

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE AS A SYSTEM 'OÙ TOUT SE TIENT'

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'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all Relations.
(John Donne in 1611)

ABSTRACT

*It is still customary, at least among textbook writers, to attribute the definition of language as 'un système où tout se tient' to Saussure even though no one has ever found a locus of this famous phrase in the Cours. This seems surprising when we also find that both Bally in 1932 and Trubetzkoy in 1933 refer explicitly to the phrase as being Saussure's. Many scholars have found this state of affairs puzzling, if not frustrating. This paper is intended to explain the reasons for the attribution to Saussure. It is important to remember that Saussure wrote only one major book in his life-time, the *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (published in Leipzig, in 1878), and that during 1881-1891 he taught at the *École des Hautes Études* in Paris, where Antoine Meillet (1866-1936) was one of his students. Teaching on Indo-European linguistics Saussure used the *Mémoire* as a textbook; indeed, a second edition of the volume appeared in Paris in 1887. From Saussure's papers it is clear that he intended to add an answer to his critics, but was dissuaded by his colleagues from doing so; it is also important to note that Saussure referred to the *Mémoire* as 'mon Système des Voyelles'. Shortly after Saussure's departure for Geneva, Meillet started to build up his own career, of which his 1893-1894 articles on 'les lois phonétiques' and 'l'analogue' were the first major statements. It is in the first of these two where Meillet, not surprisingly, used the famous phrase for the first time, without explicit reference to Saussure or the *Mémoire*. However, from 1903 onwards, in his *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes*, which Meillet explicitly dedicated to Saussure on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the publication of the *Mémoire*, we find Meillet using the phrase quite frequently and always either directly or implicitly in reference to Saussure's 1878 book, and never to the posthumous *Cours*. However, it is clear from all the circumstances sketched in this paper that the concept, if not the phrase itself, derives from Saussure's linguistic thinking and was disseminated through his students in Paris.*

0. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

I may be permitted, in a brief contribution to a special issue of this periodical in honour of our distinguished *confrère*, to start with a couple of personal observations which usually do not find entry into the regular scholarly record. I am hoping, however, that on this particular occasion I can count on the editors' indulgence as well as on the laureate's forgiveness. To be sure, nothing derogatory *ad hominem* will be said here. On the contrary, as will become clear from what follows: *De amicis nihil nisi bene*.

I first 'met' John Hewson early in 1976. He had sent me a paper for possible publication in *Historiographia Linguistica*, as a response to an article which had appeared in the first number of this journal. Its author had expressed views about the linguistic theories of Gustave Guillaume (1875-1960) which were less than appreciative of his accomplishments. I still recall that I read Hewson's rebuttal of Wunderli (1974) with great interest, because it offered me not only a fine *entrée* into Guillaume's linguistic thinking, but also intellectual pleasure, as the author displayed an unusual gift for explaining complex matters in an easily accessible manner. Another trait emanating from the paper was what may be called restraint. It was obvious that Hewson, whose doctoral dissertation had been written at Laval University under the direction of Roch Valin (b.1918), the leader of Guillaumean linguistics in North America, was rather annoyed at what he regarded as misinterpretations of Guillaume's teachings. Yet the civility Hewson displayed was remarkable, and ever since I have had many reasons to regard this characteristic as the third part of what makes Hewson, the scholar and teacher, in addition to his intellectual and pedagogical skills.¹ (I have never been close enough to Hewson to say anything specific

¹ In this connection, I'd like to recount a true story which, I believe, is typical of Hewson's pedagogical *eros*. Both he and I participated at an International Colloquium on 'Linguistic Reconstruction and Typology' organized by Jacek Fisiak of Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, which was held at a former princely Polish castle at Rydzyna, some 100 miles north of Breslau (now Wrocław), 14-17 April 1993 (see Hewson 1996 [1993]). As it so happened, my room neighbour turned out to be the only other participant from Canada. As the sound insulation of the (apparently cheaply installed) partitions was not the best, at bedtime, when I tried to fall asleep, I could not help hearing a strong manly voice talking and talking and talking. I didn't try to understand what the subject of the conversation was, but the next morning I asked Hewson what it was all about—I was sure that there was another person present—only to be told that he had been rehearsing his paper!

about 'Hewson the man', but I believe that the three traits enumerated round out the picture quite well. His professionalism, sense of fairness, and scholarly ethics are known to everyone who has had the pleasure of coming into contact with him.)

