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Neogrammarian Ferdinand: A Natural Hermeneutics of Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes

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NEOGRAMMARIAN FERDINAND: A NATURAL
HERMENEUTICS OF *MÉMOIRE SUR LE SYSTÈME
PRIMITIF DES VOYELLES DANS LES LANGUES
INDO-EUROPEÉENNES*

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Introduction¹

The term “Neogrammarian” has been fraught with tense emotion ever since it appeared. Not infrequently were facts admitted as evidence in the argumentation – for or against the Neogrammarian work – only insofar and as much as they suited the kind of momentary emotion felt [...]. It is astonishing and shocking alike that in most, if not all writings which deal with the Neogrammarians the prevailing impression conveyed is that the concept of the sound law constitutes the sum total of the Neogrammarian achievement – regardless of whether evaluated positively or negatively; once this achievement is taken away [...], not very much worthwhile remains [Jankowsky 1972: 13].

Neogrammarians, as Jankowsky [1972: 114] points out, excessive and extremist in many respects, were totally immunized against Romanicism. They wanted to reach beyond “the mere comparison of these languages in the framework of the mainstream paradigm which was then inspired by the Darwinism of Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) and August Schleicher (1821–1868)” [Bouissac 2010: 45].

This paper argues that insufficient attention has been paid to the Neogrammarian and “natural” intent of Ferdinand de Saussure’s work (e.g. a monograph

¹ I am grateful to two anonymous referees for this journal for their suggestions and criticisms. I would also like to express my thanks to Prof. Helena Pocięchina for getting me acquainted with de Saussure’s *Mémoire*. The paper is part of a larger project on Neogrammarians. For a more detailed description of the movement and an extensive list bibliography, cf. Haładewicz-Grzelak [2013, and forth.]. All translations in the paper from Russian and French are mine – M.H.-G.

published in 1879 as *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*, *Mémoire* henceforth). Without being a straightforward exegesis or a historiographic study, it makes use, however, of a hermeneutic enquiry into some aspects of his thought. To recall briefly, hermeneutics, in the version as practiced and developed by e.g. Paul Ricoeur, is not only a theory of interpretation but also, it is important due to its ability to reveal the modus of a human existence. It also contributes to a better understanding of a human being and the connections with a surrounding world [cf. Klemm as cited in Rosner 1989: 7]. Along these lines, philosophy must become interpretation, that is, it should incorporate achievements of all the sciences which aim to decipher and interpret the products of culture, the signs of human existence [Ricoeur 1989: 119].

De Saussure's contemporaries in Europe include Hermann Paul (1846–1921), Karl Bühler (1879–1963), Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), Mikołaj Kruszewski (1851–1887), Otto Jespersen (1860–1914), as well as Edward Sapir (1884–1939) in the New World.² With regard to the existence of such plethora of eminent scholars, both as de Saussure's predecessors and contemporaries, Percival [1981, 2011] asks a difficult question of why so many linguists “eventually came to regard themselves as followers of de Saussure rather than any of these linguistic theorists? How did this exclusive loyalty to de Saussure come about?” [Percival 2011: 239].

Percival [1981] aims to address this and the related moot issues. In brief, he suggests two factors which could have contributed to the posthumous pedigree status of de Saussure in the contemporary scene. The paramount one was the nationality. Citing Malkiel, “The acceptance of the leadership of a French-Swiss genius connoted for many Westerners then opposed to Germany a strongly desired, rationalized escape from the world of Brugmann, Leskien, Osthoff, and Paul” [Malkiel 1969: 537, as cited in Percival 1981: 44]. Additionally, Percival quotes an excerpt from a letter written by Edward Stankiewicz (dated 7 October 1977):

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that both Trubetzkoy and Jakobson were somehow bent on throwing all the credit for “structuralism” to Saussure (with whom they had little in common and on underplaying the role of B[adouin] d[e]C[ourtenay] (from whom they took a great deal). I recently asked Jakobson point blank why they (the Praguians) did not state more clearly the importance of B d C and Kruszewski and he answered that “nobody would have listened to us, had we talked about the Poles” [Percival 2011: 252].

In this sense, de Saussure's Swiss background provided a neutral ideological plateau, convenient for the majority of Western scholars, making him a guarding spirit already of the Second International Congress in Geneva [cf. Percival 1981: 41].

