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In Search of Panchrony: Saussure *versus* Cognitive Linguistics

ABSTRACT

The notion of panchrony is discussed in the context of the on-going polarization between structurally- and functionally-oriented linguistic paradigms. The two radically divergent conceptions of panchrony are thus surveyed, as envisaged by, respectively, Saussure and cognitive linguistics. As panchrony is not as yet a widely accepted research paradigm, it is suggested that while functionalists seem to be still in search of an appropriate understanding of panchrony, some lesson as to what functionally-driven panchrony should be can be derived from a critical reading of Saussure's original proposal. It is concluded that as long as cognitive linguists hold that language is symbolic and interactive, panchrony must be attempted not in terms of linguistic universals, as for Saussure, but in terms of functional universals, such as cognitive and experiential patterns of behaviour.

Keywords: time and space, synchrony and diachrony, panchrony, structuralism, functionalism, cognitivism

1. Introduction

In this contribution, we offer a critical assessment of Saussure's (1916/1983) proposal of panchrony and contrast it with a functionally-oriented conception of how language could possibly relate to time and space, and how this language-space/time relationship could be approached in linguistics. Indeed, however well-established, if not just taken for granted[1], the opposition between synchrony and diachrony seems to have been giving way to attempts that can do without it (cf. Janda, 2013, p. 2; Kiełtyka, 2020; Łozowski, 2018, 2022; Mompean, 2015, p. 265;), which invites an idea of seeing language as independent of spatio-temporal constraints, *panchrony* being the usual name for the approach. And, thus, it seems to be tempting to express one's interest in relating the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of language in terms divergent from those of a dichotomy

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[1]   For example, Langacker (2008, p. 13) mentions „the sharp distinction drawn between the synchronic study of language structure and the diachronic study of how it changes and evolves" among the 10 most standard beliefs of modern linguistics. As he admits, „Since my own experience has led me to challenge all of [these 10] points, I reluctantly conclude that [they have] largely been imposed". (p. 13)

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between the two, and of the priority of synchronic system over diachronic change. Yet, this is neither a straightforward task nor an easy strategy, and it brings us to the question of how the Saussurean structurally-based synchrony/diachrony opposition is interpreted in functionally-oriented research.

2. Panchrony: a new linguistic methodology, or a new conception of language?[2]

In most general terms, those functionalists that favour panchrony would side with one of two possible interpretations. In one of them, a merely methodological cause is championed, with linguists embarking upon a task of shifting, as they please, the "property line" between synchrony and diachrony. Here, the whole synchrony-or-diachrony controversy is a matter of maintaining sound research proportions, i.e. how much and what kinds of language data should and could be viewed from which temporal perspective, synchronic or diachronic, or both. Attempts at defining such a demarcation line prove that, indeed, there is a whole domain of linguistic investigation that can successfully be pursued as much in the vein of synchrony as of diachrony, which can only mean that the boundary between the two is vague and gradable, not clear-cut and dichotomous. Consequently, the resulting intersection of the synchronic and diachronic sets can be given the name of panchrony.

In the other reading, linguists stand up for a different conception of language. While structuralists typically do their best to keep synchrony and diachrony apart, functionalists persist in bringing the two together. If the former need the elevation of the notion of the boundary in order to be able to provide for the priority of synchronic system over diachronic change, the reason why the latter camouflage the boundary is to pave the way for extra-linguistic (i.e. cognitive, experiential, cultural) parameters into language and linguistics. The boundary between synchrony and diachrony, then, is vague because similar, if not identical, functionally-driven regularities can be detected on both planes; and it is to these regularities that the term panchrony is consistently applied (e.g. Winters, 1992, p. 510).