It was, I think, Hewson the theorist as well as the educator who ventured, several years ago now, to enter the long-standing discussion about the—I dare say at the outset: Saussurean—idea that language constitutes a system of interrelated entities (Hewson 1990). But unlike most others before him, he obviously was much less interested in historiographically tracing and documenting the evolution of an idea—though Hewson was never uninterested in history, whether the history of linguistics or the history of language(s).² Instead, he has generally been much more attracted to investigating 20th-century uses and the general usefulness of a concept, methodological precept, or particular framework.

As is well-known, my own major preoccupation, apart from offering fora, both in linguistics generally and in the history of the field specifically, has been, for almost thirty years now, what I term 'the historiography of the language sciences' or 'linguistic historiography'. What I mean by these terms is a methodologically sound and intellectually broadly informed manner of engaging in researching and documenting the *res gestae* of the disciplines concerned with language, in my case usually those of the 19th and 20th century, in Europe and America. Given time constraints that have been, alas, the bane of my engagements as chief editor of two journals and a handful of monograph series, the only thing I am able to offer our distinguished colleague at this time is an attempt, in the form of a fairly short sketch, to present the ways in which the phrase announced in the title of this paper evolved since the last quarter of the 19th century. I thus offer a clarification of the question asked by a number of our contemporaries as to where the 'où tout se tient' idea emanated from, much less what it has become in 20th-century thought, since this job has already been done by John Hewson himself (1990: 788-793).

1. IN SEARCH OF THE ORIGIN OF 'OÙ TOUT SE TIENT'

More than a quarter-century ago, William Gamwell Moulton (b.1914), one of the very few direct students of Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1946)—who himself read Saussure's *Cours* with great interest (cf. Bloomfield

² Recent major publications of his bear out these observations on a much larger scale (Hewson 1996; Hewson & Bubenik 1996).

1923)—made the following statement at the outset of a review of four books devoted to Swiss German dialectology, an area in which he had distinguished himself greatly:

It is a tenet of 20th-century linguistics that language is systematic. This has been expressed variously in such statements as that language is 'un système où tout se tient',¹ that the grammar of a language is a 'system of rules', and that the use of language is 'rule-governed behavior'. (Moulton 1971:938-939)

Hardly anyone would want to quibble with such an affirmation about the broad use of this idea today. In the present context, the footnote which Moulton appended to this characterization makes for more interesting reading, and we'll see in what follows the quotation why:

Although the famous phrase is customarily attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure, in a reasonably careful rereading of the *Cours* I was unable to find it. The earliest occurrence that I have been able to locate is in Maurice Grammont, *Traité de phonétique* (Paris, 1933), p.167. Did Meillet also say it? Was Saussure the first to say it? Can anyone help me?

To be sure, Moulton was neither the first nor the last to have been frustrated in his search for this turn of phrase in Saussure's *Cours*. Apart from the common observation one can make, namely that, with rare exceptions, good practitioners of the craft tend to be poor historians (if they take any active interest in the history of their discipline at all), it also seems that at least part of the reason for this frustration is due to the long-standing amnesia of American linguistics with regard to European scholarship, from what Thomas Sebeok once characterized as 'the smug thirties' to at least the 1960s, which included a lack of familiarity with or disdain for the work of Saussure, Meillet, Trubetzkoy, Hjelmslev and other European linguists (cf. Haugen 1951, for an early critique). Indeed, following Bloomfield's *opus magnum* of 1933, we can also notice a considerable lack of interest among his followers in historical-comparative linguistics. (Note that those who were fairly well read in European linguistics and who kept the subject alive were more often than not refugees from Nazi persecution, not American born.)