² Lotman [2002] explicitly maintained that “современники Пирс и Соссюр, будучи в свое время маргиналами акаемического мира, ничево не знали друг о друге” [contemporaries Peirce and Saussure, being in their times at the margin of the academic world, did not know anything about each other] [Lotman 2002: 22, footnote 2].

The second reason could have been the inherent diversity of the linguistic scene of the time. Percival claims that each of these diverging groups had their own motives to promote de Saussure. This reconciliatory function was possible due to the inherently vague means of the presentation of ideas in Saussure's work and the lack of commitment to any stand. Finally Percival points that

one cannot underestimate the extent to which the identification of a founding father can provide a struggling new movement with a much needed sense of identity. In this respect, Saussure was an ideal choice, being a highly respected historical linguist of the old school and hence a figure largely immune to criticism on the part of the professional establishment to whom the structuralists were opposed. Paradoxically, therefore, the *Cours* performed the double service of providing these rebellious young linguists with a respectable intellectual pedigree and, at the same time, offering them a weapon to fight the stranglehold that historical linguists still had on academic linguistics in the early decades of the twentieth century [Percival 1981: 45].

Taking the meta-theoretical position and assuming *Mémoire* as an example of discourse in the Ricoeurian sense, the first section of this paper concentrates on the status of the *Cours* with respect to the work of the Neogrammarians, on the status of young de Saussure with respect to his Neogrammarian contemporaries, and on the Neogrammarian status of *Mémoire*, the book which, as Pocietchina assumes, was “образцом научного предвидения в языкознании” [the epitome of scientific foresight in linguistics] [Pocietchina 2009: 24]. Section 2 points out original insights of the young scholar, which usually pass unnoticed or are taken for granted by contemporary academia. This is done by exploring and comparing a variety of referential sources and by taking a “Natural” and hermeneutic look at de Saussure's monumental monograph. My analytical focus was on what the way in which he structures his argument, and on what this structuring can reveal of his epistemology. In this way the study hopes to contribute to a critical evaluation of paradigm change in retrospective. Following Pocietchina [2009: Chapter I], I assume that there is too much emphasis on the revolutionary aspects of subsequent linguistic paradigms, while in reality there occurs nothing but gradual evolution and accumulation of ideas.

1. The *Course*

De Saussure is known almost exclusively for the work he neither wrote, nor edited, nor approved for publication, and which has been circulating for decades under his name: *Course in general linguistics* (the *Course* henceforth). The book has been “edited” by people who, as Percival points out, did not attend a single lecture of his on general linguistics in Geneva and “both made important contributions to general linguistics on their own before they became involved in

editing the *Course*” [Percival 1981: 42].³ On the other hand, the 2002 publication of Saussure’s own handwritten manuscripts and real lecture notes of his students (as *Écrits de linguistique générale – Writings in general Linguistics*) passed almost unnoticed. Worse still, the only book de Saussure wrote, edited and approved for publication, that is, *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* is at best ignored or considered among general readership as something of no particular importance.

Sanders comments on the quandary spurred by the *Course* in the following way:

While the posthumous and non autograph status of the text may have contributed to its inclusion in the twentieth century canon, its sometimes gnomic formulations gave rise to many creative interpretations and also left full scope of argument “for” and “against” Saussure. These varied according to the stance of an individual or to the intellectual fashion of the decade. Did Saussure, or did he not, see language as asocial and ahistorical? Did he or did not, rule out the study of speech within linguistics? [Sanders 2002: xviii].

As Jankowsky controversially assumes, “More than 9 students out of 10 will connect his [de Saussure’s] importance exclusively with the posthumous *Course*. And yet there is much to it when Franz Specht claims that *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*, published by de Saussure when he was 22, constitutes the climax of his scholarly career” [Jankowsky 1972: 185]. Upon closer historical scrutiny, this claim loses some of its iconoclastic and scandalous stridor: most of the distinctions introduced by de Saussure in the *Course* were shown to have existed and circulated in the academia of the time, at least 20 years before the posthumously published *Course*. I will now briefly review some of them.

