

Saussure, the procrastinator

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

Procrastination is a fact of academic life, particularly during the PhD period, as every academic supervisor knows. However, judging from ever-increasing institutional efforts to control procrastination or from the many self-help guides intended to cure procrastination, it would seem that procrastination is endemic today. Furthermore, every delay is now treated as stemming from procrastination and sanctioned accordingly. The nature of these sanctions (not meeting deadlines triggering reviews of the candidature; automatic unenrollment if no thesis has been submitted after a certain period) is also evidence that procrastination has been upgraded from a minor failing to a serious failure of the individual: a lack of talent, commitment and capability. The institutional message is clear: procrastination is a sign that you don't have what it takes to be a successful academic.

Everyone with a nagging sense of self-doubt induced by finding themselves procrastinating over this or that writing assignment will find a 1990 article about Saussure's time in Leipzig immensely therapeutic. "Documenti saussuriani conservati a Lipsi e a Berlino" by Paola Villani surveys Saussure's four years as a doctoral student in Germany, mostly Leipzig, which, at the time, was the world capital for the study of linguistics. The article's appendix includes a reproduction of all the materials relating to Saussure that are kept in the archives of [Leipzig University](#), where Saussure studied between 1876 and 1878 and obtained his doctorate in 1880.

Everyone knows that the 'father of modern linguistics' did not publish much and certainly not the work that constitutes the basis of his fame, *Cours de linguistique générale*, which was published posthumously by his students [Charles Bally](#) and [Albert Sechehaye](#) on the basis of their lecture notes. Up to now, I had never given much thought to the question why Saussure might not have published the *Cours* during his life-time. I had simply assumed that he died prematurely.

However, the Leipzig archives contain a number of short letters Saussure wrote to [Wilhelm Streitberg](#), one of the founding editors of *Indogermanische Forschungen*. These letters throw a different light on the matter and provide a unique insight into Saussure as an academic writer. Over a period of more than ten years, from 1892 to 1903, Saussure wrote a total of 22 letters to Streitberg asking repeatedly for extensions on an article he had promised Streitberg. In the end, the article was never written.

The reasons that Saussure cites for his tardiness and the grounds on which he continues to seek extensions over such a long period are most unlikely when one considers Saussure's obvious talent and lasting influence. Saussure excuses himself to Streitberg by explaining that he suffers from "*incurable graphophobie*" ("incurable fear of writing"). Other colourful turns of phrase he uses to describe his problem include the following: "*paresse scripturale*" ("scriptorial laziness"); "*horreur d'écrire*" ("abhorrence of writing"); "*une horreur malade de la plume*" ("a morbid horror of the pen"); and "*toute rédaction me procure un supplice inimaginable*" ("all writing causes me unimaginable torture").

Contemporaries were well aware that after a brilliant little book as a 21-year-old – [Mémoire sur le Système Primitif des Voyelles dans les Langues Indo-Européennes](#) ([Note on the Primitive System of Vowels in the Indo-European Languages](#)) – Saussure had never again published anything. Streitberg, for one, simply thought that Saussure was insane. In a letter to [Karl Brugmann](#) he says that he has heard that Saussure is suffering from “*unheilbarer Geisteskrankheit*” (“incurable insanity”).

Other colleagues were more charitable: [Antoine Meillet](#) attributed Saussure’s reluctance to publish to an obsession with perfection and [Émile Benveniste](#) argued that the nature of the discipline was changing in a way that Saussure felt called for entirely new terminologies and concepts.

The most intriguing explanation was put forward by [Georges Mounin](#), who suggested that Saussure’s inability to write was due to the trauma of studying abroad in Germany. Fanciful as this suggestion may sound, some of the letters in the archive provide evidence of a problematic relationship between Saussure and his peers and teachers in Leipzig. After Saussure’s death, Brugmann, for instance, wrote to Streitberg:

Übrigens ging mir jetzt ein paar mal durch den Kopf, ob bei Ihrer Darstellung des Entwicklungsganges von F. de Saussure richtig zur Geltung kommen werde, dass dieser gescheite Gelehrte die Hauptanregung in Leipzig [...] bekommen hat. Merkwürdig ist mir immer erschienen, dass de Saussure selbst meines Wissens nie offen diese Abhängigkeit eingestanden hat. Meine Auffassung ist die: das etwas derbe und rauhbeinige Wesen von Osthoff hat den zartbesaiteten Jüngling abgestossen, und als Franzose (so dürfen wir wohl sagen) war ihm eben die Form die Hauptsache. [...] Auch die Pariser Schüler von de S. haben nie diese Abhängigkeit offen eingestanden, und ich bin fast überzeugt, dass da nationale Gegensätze hineingespielt haben. [...] Kurz: ich hätte es für anständig gehalten, wenn de S. seinem Buch eine Vorbemerkung vorausgeschickt hätte, in der zum Ausdruck gekommen wäre, dass er von seinen Leipziger Lehrern mehrfache Anregungen erhalten habe. Er empfand eben nie wie wir Deutsche empfinden, sondern fühlte sich uns gegenüber als – Franzmann.

By the way, I have recently been wondering whether your obituary of F. de Saussure will emphasize that this intelligent scholar received the most important impulse in Leipzig. I’ve always found it strange that, as far as I know, de Saussure has never openly admitted this dependency. My view is this: [Osthoff’s](#) somewhat coarse and uncouth manner repelled the delicate feelings of the young man. As a Frenchman (and that’s what we may call him) manners were of prime importance to him. [...] His students in Paris never admitted this dependency, either, and I am almost convinced that national conflicts played a part in that. [...] In short: I would have considered it a matter of decency if de Saussure had prefaced his book with an acknowledgement of the multiple impulses he received from his teachers in Leipzig. The truth is that he never felt like we Germans feel but, with us, always felt himself to be – a Frenchman.

We’ll never know whether Saussure’s experience in Leipzig was in any way connected to his “graphophobia” but it is intriguing to speculate about the difficulties of finding one’s academic voice if one is predominantly seen and treated as a member of a national group. (Writing in an additional language – as most international academics must today in English – was a non-issue for Saussure: theirs was a multilingual world and Saussure happily wrote in French (although there are also some German and Latin notes he wrote in the archive) and, read in German, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and probably a dozen other languages (one of his doctoral exam subjects was Gothic!))

What is Saussure's lesson for today's procrastinators? The likelihood of not publishing and still ending up one of the most preeminent scholars in your field is one in a million – so don't jump to the conclusion that procrastinating will make you the next Saussure! The lesson is that procrastination is normal and you have to work hard to overcome it – just like the best!



Paola Villani (1990). Documenti saussuriani conservati a Lipsia e a Berlino Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure, 44, 3-33