Moulton's queries are even more interesting for other reasons, as he seems to have been the first scholar to publicly challenge the traditional ascription of the phrase 'où tout se tient' to Saussure. He also suspects that Meillet used it, and he refers to an author and a book which both are at least in some way relevant to the subject of this paper: like Antoine Meillet (1866-1936), Maurice Grammont (1866-1946) was a student of Saussure's in Paris during the 1880s, and the subject of his 1933 book, contrary to what

the title suggests, was devoted to phonology, not phonetics. As regards the urgency with which Moulton expressed his request for help, one cannot but hope that some reader of his note came to his relief soon after this fourth 1971 issue of *Language* was published, probably at exactly the same moment that I defended my thesis on Saussure which was published fifteen months later, with only minor changes, a new preface and an index of names (Koerner 1973). In it, Moulton might have found at least a partial answer to his questions, for it says—in an explanatory footnote to a passage from Meillet's 'Leçon d'ouverture du Cours de Grammaire comparée au Collège de France' of 1906, in which the characterization of language as 'un système où tout se tient' figures quite prominently (Meillet 1921[1906]: 16; Koerner 1973: 231):

This phrase defining language as 'un système [...] où tout se tient' was frequently employed by Meillet and can also be found in the writings of his pupils, notably in J. Vendryes'. Cf. Meillet's pamphlet, *La Linguistique* (Paris: Larousse, 1916[1915]), p.7: 'Toute langue est un système rigoureusement agencé ..., tout se tient dans le système d'une langue'. It is interesting to note that Meillet uses this formulation in connection with Saussure's teaching at Paris (1881–91); Meillet then was apparently not aware of the fact that Saussure's lectures on general linguistics were about to be published. (Koerner 1973 [1971]: 240n. 23)

One reason for citing this note is also to defend myself against the accusation (e.g., by Szemerényi 1980: 160) that I had attributed this famous phrase to Saussure, a charge against which Brogyanyi (1983: 143–144) defended me, referring in addition to other places in the same book of mine as well as to Koerner (1975 [1972]: 746, 797), a study with which Szemerényi was also familiar (cf. his review in *Phonetica* 36.162–165 [1979]), in which similar observations had been made. Indeed, following the publication of Peeters' 1990 paper, which supplies further evidence of my subsequent research into the question (e.g., Koerner 1984, 1987), I think there is no need anymore to publically claim ownership of my original findings. (Perhaps I should add that my 1971 dissertation was devoted to the *Cours* and its impact on 20th-century linguistic thought, not to his *Mémoire*; this interest of mine is more evident in Koerner 1987.)

Still, as the record shows, this often-used *tourneure* has received further historical investigation following Brogyanyi's 1983 paper (Toman 1987, Hewson 1990, Peeters 1990), in part also because the phrase—and the idea—is still widely attributed to Saussure in the critical literature, at times against Saussure and 'structuralism' generally (cf. Brogyanyi 1983: 145–146). Even the Indo-Europeanist Oswald Szemerényi (1913–1996), who was so well familiar with the essential tenets of Saussure's *Mémoire*

(Szemerényi 1973), went so far to regard the phrase as 'absurd' (1980:160). While I do not think that the idea of language as a system of interrelated terms needs to be defended—I would find it hard to believe that there is any serious linguist around who'd challenge such a view—it seems that a more detailed analysis of the primary sources concerning its early use is still desirable to set the record straight, and to permit future (careful) users of this famous dictum the benefit of an historical accounting of its evolution and proper application to the facts of language.

2. ATTRIBUTIONS OF 'OÙ TOUT SE TIENT' TO SAUSSURE

Bogyanyi (1983) made no mention of his one-time mentor's characterization of this phrase as 'absurd', but he showed (145-146), as I just noted, that some linguists used the quote to criticize (Saussurean) structuralism generally as not giving an adequate picture of living languages. Others, who ascribe it to Meillet, not Saussure, like Lepschy (1970:34), remarked that when Meillet stated in the preface to his *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes* that language was 'un ensemble où tout se tient' (Meillet 1903:x), 'he was expressing a commonplace idea rather than an original one'.

The key term here (and the source of Lepschy's derision), it appears, was Meillet's use of the word *ensemble* rather than *système*³ in this passage as the former has a seemingly lengthy tradition in French thought. Bogyanyi (p. 145) quotes the definition which Émile Littré (1803-1881), in his *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, had given under the entry of 'système' (1869: 2119),⁴ namely, as an 'Ensemble de choses qui se tiennent', and which harks back, according to Mounin (1972: 43), to the entry for the same term in the French *Encyclopédie* of 1765, which in turn is quoted by Walther von Wartburg (1888-1971) in his *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* as an 'ensemble de choses qui se tiennent d'une manière ou d'une autre, considérées sous l'angle de leurs relations' (1966: 504). However, Lepschy (b.1935) did not go much further in his investigations and, as a result, missed Meillet's much more forceful definitions in his many other, earlier as well as later, writings, including the revealing passage in the 1912 edition of Meillet's *Introduction*, which was retained in its many subsequent editions (see section 3.2 below).

