

# The *other* Saussure

Although it is almost forgotten today, 100 years ago René de Saussure was an eminent mathematician with a strong interest in language. Javier Alcalde examines the relationship between René and his brother Ferdinand.



René de Saussure.

It is well-known that Ferdinand de Saussure came from a very prominent Genevese family, which included several historical figures. Ferdinand's great-grandfather, Horace-Bénédict (1740–1799), was a geologist, physicist and pioneer of alpinism, who made sure that his three children received the best progressive education available. Horace-Bénédict's daughter Albertine (1766–1841) became a pedagogue and early advocate of education for women, while his son Nicolas-Théodore (1767–1845) was a chemist and pioneer of the study of photosynthesis. Horace-Bénédict's youngest, Alphonse (1770–1853), was the mayor of Genthod (a municipality of the Canton of Geneva) and father of Théodore and Henri; Henri (1829–1905), a mineralogist, entomologist and taxonomist, had nine children, among them Ferdinand (1857–1913) and René (1868–1943).

Both of them achieved remarkable academic success. Today, Ferdinand is considered the father of linguistics, but at the time René was also regarded as an eminent figure in different fields, including mathematics and linguistics. For example, he was one of the regular participants in meetings organised by the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA) in the 1920s and 30s. These meetings sought to choose the best artificial language among rivals such as Esperanto and Ido, putting René in the company of other prominent linguists such as Otto Jespersen, William Edward Collinson, Edgar de Wahl and Edward Sapir. IALA had been founded by a billionaire from the Vanderbilt family and had many resources to promote linguistic research, so it is not surprising that some of the main linguists of the time were in those meetings.

In fact, René was a prominent member of the Esperanto

### René de Saussure and Esperanto

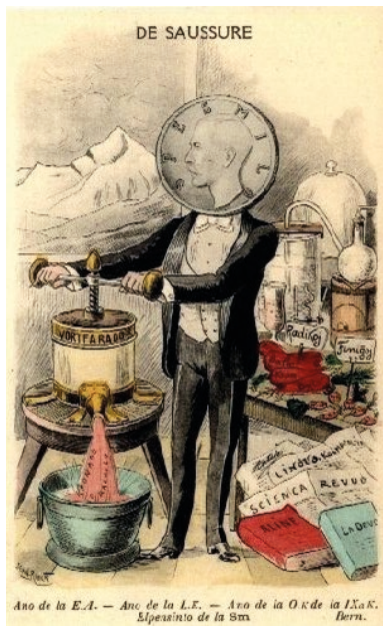
At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of an international language played a relevant role in intellectual discussions in many domains, such as science, nationalism and the possibility of peace in international relations. Esperanto, the language created by Ludwig Zamenhof in 1887, was the most promising among them, but it was not the only one. In a ferocious struggle between different rivals, René de Saussure was a loyal and prominent member of the Esperanto movement. In 1908, he rented the first office of the Universal Esperanto Association in Geneva. He was also the editor of *Internacia Sciencia Revuo* – the main scientific journal in Esperanto – and the founding director of the International Esperantist Scientific Office, also established in Geneva. To defend the language from attacks by Ido supporters such as Louis Couturat (Ido was another constructed language, one of Esperanto's competitors), he published an analysis on the logic of word construction in Esperanto. A second and more developed version was published in 1915, after discussions with the French linguist Théophile Cart, a former student of Ferdinand's.

movement and, among other things, he wrote a very influential work on word creation in Esperanto. Ferdinand, in his posthumous *Course in General Linguistics*, approaches planned languages from a fairly neutral perspective, suggesting that they can be studied in the same way as natural languages (the different means of their creation apart). Another intellectual of the time, Edmond Privat, recalled René explaining to him that he first encountered Esperanto when his brother asked him to attend the International Congress that took place in Geneva in 1906, coincidentally the year of the first *Course on General Linguistics*. In Ferdinand's view, René was (mainly) a mathematician and therefore enjoyed a greater freedom to attend unorthodox linguistic gatherings, while he himself – as a famous linguist – had to be prudent not to face the criticisms and prejudices of his colleagues. René attended the congress and became a fervent Esperantist.

Fifteen years previously, René had been writing on the subject of multidimensional geometry, a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of research connected to Henri Bergson's philosophical ideas (e.g. his concepts of duration and intuition) and to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, which could also be described as the relationship between energy and the geometry of space and time. In 1922, Bergson and Einstein would have an extremely influential public debate about the nature of time. As Ferdinand's biographer John E. Joseph states, "In retrospect, the solidity and importance of the work René was undertaking is evident". Similarly, Ferdinand's student Albert Secheyne recalls that in the early 1890s Ferdinand was interested in the idea that what matters are not so much signs themselves as the differences between signs which constitute a play of opposite values, that is, values capable of being put in opposition. This also points to the work of René.