Whichever the interpretation, there has been a strong tendency within functional linguistics towards defining panchrony as the resultant of synchrony and diachrony. This amounts to, as Winters (1992, p. 503) calls it, a "compromise" or "reconciliation" view of panchrony, and does all the same mean a possibility of separating synchrony and diachrony, and thus of positing tendencies on discrete, though perhaps related, planes of these two modes of investigation. In particular, the danger we see is again a drive towards favouring synchrony

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[2]   This is discussed at length in Łozowski (2014, 2018) and, especially, Łozowski (2008), of which the present contribution is a revised version.

at the expense of diachrony, which would most overtly be unexpected in the light of functionalists' well-pronounced claim that diachronic considerations are a reflection, an "added value", or even a verification, a metric, of synchrony. In other words, once we allow for a synchrony-*versus*-diachrony tug-of-war, we may fall prey to the Saussurean way of thinking of language as consisting of two divergent elements, i.e. a static system and dynamic change, with no points of convergence between them.

If so, panchrony – before it is likely to become a generally accepted linguistic research concept – must first be successfully delimited and conceptualized. Take the role it is said to play in grammaticalization. That grammaticalization can be studied from a panchronic perspective, i.e. somehow independent of the contingencies of space and time, can be derived, for example, from Heine et al. (1991, p. 249) when they write that "the study of grammaticalization is elusive of the synchrony/diachrony dichotomy and that it requires a perspective that is independent of this dichotomy". As it stands, this quotation makes it clear that the issue of panchrony is closely related to, if not dependent on, how synchrony and diachrony are understood and related to each other. Yet, to envisage these two temporal perspectives at work towards some panchronic effect is a true challenge and the results may be far from clear-cut. Taking only what Heine et al. themselves offer as "panchronic grammar", one can easily see two different readings of the synchrony-diachrony relationship. Compare (i) and (ii):

> (i)
> Such a theory [panchronic grammar], in addition to accounting for "synchronic facts" (…), contains some component that takes care of the diachronic situation underlying these "synchronic facts", where this diachronic component provides an explanatory parameter for dealing with these "synchronic facts". (p. 251)

> (ii)
> [Panchrony] relates to a more narrowly defined range of phenomena, namely, to phenomena exhibiting *simultaneously* a synchronic-psychological and a diachronic relation. (p. 258)

In (i), there is hardly anything panchronic, with panchrony accounting for synchrony by means of containing diachrony that explains synchrony. This is simply calling for diachronic resources in order to explain synchronic opacity - a regular and successful practice in historical linguistics, usually exercised under some version of the rubric of "explaining the present through the past".[3] However, there seems to be room for the (panchronic) "third way" in (ii), but it is more of a shared commonality rather than an independent entity on its own.

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[3]   For one of the latest illustrations of how successful one can be in relating the past and the present of any language without invoking panchrony as an independent research tool, see Kiełtyka (2023).

Moreover, still on the grounds of grammaticalization, Kuteva (2001) is far less equivocal about how to understand panchrony. She advocates the panchronic approach as "both synchronic and diachronic" (p. 92). Promising as it seems, it appears, on a close reading, to amount to what we identify in (i) above, i.e. unlocking the present by diving into historical (and cognitive) sources of motivation, which, again, has more to do with maintaining the right balance between synchrony and diachrony than with deriving a new and distinct research perspective.

When Kuteva (2001) says that "the panchronic approach is *not* confined to a synchronic static perspective (…), with the diachronic parameter no less important than the synchronic" (p. 7), in practice she means nothing more than to appreciate the diachronic resources "as an explanatory tool in the many seemingly mysterious cases" (p. 8):

> If we confine our analysis [of the discontinuous morpheme *le…m* in Ewe which is used to express a single grammatical function (progressive)] to pure synchrony, the discontinuity of the morphological marking for the progressive cannot be accounted for. (…) The easiest course would then be to avoid the issue of *explaining* auxiliary structure altogether, brushing it off as an accidental historical vagary and/or residual quirk of language structure. (…) The key here is the *genesis* of the particular auxiliation syntagm. Once we refer to the genesis of the progressive marker in the Ewe progressive construction, the morphosyntax which it exhibits is in fact what might readily be expected. (…) Thus features that are a 'mystery' for a static description become an integral [cf. p. 7: "natural"] part of the diachronic explanation.