3 Even though the context shows that Meillet in fact used the term 'système linguistique indo-européen' right before the passage Lepschy refers to.

4 Erroneously, Toman (1987: 404) misquotes Bogyanyi (1983) twice when substituting 'système' with 'structure'.

2.1 Early attributions

The earliest reference to Saussure as the originator of the phrase appears to have come, interestingly enough, from the pen of his one-time student at the University of Geneva and later co-editor of his lectures on general linguistics, Charles Bally (1865–1947). In the first edition of his influential *Linguistique générale et linguistique française* Bally noted (1932: 9 = 1944: 17): 'Dans un système, tout se tient [...]: ce principe, proclamé par Saussure, conserve pour nous toute sa valeur'. This affirmation seems to have been the source of Nikolaj Sergeevič Trubetzkoy (1890–1938), who in his programmatic, if not propagandistic, article of 1933, 'La phonologie actuelle', cites the phrase characterizing language as 'un système où tout se tient' altogether four times (Trubetzkoy 1933: 241–244 = 1969: 159–163), each time identifying Saussure as the originator and suggesting (without offering a particular locus—of course) that the phrase in question could be found in the *Cours*, from which he quoted elsewhere, for instance when referring to the following famous phrase from the *Cours*: 'Les phonèmes sont avant tout des entités oppositives, relatives et négatives' (Saussure 1931[1916]: 164). It seems that on the authority of Bally and then possibly also on that of Trubetzkoy, it became fairly commonplace to attribute the phrase to Saussure. Whatever the (secondary or tertiary) source of this ascription, it seems that the phrase in question fitted well into the argument of the post-Saussurean linguists who took the *Cours* as a textbook of structuralism rather than as an original attempt at an overall general linguistics in which both synchrony and diachrony would find their proper place.

2.2 Later ascriptions

By the 1960s, when linguistics had become a popular subject of university instruction, the expression of language as a 'système où tout se tient' and its congeners had become widely used in the classroom and in the textbook literature. It was a handy phrase if one was to argue in favour of a structural approach to language. It would probably be useful to check all sorts of modern textbooks to make an accounting of more recent ascriptions of this 'tour de phrase'. These are more likely due to a kind of oral, classroom transmission than the result of original research as, for instance in Fishman's 'brief introduction' to sociolinguistics (1970: 9), where he makes a general reference to the *Cours*, obviously without having read it. Given limitations of space, reference to just two more places may suffice where the phrase is credited to Saussure: in Jan Mulder's Martinet-in-

spired *Foundations of Axiomatic Linguistics* (1989: 135) and an article by Jacob Mey on 'semoisis', where the author even goes so far as to supply of a page reference to the *Cours*,⁵ affirming:

Perhaps one of Saussure's most important (and at least most widely quoted) statements has been that in language, everything holds together: 'dans le langage, tout se tient' (1966: 72). The immediate corollary of this statement is that in language everything is possible, as long as one knows, and sticks to, the rules of the game, [...] (Mey 1992: 229)

It's obvious that the author has no idea where this phrase has come from and in what context it was originally conceived. Still, Mey is largely correct in his belief that comparable ideas can be found in the text compiled by Bally and Sechehaye, but not where his reference leads us to, namely, to a discussion of phonetics ('Classification des sons d'après leur articulation buccale').⁶

3. ON THE HEELS OF THE SOURCES OF 'OÙ TOUT SE TIENT'

It appears to me that most teachers of linguistics did not particularly care as to where the phrase had come from. Indeed, it didn't really matter. It was a useful way to explain the nature of language structure, and this usually sufficed. We know of various other instances where concepts or a 'joli mot' (as Meillet called Baudouin de Courtenay's 1881 creation of 'morpheme' by analogy to 'phoneme') are ascribed to the wrong person. The frequent ascription today of the concept of 'markedness' to Chomsky, and not to Trubetzkoy, is just a case in point, and only historians of linguistics may take exception to such misleading claims.⁷ ('Modern linguistics' has been particularly successful in 'borrowing' important insights

⁵ Here and in several other instances I owe such *loci* to the keen eyes of Bert Peeters of the University of Tasmania who was kind enough to send me various reviews of his in which he noted such offenders.