Percival [1981, 2011] explores reactions of the contemporary reviewers after the publication of the first editions of the *Course*. The study shows that, unfortunately, the response of the contemporaries to the first edition of the *Course* was mostly negative, protesting most of all against assumed originality of de Saussure’s concepts. For example, in Leonard Bloomfield’s review (the 1922 edition of the book), we can read that the *Course* merit “lies in its clear and rigorous demonstration of fundamental principles. Most of what the author says has long been ‘in

³ Bouissac similarly observes that Bally and Sechehaye, although they attended some of de Saussure’s course on comparative grammar, “had not been present at any of the three courses in general linguistics that Saussure gave between 1906 and 1911. They enrolled a former student, Albert Riedlinger, who had taken the second course, to help them sort out the material and build a plausible reconstruction of Saussure’s theory on the basis of these notebooks. This was all the more challenging as Saussure had not organized the three course in the same manner” [Bouissac 2010: 117]. More importantly still, both “editors” had drastically differing views on linguistic architecture from those they attributed to de Saussure in the *Cours*. Percival provides an extended quote from Bally’s inaugural address on succeeding to de Saussure’s professorial chair in 1913, pointing out that although Bally began by dutifully and deferentially expounding de Saussure’s framework of ideas, he swiftly “proceeded to state quite openly that he himself had reached different conclusions from those of his master” [Percival 1981: 42].

the air' and has been here and there fragmentarily expressed; the systematization is his own" ([Bloomfield 1923: 317] as cited in Percival [1981: 40, footnote 5]).

What exactly has been in the air? Jankowsky points out that "[t]he Neogrammarians, all of them, distinguished between 'systematic', i.e. historical, and comparative approach" [Jankowsky 1972: 150]. Percival provides detailed evidence for this issue showing, for example, how scholars such as e.g., Hugo Schuchardt and Otto Jespersen vehemently protested against the conceptual novelty of the neologisms *synchronie* versus *diachronie*: "Otto Jespersen, a member of Saussure's own generation, makes the same point bluntly and with none of Schuchardt's modesty. He refers to the synchronic and diachronic approaches as 'what I myself called the statics and dynamics of language in *Dansker Studien* 1908, p. 213'" [Percival 1981: 34].⁴

Jakobson provides a tectonic summary of "Saussurean" ideas, where he basically traces them all directly back to the Kazan School, in particular, Mikołaj Kruszewski. For example, "the majority of theoretical concepts and principles exposed by de Saussure date back to his elder contemporaries, Baudouin de Courtenay (8, 133) and Kruszewski (150, 142)" [Jakobson 1973: 17].⁵ Further on Jakobson explicitly points out that the internal duality of *langue* and *parole* exposed by de Saussure, was calqued on the synonymous distinction between *jazyk* [language] and *reč* [speech] enunciated by Baudouin de Courtenay in 1870 [Jakobson 1973: 19]. To that, "Saussure a adopté la conception stoïenne du signe verbal, double composé du signifiant perceptible et du signifié intelligible [...]. La différence entre les deux attitudes linguistiques, la synchronie et la diachronie, a été clairement exposé, avec des exemples à l'appui, par Baudouin de Courtenay pendant le dernier tiers du XIX^e siècle" [Jakobson 1973: 18ff].⁶ More importantly, in his essay on the importance of Kruszewski, Jakobson writes:

A travers le *Cours* de Genève, c'est l'idée fondamentale du *Profil* de Kruszewski sur les deux axes linguistiques, l'axe syntagmatique et l'autre, qu'on appelle aujourd'hui paradigmatique, qui a profondément pénétré dans la linguistique internationale contemporaine. Baudouin se sert lui aussi de cette dichotomie comme de différentes autres idées de Kruszewski dans ses travaux tardifs [...]. Mais il faut dire qu'en réalité la

⁴ With respect to the focus of Neogrammarians on dialectology, I would like to cite another charge against the *Course* that appeared in Percival's paper. A review by Karl Berger, a prominent Romanist, contains the following complaints: "[a] name such as Schuchardt", he says, 'is not mentioned in de Saussure's book' [...]. 'An awareness of the results of modern dialectology, especially in the romance area, is also lacking. Saussure did not seem to have understood the significance of the French linguistic atlas and the work of Gilléron upon it' [Jaberg 1965: 127]" [Percival 1981: 35].

⁵ "La plupart des concepts et principes théorétiques exposés par Saussure remontent à ses contemporains aînés, Baudouin de Courtenay (8, 133) et Kruszewski (150, 142)" [Jakobson 1973: 17].