In 1890, René de Saussure was living in New York and would send his manuscripts to Ferdinand – then teaching in Paris – in order to gain his detailed, critical comments. In several of them, René's main influence is a book by J. B. Stallo, *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Physics* (1882). René comments extensively on Stallo's views on abstraction, linearity, time and sense perception. Stallo's ideas included (a) the consideration that physical phenomena are abstractions not perceptible to the senses, (b) that thought deals not with things as they are but with our mental representation of them, (c) and that objects are known only through their relations to other objects. René himself wrote about the relativity not only of the qualities perceived by our senses, but of the notions conceived in our mind. These ideas recall Ferdinand's understanding of duration, time, linearity and abstractness. As he said to his student Léopold Gautier in 1911, "For now, general linguistics appears to me as a system of geometry".

At that time René was teaching a course in Geneva, in the same faculty as Ferdinand, on the "History of the international language movement from Descartes and Leibniz to Esperanto". René had just published a persuasive work on the logic of word construction in Esperanto. By doing so, he was actually initiating scientific studies of that language. According to Federico Gobbo, professor of Interlinguistics and Esperanto at the University of Amsterdam, it is obvious that René's research on Esperanto's morphology was known by Ferdinand. Not far from Ferdinand's idea of structure, René's analysis describes



the different possibilities of constructing words by combining smaller elements in a way that creates meaning.

Almost as a renaissance thinker, René had other accomplishments that could have influenced Ferdinand. For example, he proposed in 1908 a supranational neutral monetary system and an international currency called *spesmilo*, worth about 2 gold shillings. John E. Joseph in his comprehensive biography of Ferdinand considers that the presence of ‘value’ as a monetary metaphor in the *Course of General Linguistics* cannot be unconnected to the attention his brother René was gaining with his proposal. In fact, the *spesmilo* was used before the First World War by several British and Swiss banks, including the *Ĉekbanko esperantista* (‘Esperantist Checking Bank’), a bank founded in 1907 by H.F. Höveler in London.

These examples of René’s (possible) traces in the pages of the *Course* remind us that Ferdinand had a younger brother, another Saussure who is worth remembering. ¶

## The International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA)

In the struggle for an international language, billionaire Alice Vanderbilt Morris (1874-1950) played a crucial role. For the first time, there would be economic resources to support such a utopian movement. The only thing activists needed to do to take advantage of it was agree on which auxiliary language should be used. With this aim, and together with her husband Dave Hennen Morris and eminent intellectuals such as Frederick Gardner Cottrell, Vanderbilt established the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA) in New York in 1924. Edward Sapir would become its first Research Director in 1930.

Apart from Esperanto and Ido, other languages that were taken into scientific consideration were Latino sine flexione (proposed by Giuseppe Peano), Novial (presented by Otto Jespersen), Occidental (created by Edgar de Wahl), and Esperanto II (presented by René de Saussure). By 1925 René, like Jespersen and de Wahl, was no longer an Esperantist and had created his own international auxiliary language project, although he also worked to bridge the gap between the different proposals. Although Vanderbilt had studied Esperanto, she remained neutral. However, an agreement could not be reached and IALA developed a totally new language, called Interlingua and published in 1951. In the end, the outbreak of World War II and the death of Vanderbilt closed the window of opportunity for the movement for an international language.

## Find out more

### Books

John E. Joseph (2012) *Saussure*, Oxford University Press.

Roberto Garvía (2015) *Esperanto and Its Rivals. The Struggle for an International Language*, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jimena Canales (2015) *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate That Changed Our Understanding of Time*, by Jimena Canales, Princeton University Press.

### Articles

Federico Gobbo (2014) ‘La fratoj de Saussure kaj Esperanto’. In *Esperanto* 1285 (11).

### Online

Andreas Künzli (2001) ‘René de Saussure (1868-1943): Tragika sed grava esperantologo kaj interlingvisto *el Svislando*’. In *Studoj pri interlingvistiko*. Festlibro omaĝe al la 60-jariĝo de Detlev Blanke / Studien zur Interlingvistik. Festschrift für Detlev Blanke zum 60. Geburtstag, edited by Sabine Fiedler and Liu Haitao (Kava-Pech) [Available at [lingviko.net/db/35\\_Kuenzli.htm](http://lingviko.net/db/35_Kuenzli.htm)]

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