

Saussure



Modern
European
Philosophy

Saussure

Signs, System, and Arbitrariness

David Holdcroft

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The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) has exerted a profound influence not only on twentieth century linguistics but on a whole range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. His central thesis was that the primary object in studying a language is the state of that language at a particular time - a so-called synchronic study. He went on to claim that a language state is a socially constituted system of signs that are quite arbitrary and that can only be defined in terms of their relationship within the system. This new perspective has changed the way people think about linguistics and has led to important attempts to apply structuralist ideas in anthropology, literary criticism, and philosophy. Professor Holdcroft's book expounds and elaborates Saussure's central ideas. It also offers a critical assessment of them, arguing that many of Saussure's claims are either questionable or have been misunderstood.

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