⁶ For a detailed discussion of paradigmatic affinities between Kruszewski, Baudouin de Courtenay and Saussure, see also in particular Radwańska-Williams [1993] and Jakobson [1973] (chapter XI "*L'importance de Kruszewski dans le développement de la linguistique générale*"). See also Koerner [1973] for the more detailed documentation of continuities between Saussure's ideas and achievements of his predecessors and contemporaries.

conception des problèmes en question chez Kruszewski est beaucoup plus systématique, plus cohérente et plus vaste que celle de Baudouin et de Saussure [Jakobson 1973: 256].

Of course, we will never know what de Saussure's intended book would have really been like and how he would have structured the argument. Two things are certain: the editors of *Writings* observe some discrepancies between de Saussure's actual manuscripts and original lecture notes of his students, with the version authored by Bally and Secheyave. Bouquet [Bouquet, Engler, Weil 2002], comparing de Saussure's own notes with the "vulgate" of the *Cours*, observe that

his view of the discipline is less categorical than appears in the 1916 rendering, while at the same time resting on more explicit foundations [...]. The meticulous foundations – epistemological and philosophical of the Swiss linguist's thought correspond exactly to the two components somewhat neglected by his "editors" (this is how, curiously, Bally and Secheyave refer to themselves in the preface to the book which they drafted from the beginning to the end). These two components are an epistemology of comparative grammar and a philosophy of language. To oversimplify, the first was nourished by the knowledge paradigm (episteme) of the nineteenth century and the second by that of the eighteenth century" [Bouquet, Engler, Weil 2002: xiii].⁷

It must be also observed at this point that in *Mémoire* de Saussure always refers with full reverence to all the scholars that contributed to the research in a given field. He also specifies in what way his work differs or builds on their research. For example, de Saussure says that the sonant liquids in PIE were discovered in 1877 by Osthoff, but "malheureusement ce savant n'a donné nulle part de monographie complète de ce sujet" [Saussure 1879: 42, footnote 1]. As far as the nasal sonants are concerned, de Saussure attributes the discovery of these to Karl Brugmann various times throughout the book [e.g. Saussure 1879: 6].⁸ If de Saussure consistently mentions all prominent scholars of his times and earlier in the only book he wrote, it thus seems that he cannot be charged for failing to refer to the predecessors in a book he had never approved for publication himself. We thus have solid grounds to claim that the *Course* might not have been the version of de Saussure's "catechism" he would have totally endorsed. The lack of proper

⁷ The existence of discrepancies, interestingly, was observed much earlier by Jakobson himself: "Notre conclusion – que la valeur d'opposition devrait être transférée du phonème à trait distinctif (23) – ne contredit pas les vues de Ferdinand de Saussure lui-même, étant donné qu'ici comme en bien d'autres endroits, les éditeurs du *Cours* ont dévié de son enseignement authentique. Dans les transcriptions originales des cours de Saussure, nous voyons en effet que ce ne sont pas les phonèmes mais leurs 'éléments' qui prennent 'une valeur purement oppositive, relative, négative'" [Jakobson 1973: 139]. Divergences were observed already by people who knew Ferdinand personally. For example, Percival cites a review of the *Cours* by a student who had actually studied with de Saussure, Paul Regard, where the editors are critiqued "for making it appear that de Saussure separated linguistic change from the external conditions upon which it depends [...] 'But the author of the present preface more than once heard the late Ferdinand de Saussure explain by means of external conditions not only linguistic changes but the reservation of certain features'" [Percival 1981: 37].

⁸ Also, in one of the footnotes de Saussure observes that "M. Benfey has shown that the verb *mṛlati* in the Vedas, had the long \bar{r} and M. Hübschmann has given the explanation for it by the comparison with Avestan *marezhd*" [Saussure 1879: 250, footnote 1].

credits to theoretical achievements of the time in the *Course* could only testify to the fact that Bally and Secheyave were themselves not very proficient in the intricacies of the scholarly scene of the time. Given also that both Bally and Secheyave on many occasions made a point of stressing the divergence of their opinions with these of de Saussure [see Bouquet, Engler, Weil 2002], it could be the case that in their version they exaggerated de Saussure's stand to make the difference more prominent.

With regard to the plethora of ambiguities concerning the *Course*, the scarcity of elaborations on *Mémoire* – the book de Saussure did approve for publication under his name – is astonishing. Usually, the existence of *Mémoire* is subsumed under this type of brief comment:

Saussure himself wrote nothing of general significance. A book on the vowel system of early Indo-European language, a doctoral thesis on the use of the genitive case in Sanskrit and a handful of technical papers are all that he ever published. Nor did he leave behind a rich hoard of unpublished writings. His influence, both within and beyond linguistics, is based on something he never wrote [Culler 1986: 17].⁹

The following subsection will try to take a closer look at this monograph in the context of the Neogrammarian spirit of the time. I take *Mémoire* as one of the highlights of Neogrammarian achievements and will refer to particular formulations therein as instances of Neogrammarian methodology.