⁶ In his bibliography (p. 238) Mey refers to the 1916 edition, and so one may speculate which edition—or translation?—he might have been referring to. Neither in the first French edition (whose pagination differs from all subsequent editions) nor in any later edition or, rather, uncorrected reprint is there anything said on page 72 about this matter; there is not even a mention of 'système' in either.

⁷ For a well-researched corrective to this 'now swollen notion', see Chvany (1996). I owe this reference and a copy of this article to Sylvain Patri of the Université de Lyon II.

from others and then obscuring their sources: On presse l'orange et en jette l'écorce!)

3.1 The circuitous history of 'où tout se tient'

As we have already noted, there appears to be a fairly long list of scholars to whom the phrase has been credited. To be sure, the idea of language being a system is not a 20th-century discovery. The organicist view of language which permeated 19th-century historical-comparative linguistics implied that languages were open to systematic analysis. So when the French lexicographer Littré, an ardent follower of Auguste Comte's philosophy of science, by the way, defined 'système' as an '[e]nsemble de choses qui se tiennent' in 1869, he may be said to have done little else than formulate a generally-held view.

As a result, it was not merely the context in which Littré's definition appeared which was probably much less promising and influential than Antoine Meillet's *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes*, which first appeared in 1903, was translated into German soon thereafter, and had six more editions during the author's lifetime. It is probable that most readers of the book used later editions (notably the fifth dating from 1922), by which time the *Cours de linguistique générale* had appeared and begun to exert its influence. It would help explain why 20th-century linguists soon began to associate the phrase with Saussure and the *Cours*, and not Meillet and his *Introduction*—or Saussure and his *Mémoire* for that matter.

However, as we shall see, Meillet used this now well-known phrase much earlier in his career, a whole decade earlier, at least where the printed record is concerned. This is significant as we shall see later in the present discussion. In 1893, when the quote below appeared, Saussure had returned to Geneva less than two years earlier, and Meillet, then aged 27, was eager to establish himself as a scholar in his own right. It was no surprise that the article was devoted to an *exposé* of the main pillar of historical-comparative linguistic theory and practice since 1876, the question of the regularity of sound change as emphasized by the young scholars of the Leipzig circle around Georg Curtius (1820–1885), notably Karl Brugmann (1849–1919) and Hermann Osthoff (1847–1909), precisely during the time Saussure was a student there (1876–1878, 1879–1880). In his paper on 'Les lois phonétiques', Meillet noted:

Les divers éléments phonétiques de chaque idiome forment un système où tout se tient. Les personnes qui ont appris à prononcer une langue étrangère ont pu

s'en rendre compte: ce n'est pas seulement parce qu'il prononce mal le *th* ou les consonnes finales que le Français est inintelligible en parlant l'anglais, c'est que ni la position des lèvres, ni celle de la langue ne sont les mêmes pour parler les deux langues, et que pas une seule des voyelles n'est rigoureusement identique dans les deux. Or l'enfant, en apprenant à parler, s'assimile non une articulation isolée, mais *l'ensemble du système*. (Meillet 1893: 318-319; Koerner 1989: 405; emphasis added: EFKK)

Two years later, we can read the following in an important and influential 215-page monograph of the phenomenon of 'dissimilation' found in Indo-European languages, by another former student of Saussure's during his tenure as Maître de conférences at the École des Hautes Études in Paris (1881-1891), Maurice Grammont, where the author holds up the following principle maintained elsewhere by historical linguists at the time:

[...] si la dissimilation elle aussi obéit à des lois, tout se tient dans l'édifice, l'ensemble est complet et il ne reste qu'à parfaire les détails. (Grammont 1895:10)⁸