This minimalist idea of panchrony is precisely the reason why Kuteva (2001, p. 9) finds her programme on a par with those proposals where, as she says, "diachrony manifests itself in synchrony and that synchronic facts are mirrors that reflect their own history".

In all honesty, to claim that, one does not really need to postulate anything like "a panchronic method of investigating language" at all (p. 7). Notice how Mithun (2003, p. 553) means to appreciate diachrony when she expresses the standard, if not merely the default, understanding of the diachrony-synchrony issue in functionalism at large:

> Synchronic systems are understood [in functionalist approaches] as the historical products of sequences of individual diachronic events, each motivated in one way or another at the time it occurs. The diachronic dimension thus plays a key role in explanation.

Unlike Heine et al. (1991) or Kuteva (2001), however, Mithun can do without naming what she proclaims with any special name or under any special rubric, let alone that of *panchrony*.

Either way, the question of panchrony seems to be a derivative of synchrony and diachrony, understood both in their own respective terms and in their assumed mutual relationship. As the controversy continues, we suggest delving into Saussure's

original ideas in order to give an idea of what panchrony in functional linguistics can*not* possibly be. Some relevant generalizations on all the three allegedly related terms, synchrony, diachrony, and panchrony, seem now to be due.

3. Synchrony, diachrony, panchrony

The notion of panchrony has now come to the fore with the functionally-oriented rejection of the opposition between synchrony and diachrony, as originally envisaged by Saussure. That synchrony and diachrony should be kept apart Saussure (1916/1983, pp. 83–98) could not have made any clearer:

> [W]e must distinguish two branches of linguistics. (…) The opposition between these two orders must be grasped in order to draw out all the consequences which it implies. (…) The contrast between the two points of view – synchronic and diachronic – is absolute and admits no compromise. (…) [I]t is irreducible. (…) Any notion of bringing together under the same discipline [i.e. linguistics] facts of such disparate nature would be mere fantasy. (…) This difference in nature between chronological succession [diachrony] and simultaneous coexistence [synchrony], between facts affecting parts and facts affecting the whole, makes it impossible to include both as subject matter of one and the same science. (…) All this (…) confirms the radical distinction between diachronic and synchronic. (…) [There is] the absolute necessity for distinguishing in linguistics between the two orders of phenomena. (…) Diachronic and synchronic studies contrast in every way. (…) No synchronic phenomenon has anything in common with any diachronic phenomenon. (…) Realising these facts should be sufficient to bring home the necessity of not confusing the two points of view. (…) In studying a language from either point of view, it is of the utmost importance to assign each fact to its appropriate sphere, and not to confuse the two methods.

Even if we read Saussure's intentions liberally and attempt to see in the synchrony/diachrony distinction not an absolute cut-off, but "a dynamic interface" (Ramat et al., 2013), or a dialectics of "long diachrony and past synchrony" (Rissanen, 2014, p. 110), or "a conceptually-driven analogy" (Verveckken, 2015), this distinction anyway stems from and follows a structurally-designed primacy of an autonomous language system over its realisation "through the exercise of the individual's language faculty" (Thibault, 1997, p. 113). In Ritt's (2004, p. 53) words, the rationale behind the synchrony-diachrony split is as follows:

> Basically, the Saussurean position is that languages owe their properties to a tacit agreement among speakers within specific communities. On its basis they choose an essentially arbitrary subset of the potentially open set of properties that their common language, as a system of signs, might theoretically assume. (...) This view clearly backgrounds the undeniable fact that the conventions which any speech community at any point t_n in time seems to agree upon are rarely very different from the conventions assumed at a historically prior point t_{n-x}, as long as x is small enough. Thus, the Saussurean view suggests that there is no causal link between the properties of historically successive language stages.

As Saussure (1916/1983, p. 81) is believed to have said himself, "the linguist who wishes to understand [the] state must rule out of consideration everything which brought that state about, and pay no attention to diachrony"[4].