2. *Mémoire* and Ferdinand de Saussure as a rebellious Neogrammarian

2.1. The challenge

De Saussure's academic carrier was largely devoted to teaching ancient European languages – he assumed the post of the professor of Comparative History of Indo-European Languages at the University of Geneva in 1891, in the words of Bouissac, “a domain of research in which he was considered a major authority” [Bouissac 2010: 2]. His adventure with linguistics started for real at the age of 18, when he came to Leipzig, which at the time was a linguistic high ground, with

⁹ There are of course remarkable exceptions. In his monograph on Russian historical grammar W.K. Matthews [1960] frequently refers to the diachronic research of de Saussure, assessing its meritoric validity. For example, he points out the issue of long sonants in PIE which de Saussure advocated and recalls that it was de Saussure who (in his paper *À propos de l'accentuation lituanienne* in *Recueil de publications scientifiques*) had shown that the Indo-European long vowels “are represented in ‘Balto-Slavonic’ by the acute (e.g. [long] *i, á, ú*) and the diphthongs are normally circumflex (**eĩ, eñ, el*)” [Matthews 1960: 22]. Also, discussing metatony in the Russian paradigm of declension, Matthews cites it as an example of “the so-called Fortunatov – de Saussure ‘law’ which explains the shift from the initial to the final syllable as due to the attraction of either a short syllable or a long circumflex syllable in Common Slavic, as well as in Baltic, to a following long acute syllable (e.g. Com S *bordá*)” [Matthews 1960: 42].

acknowledged professors such as Georg Curtius (1820–1885) and August Leskien (1840–1916) [cf. Bouissac 2010: 44]. Furthermore, Leipzig at the time was the crib of the nascent movement – Neogrammarians. Bouissac [2010] describes the group as young rebels, not very much older than de Saussure, aiming to move linguistics toward a scientific epistemology and defying the romantic approach that at the time had dominated the study of Indo-European languages in Germany. Their objective was “the methodic search for rigorous objective laws that explained scientifically why the Indo-European languages were all so different in spite of the common origin” [Bouissac 2010: 44f]. The lead in this movement was taken by Karl Brugmann, who was only 27 at the time when de Saussure arrived in Leipzig [cf. Bouissac 2010: 45]. As mentioned in Kemmer [2009] about that time (in 1876) Brugmann fell in deep conflict with Curtius after the publication of an article on *nasalis sonans*: “After his co-editor of one of the main journals of comparative linguistics, Georg Curtius, essentially stopped publication to get rid of him and his new ideas about linguistic methodology, Brugmann co-founded the journal *Morphologische Untersuchungen* with Hermann Osthoff” ([Kemmer 2009, no indication of a page]).

In the autobiographical text of 1903 (as quoted by Bouissac), de Saussure admits that he felt ill-prepared for the studies, experiencing additionally a culture shock: “[a]though he was reasonably fluent in German, he did not know most of the ancient languages that were discussed in the philological courses and his knowledge of Sanskrit was still superficial” [Bouissac 2010: 45].¹⁰ Still, only three years after de Saussure arrived in Leipzig with only very rudimentary linguistic knowledge, his monograph *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* was published by the prestigious Teubner publishing house in Leipzig (1879).

We have to recall that it was the time of very prolific Neogrammarian output. The preceding year Kurt Wagner’s Neogrammarian project on dialectology came out in the same publishing house. The year 1878 also witnessed the publication of the Neogrammarian manifesto, signed by Osthoff and Brugmann, which appeared in the first issue of *Morphologische Untersuchungen*. A year after the publication of *Mémoire*, Hermann Paul’s *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* came out in Halle, published by Max Niemeyer.

Mémoire, in general reporting the study of multiple forms under which “what is called” Indo-European *a* is manifested,¹¹ arose mixed reactions among German linguists, and, as Bouissac [2010] points out, to de Saussure’s disappointment,

¹⁰ Notwithstanding, as Bouissac remarks, de Saussure was admitted to the Linguistic Society (Société de linguistique) already at the age of 17, with his first essay read at its meetings when de Saussure was 18 [Bouissac 2010: 51].