As Meillet's 1893 article appeared in a rather obscure place, and not in a regular linguistics journal, it is not surprising that Toman, looking for pre-1903 locations of the phrase, expected to have found reasons to attribute it to Grammont rather than to Meillet, of whom he only found a later (1899) attestation which, however, was much more detailed and so could have been taken as an elaboration on Meillet's part of his *confrère's* discovery. The latter, in a paper published in the prestigious *Indogermanische Forschungen*, on a fairly minute subject of Indo-European morphology, had given the following argument to explain a particular language change:

[...] tous les mouvements qui concourent à la formation d'un phonème étant solidaires, l'altération de l'un d'entre eux a chance d'entraîner, soit immédiatement, soit plus tard, l'altération d'une ou de plusieurs des autres. Du reste ce phonème n'est pas isolé dans la langue, il fait partie d'un système dont toutes les parties se tiennent et réagissent les unes sur les autres; [...]. (Meillet 1899: 64; Toman 1987: 403)

Apart from the fact that Meillet's statement is quite distinct from Grammont's, we may be safe in assuming, also based on Meillet's earlier use of the idea, that both had drawn inspiration from the same source, even if later readers might have seen Meillet as its originator, a possibility Toman (1987: 404-405) is willing to consider. Thus, it is interesting to note that Joseph Vendryes (1875-1960), one of Meillet's first students and not

⁸ Toman (1987: 404) took this passage as 'the earliest variation on *où tout se tient*'.

much later a close collaborator, should have revisited in a way Meillet's 1893 paper. In a programmatic paper on the 'sound laws', published in a Festschrift dedicated to Meillet (on the occasion of what appears to have been the 10th anniversary of his teaching at the École des Hautes Études), he noted that the change of one phoneme presupposes the change of other phonemes in the evolution of a given language system ('évolution du système'): 'L'altération d'un phonème suppose l'altération concomittante de plusieurs autres phonèmes' (Vendryes 1902: 116). Even if the 'où tout se tient' phrase itself does not appear in Vendryes' paper, the underlying concept is clearly in evidence.

3.2 Getting closer to the sources of 'où tout se tient'

Given the now widely accepted ascription of the concept and phrase to Meillet, it becomes of interest to the historian of linguistics to look for clues of their genesis in Meillet's mature work, in particular his influential *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes*, published in a German translation in 1909, a considerable feat given Germany's preeminence in the field of comparative-historical linguistics at the time.⁹ What we could have noted thus far is that nowhere in his writings did Meillet claim ownership to the phrase in question; there is no hint anywhere that he thought he was expressing a novel idea. Where his *Introduction* is concerned, we should note right from the start that the book carries, on a separate page, the following dedication:

A MON MAÎTRE
FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE
À L'OCCASION DES VINGT-CINQUE ANS ÉCOULÉS DEPUIS LA PUBLICATION DU
MÉMOIRE SUR LE SYSTÈME PRIMITIF DES VOYELLES
DANS LES LANGUES INDO-EUROPÉENNES
(1878-1903)

As we shall see from what follows, this dedication is much more than a polite gesture of a student to his former teacher; indeed, Meillet was very conscious of Saussure's influence on his linguistic thinking as may be gathered from his obituary of the *maître*. Referring to his own contribution to a volume of *mélanges* dedicated to Saussure in 1908, the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the *Mémoire*, in which his former students were

⁹ In fact, Meillet's reputation had grown so much by then that the University of Berlin bestowed on him an honorary doctorate in 1910.

given an opportunity to indicate 'leur dette vis-à-vis de leur maître', Meillet spoke of his own indebtedness in the following terms:

Pour ma part, il n'est guère de page que j'ai publiée sans avoir un remords de m'en attribuer seul le mérite: la pensée de F. de Saussure était si riche, que j'en suis resté tout pénétré. Je n'oserai, dans ce que j'ai écrit, faire le départ de ce que je lui dois; mais je suis sûr que l'enseignement de F. de Saussure est pour beaucoup dans ce que les juges bienveillants ont parfois pu trouver à y louer. (Meillet 1936[1913]: 179)