While this apparently did not discourage some of the structuralists to develop profoundly the diachronic aspect of language, they still pursued their research with the intention of the (more or less explicit) primacy of synchrony over diachrony. Take this insightful remark from Jakobson (1972, p. 122):

> Every phonological fact is treated as a part of the whole, which is related to other parts of higher levels. Thus the first principle of historical phonology will be: *every modification must be treated as a function of the system of which it is a part*. A phonological change can be understood only by elucidating its role within the system of the language. (…) Every phonological unit within a given system must be examined in its reciprocal relations with all other units of the system before and after the given phonological change.

This cannot be interpreted otherwise than as Jakobson's call for a (system-based) dimension of diachrony and his conviction that diachronic phenomena always result from the way language functions in synchrony (cf. Heinz, 1983, pp. 286, 290–291). In Jakobson's (1972, p. 136) further words,

> A description furnishes the data concerning two linguistic situations, the period before and after the change, and allows us to investigate the direction and meaning of this change. As soon as this question is posed, we pass from the terrain of diachrony to that of synchrony. (…) The perception of movement is already present in the synchronic aspect.

Jakobson may well claim that "the joining together of the static and the dynamic" is the "antimony", without referring to which "one cannot conceive of the dialectic of linguistic development" (p. 138), yet it seems to be clear for him that "the direction and meaning of change" we owe to synchrony, and not to the change itself, to the linguistic system, and not to its external motivation.

To mention two more structuralists of a similar position, Wartburg, explaining the paradox that language comes into being in diachrony but at the same time functions in synchrony, decisively opted for a mutual overlapping of synchrony and diachrony, yet he separated the two as rigidly as Saussure himself (cf. Heinz, 1983, p. 284–285). Similarly, Ullmann (1957, p. 256–257) pleaded for a relaxation of the ban to adhere strictly to "the Saussurean conception of diachronistic linguistics as a purely isolative study" only to speak - after some years, though – "of the necessity to distinguish between historical and descriptive viewpoints in linguistics" (1964, p. 103).

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[4]   It is to one of our Reviewers that we owe an observation that Saussure's view had changed in this respect from his early work on IE vowels, which was based on Neogrammarian principles, to the *Course*. Cf., for instance, Polomé (1990).

Against this (structurally-designated) background, the functionalist innovation entails two inherently related problems: a) the relationship between the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of language must be attempted on grounds different from those of the priority of synchronic system over diachronic change, and b) the dividing line between the two cannot be squeezed into any all-or-nothing or yes-or-no formal delimitations.

This, naturally, accords with a general stand functionalists take on language and linguistics. As Janda (2013, p. 2) makes the case for the cognitive branch of functionalism, "cognitive linguistics is a usage-based model of language structure (….) [with] no fundamental distinction between "performance" and "competence", and (…) all language units (…) arising from usage events". Here we have yet another call for the obliteration of methodological dichotomies, the synchrony-diachrony opposition included. Indeed, the list of the denied dichotomies can be quite long: "semantics/pragmatics, linguistic/encyclopaedic knowledge, literal/ figurative language, or synchrony/diachrony" (Mompean 2015, p. 265). This all stands in a truly sharp contrast to Saussure's original intentions.

4. Saussure on panchrony

What must be admitted, however, is that it was Saussure (1916/1983, p. 94) who first wrote about a possibility of panchronic description. By this he meant "relations which hold in all cases and for ever", or "general principles existing independently of concrete facts [i.e. individual and specific]". Yet, he did not quite see how this panchronic mode of investigation might at all be successful. If, for example, a given language change is not restricted in terms of either time and space and, thus, proves productive at all times and at all places, "there is no value, because there is no meaning. The panchronic point of view never gets to grips with specific facts of language structure" (p. 94).

In other words, the reason why Saussure postulates and, at the same time doubts panchronic description is precisely because "in linguistics as in chess, there are rules which outlast all events". If so, the only panchronic characteristic of the French word *chose*, for example, must be limited – according to him – only to the analysis of "the sounds of the word considered in themselves", and these seen as a certain continuum appear to be "devoid of linguistic value", "just a formless mass, which lacks definition". On Holdcroft's (1991, p. 83) account of Saussure's example,

> [I]f we take a word, the French word *chose*, for instance, there is no point of view which combines both the diachronic perspective, in which 'it stands in opposition to the Latin word from which it derives, *causa*', and the synchronic perspective, in which 'it stands in opposition to every word that might be associated with it in Modern French'.