¹¹ Jerzy Kuryłowicz, in his outstanding appraisal of *Mémoire*, says the following in this respect: “Les éléments n’existent pas les uns à côté des autres, mais grâce aux autres. L’auteur du ‘Mémoire’ le dit expressément en introduisant le ‘heros’ de son livre, la voyelle fondamentale a_1 (*e*), dont dépendent tous les autres vocalismes et dont il va raconter les avatars” [Kuryłowicz 1978: 8].

it was largely ignored in the Neogrammarian milieu. Brugmann and Osthoff in particular are reported to have shown very hostile attitude both to the monograph and to its author: “Osthoff went as far as casting doubt on author’s integrity, hinting that he may have used knowledge acquired in the courses he had taken with Brugmann and himself” [Bouissac 2010: 46].¹² Jakobson [1973: 289] similarly mentions violent attacks which Hermann Osthoff targeted against *Mémoire*.¹³

It is no wonder, though, that de Saussure’s Neogrammarian colleagues should have reacted so negatively both to the book and to its author: de Saussure, while giving always other scholars full credit and acknowledgement, does not hesitate to point out the shortcomings of his senior colleagues’ research on frequent occasions throughout the monograph, e.g. “M. Delbrück [...] dit bien que que *sran* dans *avasran* (R.V. IV2, 19) contient la voyelle thématique. Mais les preuves positives manquent et Grassman interprète cetter forme d’une manière toute différente” [Saussure 1879: 10].¹⁴ Ironically, it thus seems that de Saussure with his *Mémoire* became a controversial rebel amongst controversial rebels of the time, challenging his tutors who had just challenged theirs (Brugmann contra Curtius).

2.2. *Mémoire*: a natural hermeneutics

Pociechina, recalling the impact of *Mémoire* on the development of morphology, remarks that

уже в самом начале своего труда Соссюр отмечает системный характер своего исследования и предопределяет связь двух уровней языковой системы: фонетики и морфологии. «Мемуар», вознесенный до небес потомками и отвергнутый современниками Соссюра, оказавшись книгой несвоевременной, преждевременной, изучаемый в связи с ларингальной теорией, провозглашенный символом научного предвидения в лингвистике, остается по-прежнему недооцененным. [Pociechina 2009: 24f].

Между тем, «Мемуар о первоначальной системе гласных в индоевропейских языках» можно считать первой работой по морфонологии в современном языкознании. Во-первых, речь в нем идет о чередовании гласных, во-вторых, автор рассмат-

¹² Yet, he also narrates an anecdote that, “shortly after, as he [de Saussure] introduced himself to a German professor with who he intended to study, the professor asked him if, by any change, he was a relative of the famous Swiss linguist who was the author of the *Mémoire*” [Bouissac 2010: 47].

¹³ *Nota bene*, de Saussure’s weighty replique to these attacks, never published of course, in the form of large sketches of a phonetic treatise occupies the most important place among the manuscripts of the Harvard Collection [Jakobson 1973: 289].

¹⁴ See also this sample of de Saussure’s subtle and elegant critique: “Seconde question. Sans vouloir se prononcer sur la priorité de l’un ou de l’autre phonème, M. Brugmann tient que a_2 , par rapport à a_1 , est un renforcement; que a_1 par rapport à a_2 , est un affaiblissement (Stud. 371, 384). [...] Ces désignations prennent un corps si on admet que l’échange de a_1 et a_2 est en rapport avec les déplacements du ton. C’est là la opinion de M. Brugmann. Si on pense, et c’est le notre cas, que l’échange de deux phonèmes est indépendant de l’accent, il vaut mieux s’asbentir d’attribuer à l’un d’eux une supériorité qui ne se justifie guère” [Saussure 1879: 134].

ривает грамматическую роль различных видов фонемы <a> как в словоизменении (именном и глагольном), так и в словообразовании [Pocieczina 2009: 24f].

