLOMMAERT, 2015). Her plight stems from a ghostly binding to a bureaucratic system that at once grants and grants not her admission, a contradiction that betrays the liberal exhaustion of politics in its masquerading as administration. To insist in a form of linguistics that cares about subjects' social and psychic attachments to the world is yet another critical step towards avoiding the abandonment of social relations to their own chance.

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