In short, panchrony is impossible not because one and the same object, the French *chose*, cannot be seen from two different temporal perspectives, but because these perspectives require a different object for their study. In synchrony, *chose* is part of "*langue*, which is a system that is psychologically real", whereas in diachrony, *chose* is part of "relations of succession between *individual items*, which speakers are unaware of and which are in no sense systematic" (Holdcroft, 1991, p. 70).

On the surface, the difficulty seems to be merely practical. Simply, once we set off in search of "rules that outlast all events", rules which necessarily must relate to language as laws as they are "understood in the physical and natural sciences" (Saussure 1983, p. 94), we can only end up with negative findings. Why? This is how Harris (1987, p. 101) sees the answer:

> Because (…) although it is possible to generalize about universal features of language (for example, that phonetic changes constantly occur), where specific linguistic facts are concerned (…) [a]ny concrete fact amenable to panchronic explanation could not be part of *la langue*. For example, the French word *chose* may be distinguished synchronically from other words belonging to the same *etat de langue*, and diachronically from words in earlier *etats de langue* (for instance, from Latin *causa,* from which it is etymologically derived). But there is no independent panchronic means of identifying it.

In other words, Saussure unintentionally admits that there is no practical tool that would allow for a holistic analysis of language, which is approaching sounds as "considered in themselves" and, at the same time, relating them to meanings "in themselves", so to speak. What can be studied panchronically is form, but not function, and still less the form/function pairings. On Harris' account of Saussure at this point, "the sounds (…) may be considered panchronically in themselves: but the sounds as such do not constitute the word" (p. 101).

Whether Saussure's idea of impossibility behind panchronic research programme is plausible and whether this impossibility can at all relate to and indeed be derived from natural sciences is another question, but Saussure makes it again part of his anti-panchronistic argumentation while differentiating between phonetic evolution and its synchronic consequences. One of those consequences Saussure (1916/1983, pp. 151–153) specifies as "breaking grammatical links":

> Thus it comes about that one word is no longer felt to be derived from another. (…) Sound change also breaks the usual link between inflected forms of the same word. Thus Latin *comes-comitem* becomes in Old French *cuens // comte*.

The point here is that if we insist, as Saussure does, that the Old French pair *is* less of a link than the Latin one due to the operation of a sound change, we are mistaken in believing that we are relating two compatible systems. More specifically, as Harris (1987, p. 145) notices,

> To compare the Latin case system (of six possible oppositions) to the Old French case system (of only two) is an exercise which students convinced by Parts One and Two of the *Cours* ought by now to reject out of hand; for the *valeurs* are clearly not comparable.

If, nevertheless, we do draw generalizations from comparing the nominative/accusative opposition in Latin with the nominative/oblique contrast in Old French, we no longer keep synchrony and diachrony apart. Neither do we merely study sounds "in themselves". In fact, we "panchronize" the functional contrast in order to present it as a grammatical consequence of the phonetic evolution.

In other words, there is much more in Saussure's reluctance to acknowledge any possibility of panchronicity than merely practical difficulties or doubtful research results. The real point is methodological. As Culler (1986, p. 51) makes the case for Saussure,

> A panchronic synthesis is impossible (…) because of the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs. In other sorts of systems, one might hold together the synchronic and diachronic perspectives: "insofar as a value is rooted in things themselves and in their natural relations, one can, to a certain extent, follow this value through time, bearing in mind that it depends at each moment on a system of values that coexist with it".[5]