A possible hyperbole aside, we can be sure that Meillet meant what he said. Characterizing Saussure's teachings at the *École des Hautes-Études*, Meillet (p. 178) points out that what the student received was of 'une valeur générale, ils préparaient à travailler et formaient l'esprit; ses formules et ses définitions se fixaient dans la mémoire comme des guides et des modèles.' This statement should be kept in mind too. Together with the dedication of his *Introduction*, which was retained in all subsequent editions, Meillet's acknowledgement of the profound impact that Saussure had on his training as a linguist is, in my view, significant for the resolution of our puzzle concerning the original source of the well-known phrase concerning the systematic nature of language, of which we find so many expressions in Meillet's writings. The following additional locus may suffice to illustrate this. In his 1906 inaugural speech as successor to Michel Bréal (1832-1915) in the Chair of Comparative Grammar at the Collège de France, Meillet chose to pronounce himself on 'L'état actuel des études de linguistique générale [*sic*]'. There, speaking about 'la réalité d'une langue', he expatiates:

Elle est linguistique: car une langue constitue un système complexe de moyen d'expression, système où tout se tient et où une innovation individuelle ne peut que difficilement trouver place si, provenant d'un pur caprice, elle n'est pas exactement adaptée à ce système, c'est-à-dire si elle n'est pas en harmonie avec les règles générales de la langue. (Meillet 1921[1906]: 16; emphasis added: EFKK).

Returning to Meillet's *Introduction* of 1903, we may read in his *Avant-propos* the following observation which, I believe, should lead us closer to the source of the idea:

Comme toute autre langue, les différentes parties du système linguistique indo-européen forment un ensemble où tout se tient et dont il importe avant tout à comprendre le rigoureux enchaînement. (Meillet 1903: x = ⁸1937: ix)

Indeed, if a further piece of evidence was needed to demonstrate that Meillet had not merely comparative-historical Indo-European linguistics in mind but, specifically, Saussure's *Mémoire*, when he spoke of a lan-

guage as a system of interdependent terms, we may refer to the article 'Aperçu du développement de la grammaire comparée', which Meillet added to the third edition of his *Introduction* in 1912. There, after a detailed exposé of the discoveries made by Saussure in his *Mémoire* (Meillet 1937[1912]: 473-474), which established 'd'une manière définitive la théorie du vocalisme indo-européen' (p.473), Meillet comes to the following judgment:

[...] le *Mémoire* apportait, par une innovation, un système cohérent qui embrassait tous les faits, mettait à leur place les faits connus et en révélait une foule de nouveaux. Dès lors il n'était plus permis d'ignorer, à propos d'aucune question, que chaque langue forme un système où tout se tient, et un plan général d'une pleine rigueur. (1937[1912]: 474-475; emphasis added: EFKK)

Still in 1915, a year before the first appearance of the essentials from Saussure's Geneva lectures on general linguistics, Meillet, in a presentation of the state of the art of French linguistics for the San Francisco World Exhibition, emphatically reiterates the formulation whose genesis has been the subject of my paper, and clearly in connection with Saussure's teachings in Paris, when affirming 'Toute langue est un système rigoureusement articulé [...], tout se tient dans le système d'une langue' (Meillet 1916[1915]:7; also quoted in Koerner 1973:240n.23).

3.3 The place of 'system' in Saussure's linguistic thought¹⁰

Meillet had noted the following in his review of the *Cours de linguistique générale* which should be kept in mind when pursuing our quest for the source or sources of this well-known phrase:

[...] la pensée de F. de Saussure s'était fixée très tôt, on le sait. Les doctrines qu'il a enseignées explicitement dans ces cours de linguistique générale sont celles dont s'inspirait déjà l'enseignement de grammaire comparée qu'il a donné vingt ans plus tôt à l'École des Hautes Études, et que j'ai reçu. Je les retrouve telles qu'il était souvent possible de les deviner. (Meillet 1916: 32; Mounin 1968: 163)

This observation is of importance to my argument as it suggests that Meillet picked up the idea and probably also the happy phrase during Saussure's courses in Paris during the 1880s. It was during this time that Saussure was very much preoccupied with Indo-European linguistics, which was the subject of his courses, but also with defending the findings of his *Mémoire* which had not yet become widely accepted and, by some in

¹⁰ Given space restrictions, this section lacks the kind of detail that I believe an *article de fond* requires to settle the issue once for all.