There are crucially three themes that merit to be mentioned with regard to this opus and all of which are a proof of immense analytical insight of the young scholar. The first is, unquestionably, deducing the presence of an unknown factor – a laryngeal – that must have influenced the development of language. The part that seems most confusing, though, is the issue of PIE sonants, which de Saussure systematized and corroborated in this work and which is captured under the term *sonantic coefficient*.¹⁵

Generally it is assumed [e.g. Smoczyński 2006] that de Saussure's concept of "sonantic coefficient" (*schwa indogermanicum*) implies PIE laryngeals (current notations h_1, h_2, h_3) – as a reconstructed consonant which, while disappearing from the phoneme inventory, gave rise to certain changes.¹⁶ However, my understanding of the term here is much narrower, strictly Saussueran, and it follows directly from the text of the *Mémoire*, where de Saussure writes implicitly the following words: "L'*i* et l'*u* de ces racines [that is, containing *e*], ainsi que la liquid et la nasale des racines telles que *derk bendh*, peuvent prendre le nom de *coefficient sonantique*. Ils concurrent au vocalisme de la racine. Suivant que l'*e* persiste ou disparaît, leur fonction varie: *r, l, m, n* de consonnes deviennent sonantes, *i* et *u* passent de l'état *symphtongue* à l'état *autophthongue*" [Saussure 1879]. In this sense, *sonantic coefficient* is a term, of course currently widened to encompass the three lost obstruents, for the "hermaphrodite" sounds, which in some contexts behave like a vowel and in some, like a consonant – and not for the PIE laryngeals.

De Saussure proposes that PIE liquid sonants came into being by the weakening of the preceding *a* [Saussure 1879: 6, cf. footnote 28]. "Tout port à croire que que les liquids sonantes n'ont jamais pris naissance que par un affaiblissement, en raison duquel l'*a* qui précédait le liquide se trouvait expulsé; mais cela n'empêche, pas, comme nous le verrons, de les placer exactement sur le meme rang que *i* et *u*". The method of his reasoning to prove that, is summarized by the scholar as follows:

¹⁵ Radwańska-Williams points out that the issue that Saussure solved in such a decisive manner had been troubling Mikołaj Kruszewski at about that time. In particular, "in his search for regularity in Sankrit vocalism, Kruszewski was frustrated by traditional assumptions of an original Indo-European **a* whenever Sankrit shows *a*, and of the *guna* rule of Indian grammarians. This rule maintained that in the case of roots which had both a weak form and a strong form with *a* the weak form was original and the *a* of the strong form was inserted. This was an apparent contradiction of the phonetically motivated change which Kruszewski observed, that in the weak form "the disappearance of *A* is accompanied by the vocalization of *r, v, y* into *r, u, i* which is observed only in pretonic syllables [Kruszewski 1879 as cited in Radwańska-Williams 1993: 44].

¹⁶ An indepth retrospective of the development of *PIE laryngeals as well as of the laryngeal theory is provided in [Smoczyński 2006]. The scholar for example points out that "Przez długie lata nauka o *schwa indogermanicum*, a potem o spółgłoskach laryngalnych, uchodziła za dziedzinę niepewnych hipotez [...]. Ten stan rzeczy zaczął się szybko i radykalnie zmieniać około 1912 r., kiedy to dzięki wysiłkom H. Möllera i A. Cuny'ego zrozumiano, że przedmiotem poszukiwań nie jest jedna zanikła głoska (*schwa*), lecz kilka głosek i że nie chodzi tu ani o samogłoski, ani o sonanty, lecz o spółgłoski, najprawdopodobniej o trzy zanikłe obstruenty" [Smoczyński 2006: 155].

En vue du but spécial que nous nous proposons dans cette chapitre, nous tirons des remarques qui précèdent l'avantage suivant: c'est que nous connaissons le point précis ou il faut s'attendre à trouver les liquides sonantes et que nous assistons pour ainsi dire à leur formation; la comparaison seule d'un *r* indien avec un *án* grec, n'a, en effet, qu'une valeur précaire, si l'on ne voit pas comment cet *án* a pris naissance et si'il y a une une probabilité que c'est un *ar* ordinaire. Partout où l'*e* tombe normalement, partout en particulier où apparaît l'*u* ou l'*i* autophthongue, les liquides sonantes doivent régulièrement exister ou avoir existé, si la position des consonnes les forçait à fonctionner comme voyelles" [Saussure 1879: 9].