Frankly speaking, it is Saussure's own conception of language as an autonomous system of arbitrary signs that has now brought him to defend the synchrony/diachrony dichotomy at all expense in order to guarantee the autonomy of language. Of the two understandings ascribed by Saussure to his own thesis of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, i.e. the arbitrariness of the association of form and substance within the bounds of the linguistic sign and the arbitrariness of the substance itself, it is probably the latter that precludes the non-autonomy of language more. Take Taylor's (2003, pp. 6–7) comments on that:

> The meaning of a linguistic sign is not a fixed property of the linguistic sign considered in and of itself; rather, meaning is a function of the value of the sign within the sign system which constitutes a language. Thus concepts, i.e. the values associated with linguistic signs, are purely differential (...). This means that while the word *red* is obviously used by speakers of English to refer to properties of the world, and might well evoke in the mind of a speaker a mental image of the concept "red", the meaning of the word is not given by any properties of the world, nor does it reflect any act of non-linguistic cognition on the part of a speaker. The meaning of *red* results from the value of the word within the system (...) of English colour terminology.

Simply speaking, Saussure just cannot allow for panchrony, because, on his conception of language, even a slight "conflation" (Harris 1987, p. 145) of synchronic

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[5]   What one of our Reviewers sees here is a clear connection with Neogrammarians: in Saussure's view, the present state (of language) should not be "judged" by, or seen as motivated by, previous facts. Again, we can only appreciate this observation.

and diachronic perspectives would mean both committing a methodological error as well as leaving language at the mercy of external influences.

As to the first (methodological) point, any integration of synchrony and diachrony would be precisely the fault Saussure ascribes to comparative-historical linguists "because of their failure to ask fundamental questions, in particular what precisely is being compared with what" (Holdcroft, 1991, p. 17). In Harris' (1987, p. 102) words, the fear is this:

> All we can do is examine a number of different synchronic entities (…), and the separate diachronic changes which connect them. The 'panchronic error, in other words, is another version of the 'historical error'. It is a mistake to imagine that there could be some more general perspective on language which would take in both synchronic and diachronic facts simultaneously.

The other point is also related to panchrony, to which the following lengthy quotation from Harris (1987, p. 226) does not seem to leave any doubts:

> It does not fall within the scope of Saussurean linguistics to investigate universal constraints which derive from factors outside the human language faculty (…). For Saussure 'there is no panchronic point of view' (…). This is *not* a denial of the possibility of formulating generalizations of various kinds about linguistic phenomena; but it is both a denial that *faits de langue* can be identified on any basis 'outside' *la langue*, and an affirmation that the only generalizations which concern linguistics are those concerning *faits de langue*. Clearly, if there are no *faits de langue* which are panchronic facts, then *a fortiori* there are no psychological facts 'universal to human nature' which can be the concern of linguistics, other than those deriving from the *faculté linguistique*.

It is clear now that the reason why Saussure believes that, seen from a panchronic perspective, the French word *chose* must be limited to "sounds of the word considered in themselves", and these must be claimed to appear "devoid of linguistic value", is not that the word cannot be analysed otherwise, but it goes well with Saussure's methodological imperative to suppress the external by controlling where the external comes from, which is space and time as construed by the human mind.

Indeed, the *chose* example alone suggests that Saussure tends to identify panchrony with any other natural law that breaks free from the constraints of time and space. For that reason, the term that we think is more appropriate to label his position of pushing language beyond space and time is that of transchrony, that is a view of language without taking into consideration either temporal or spatial contextualization, or asking a question of what language is if stripped of one of its basic parameters, i.e. the time-space dependence. The only answer Saussure could give to this question is that language is "a formless mass, which lacks definition", and this does not encourage any further pursuit of panchrony, indeed.

5. Concluding remarks

While the debate on what panchrony in functional linguistics can possibly involve continues, we have sketched Saussure's original insight into a possibility of panchronic research in order to show what functionally-driven panchrony cannot be like. In a nutshell, as long as functionalists hold that language is not autonomous, but "symbolic and communicative/interactive" (Langacker, 2007, p. 422), panchrony must be attempted not in terms of linguistic universals of the "always-and-everywhere" type, as for Saussure, but in terms of functional universals, such as cognitive and experiential patterns of behaviour.

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