Germany, even attacked. Saussure appears to have used the *Mémoire* as a textbook; indeed, a second edition of the volume appeared in Paris in 1887. From Saussure's papers it is clear that he intended to add an answer to his critics (notably Osthoff), but was dissuaded by his colleagues from doing so (cf. Redard 1978:34). It is also important to note that Saussure referred to the *Mémoire* as 'mon Système des Voyelles', the first paragraph of which should be quoted in full to illustrate the clear-headedness of this twenty-one-year old genius:

Etudier les formes multiples sous lesquelles se manifeste ce qu'on appelle l'*a* indo-européen, tel est l'objet immédiat de cet opuscule [of 302 pages!]; le reste des voyelles ne sera pris en considération qu'autant que les phénomènes relatifs à l'*a* en fourniront l'occasion. Mais si, arrivé au bout du champ ainsi circonscrit, le tableau du vocalisme indo-européen s'est modifié peu à peu sous nos yeux et que nous le voyions se grouper tout entier autour de l'*a*, prendre vis-à-vis de lui une attitude nouvelle, il est clair qu'en fait c'est le système des voyelles dans son ensemble qui sera entré dans le rayon de notre observation et dont le nom doit être inscrit à la première page. (Saussure 1879[1878]: 1; emphasis added: EFKK)

There can be no doubt that Saussure's entire argument is based on the idea of 'system' and the interrelationship between the parts. No surprise when in the final paragraph of his *Mémoire* Saussure speaks of 'structure considérée en elle-même' (p. 283). Indeed, the idea of language as a system may be regarded as the *fil conducteur* of Saussure's entire work in matters linguistic. Already in his *enfantillage* (Saussure's term in retrospect) of 1872, when he was less than fifteen years old, the schoolboy wrote a 40-page 'Essai pour réduire les mots du Grec, du Latin & de l'Allemand à un petit nombre de racines' which can be seen as foreshadowing Saussure's later preoccupation with discovering or building on the assumption of the presence of 'system' in language.¹¹ In the *Cours*, Mounin (1968: 61) reports, the term *système* shows up 138 times, and if we add Saussure's use of 'organisme grammatical' and similar expressions which he employed as synonyms, we'd probably arrive at an occurrence of the concept on every second page.

¹¹ In fact, in his reminiscences of 1903 or thereabouts, Saussure (1960: 17) reports: 'La marotte linguistique me travaillait évidemment dès cette époque, car je n'eus pas plus tôt appris quelques rudiments de grec à l'école, que je me sentis mûr pour esquisser un *système général du langage*' (emphasis in the original).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In his 1990 paper, 'Un système où tout se tient: Origin and evolution of the idea', John Hewson quoted the following remark by the late Jean Stéfanini (1917–1985): 'L'idée que la langue est un système a toujours été considérée par toute l'école de Paris, de Meillet à Benveniste, comme l'apport fondamentale de Saussure' (Stéfanini 1973: 322), elaborating on this observation in the following manner (pp. 787-788):

The notion of system is indeed fundamental to all of Saussure's work, both synchronic and diachronic; in fact, as Guillaume points out, it is fundamental to the whole comparatist enterprise (1986: 10). The centrality of the notion of system in Saussure's work is to be found, in fact, as early as his 1879 *Mémoire sur les voyelles*: in that work he proposed a system of three laryngeals entirely on regular correspondence in the Indo-European languages.¹²

While we may regard this statement as *un peu rapide*, it summarizes fairly adequately what I tried to expatiate on in this little note, namely, that there is a straight line from Saussure's early comparatist work down to his last lecture on general linguistic theory in the summer of 1911. There are definitely not two Saussure's, one of the *Mémoire*, another of the *Cours*, and not only with regard to the notion of 'système'. As regards the fears expressed by John Donne concerning the effects of the Copernican Revolution on 17th-century cosmology (quoted at the outset of this paper), they may not hold where the Saussurean Revolution in 20th-century linguistics is concerned, as long as Hewson's (1990) caveats are heeded.

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¹² As is typical of Hewson's pedagogical bent, he subsequently (p.788) explains this observation as follows: 'Implicit in this approach is the conclusion that a certain kind of sound change is the product of systemic change: change a letter on a typewriter (change in the system) and the text will be affected in regular fashion. If one replaces the s by a dollar sign, for example, a word such as *stress* would appear as \$tre\$\$.'

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