Although, as mentioned above, de Saussure explicitly attributes the discovery of sonants to other scholars, both Jakobson [1973: Chapter 14] and Bouissac [2010: 41] observe that an essay (currently part of the Collection Harvard), written by de Saussure at the age of 15, and entitled *Essay pour réduire les mots du grec, du latin, de l'allemand à une petit nombre de racins*, contains vital observations on the *nasalis sonans*. The gist of the manuscript basically implies that de Saussure discovered the regularities behind the creation of a nasal sonant while a teenager.¹⁷ The reasons he never claimed this ingenuous finding as his own are obscure. As Bouissac further observes, "some three decades later, in spite of the lingering ambitious feelings, Brugmann remained for de Saussure the one who had frustrated him from the discovery of the famous *nasalis sonans*. This was all the more irritating as he could not blame anybody but himself for not having established the priority of the discovery he had made much earlier" [Bouissac 2010: 46].

Conclusions and summary

In the words of Jankowsky, "the most important objective of linguistics in the first half of the century had been to conduct a thorough search for all the searchable data, with the express purpose to avoid – as Schleicher put it – making the facts fit into a preconceived systematic arrangement, but instead to observe the secured data meticulously and draw up a system based upon the characteristics of its actual components" [Jankowsky 1972: 122]. Neogrammarians seem to have performed a Herculean task of preparing linguistic data through the incredible investment of work and scientific skill, the data used and interpreted by subsequent generations, not only without acknowledging the source, but charging the scholars

¹⁷ "Ces quarantaine et un pages d'une écriture enfantine appliqué étaient mentionnées dans les *Souvenirs* de Saussure (voir CFS XVII, p. 17) comme une 'enfantillage' composée en 1872 et le manuscrit ne donne aucun raison de douter du témoignage du auteur. Le garçon de quinze ans qu'il était, pose neuf racines fondamentales de trois éléments bâties sur toutes les combinaisons possibles de *k*, *p*, et *t*, avec un *a* invercellé: *KAK*, *KAP* *KAT* etc. (p. 4) et assure que 'de ces neuf mots primitives in en va découler des milliers des nouveaux au moyen de diverses operations qui n'empêcheront pas de reconnaître la forme de chaque racine'" [Jakobson 1973: 288]. A detailed appraisal of the essay can also be found in Davis [1978]. The essay was reprinted *in extenso* in: Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure 1978, Vol. 32, p. 73–101.

who prepared the data for not developing phonological models that would accommodate it.

In this sense, de Saussure stands out as the epitome Neogrammarian scholar. As evident from the discussion above, the academic scene of the second half of the nineteenth century was by no means homogenous, with several competing undercurrents, and young linguistic rebels fighting for their vision of language. Among them, a modest Swiss teenager who came unprepared to the Leipzig center of linguistics, within three years' time not only caught up with the knowledge of his older colleagues but also managed to offer a different vision of the topics researched at the time, involving the extension of linguistic theory with laryngeals, sonantic coefficient, and proposed to apply a concept of the phoneme to his analysis.¹⁸

The aim of this article was to evaluate some epistemological aspects of *Mémoire* against the *Dasein* of de Saussure's times. I hope to have invited a revision of the Neogrammarian achievements and make them more accessible to a global audience, pointing out that both de Saussure and his Neogrammarian colleagues have still a lot of offer to contemporary phonological scholarship.

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¹⁸ Cf. Haładewicz-Grzelak (forth.) on the rheological aspect of the concept itself.

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Summary

Neogrammarian Ferdinand: A Natural Hermeneutics of *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*

While “de Saussure” is in fact THE name that has always been automatically brought up at any mention of “linguistics” and “semiotics”, that scholar might be nevertheless the most enigmatic and tantalizing persona in the history of linguistics. In retrospective, whenever there was a question of criticizing de Saussure, he was referred to as a Neogrammarian, and whenever the aim was to praise him – as a structuralist [Jankowsky 1972: 185]. Following e.g. Percival [1981], Jakobson [1973] or Koerner [e.g. 1989], this paper challenges the usually

taken for granted view that it was de Saussure who founded modern linguistics and takes an alternative look on de Saussure's oeuvre from the point of view of the Neogrammarian school. Through a personal hermeneutic reading of the only book that de Saussure published and approved for publication (*Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*, 1879), I will argue that de Saussure's monograph, within the ambit of epistemological premises, is a mutiny on many levels against the phonological world of his times. In this way, the discussion contributes to a larger project pointing to misapprehensions in Neogrammarian achievements, which are assumed to ensue from the contemporary emphasis on the revolutionary aspects of linguistic paradigms over their evolutionary development [cf. also Pocietchina 2009; Kiklewicz 2007, 2014].