University of Oum El Bouaghi

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Module: Linguistics

**Unit 2: European Structuralism – Structural Linguistics-**

**Introduction**

The theory of structuralism is not confined to a single discipline. In essence, all structuralism revolves around the concept of **system**, seen as the whole, and the internal contrasts within it. Structuralist ideas in linguistics have developed in Europe and America concurrently and autonomously at the beginning of the 20th century. They shared the conception of considering language a **system** and used **descriptive** tools in their analysis.

**1. Ferdinand De Saussure**

Structural linguistics in Europe was initiated with the publication of **Cours de Linguistique Générale** of the Swiss linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857- 1913). The book was edited and published by his students in 1916. It presents a series of lectures that Saussure gave in Geneva. It was a novelty in linguistic thinking during the 1920s and 1930s. Despite being originally a comparative philologist himself, Ferdinand de Saussure is considered the founder of **structuralism**. Saussure's work was principally **non-historical and descriptive**. This linguist is well distinguished for his view of language and for his dual concepts presented in the form of **dichotomies**, which have become a tradition when discussing Saussure's theory.

## 1.1. Saussure's View of Language

Prior to the 20th century, linguists took an **atomistic** view of language: it was seen as a compilation of individual elements, for instance, speech sounds, words and grammatical endings. This was an **item-centred analysis**. Ferdinand de Saussure put forward a very different view where language is seen as **structured system of relation oppositions**. In structuralism, units (sounds, morphemes, sentences, meanings . . .) can be defined only by reference to their relationships to the other units in the same language. They are mutually defining entities. They derive their identity from their interrelationships. Every unit is a point in a structure, and it has no significance by itself.
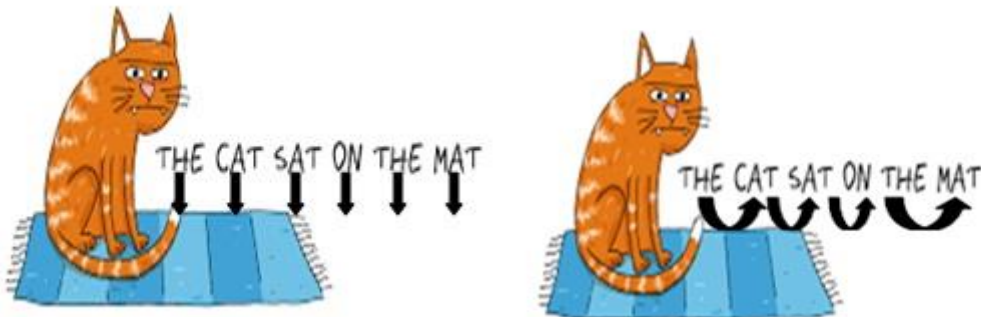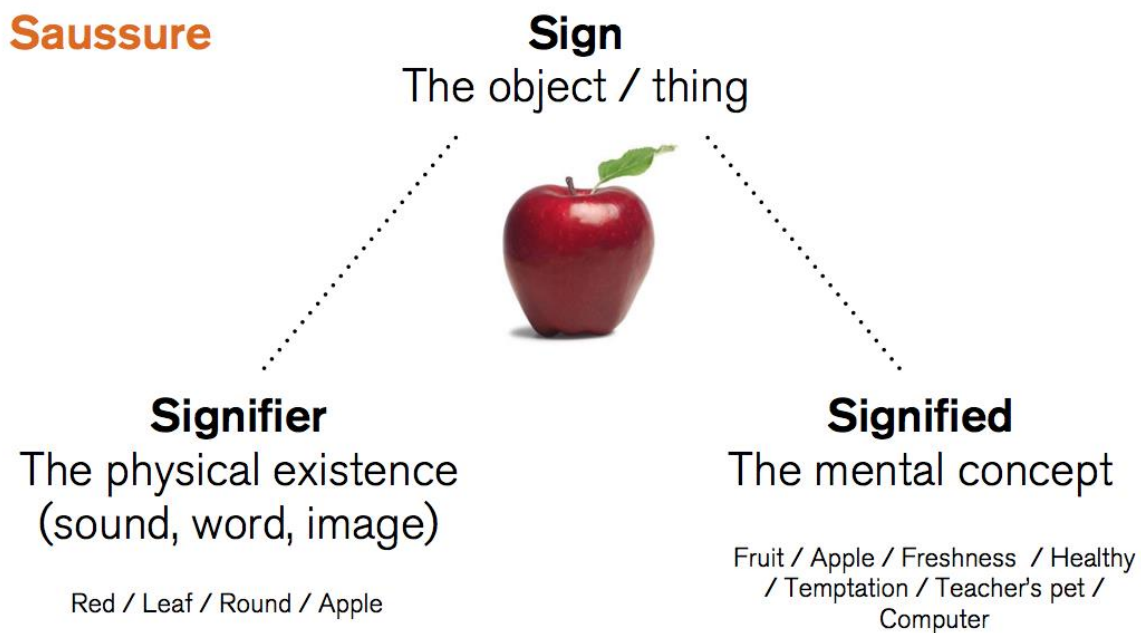


**Atomistic View (collection of individual items) vs Structural View (network of relations)**

**1.2. Saussure's Dichotomies**

Various theoretical dichotomies can be extracted from Saussure's work. This has become a tradition. He made a clear distinction between several new concepts: signifier/signified langue/parole, synchronic/diachronic studies, and syntagmatic/paradigmatic studies.

### 1.2.1 Signifier/Signified

One of the concepts introduced by Saussure in his linguistic theory is the linguistic **sign**. He regards langue as a system of arbitrary signs. First, he defines the sign as a relationship between two equally participating characteristics: t**he signifié** (signified) and the **signifiant** (signifier). The first refers to an **idea** or a **concept**, the second to **a form** or an **acoustic image**. The sign is a meaningful entity, and it is the basic unit of communication. **Arbitrariness** of the linguistic sign means that there is no inherent or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified: it is a matter of **convention** within a speech community.

**Saussure**

**Sign**
The object / thing

**Signifier**
The physical existence
(sound, word, image)

Red / Leaf / Round / Apple

**Signified**
The mental concept

Fruit / Apple / Freshness / Healthy
/ Temptation / Teacher's pet /
Computer

### 1.2.2 Langue/Parole

Saussure distinguished between three main senses of language, and then he emphasized two of them. He sees that langage is composed of two aspects **langue** and **parole**. These terms have

obtained a wide approval in modern linguistics, without any specific translations in European languages. Language is the hereditary propensity of human speech present in all normal human beings. For its correct development, it needs the appropriate environmental prompts. It is a natural bequest distinguishing the human species. **Langue refers to the <u>abstract</u> system shared by all the speakers of the same language**, like English, Arabic, French, etc. It is an underlying system of <u>abstract</u> rules of lexicon, grammar and phonology which is implanted in each individual's mind resulting from his nurture in a given speech community. Being peculiar to the speech community, langue is something which the individual can make use of but cannot influence by himself. It has a **social nature** according to Saussure. **Parole refers to the real speech of the individual, an instance of the use of system.** It is the **concrete** side of language. According to Saussure, it is langue that should be the primary concern of the linguist.



Parole (what the individual speaks)    Langue (what is shared by the community)
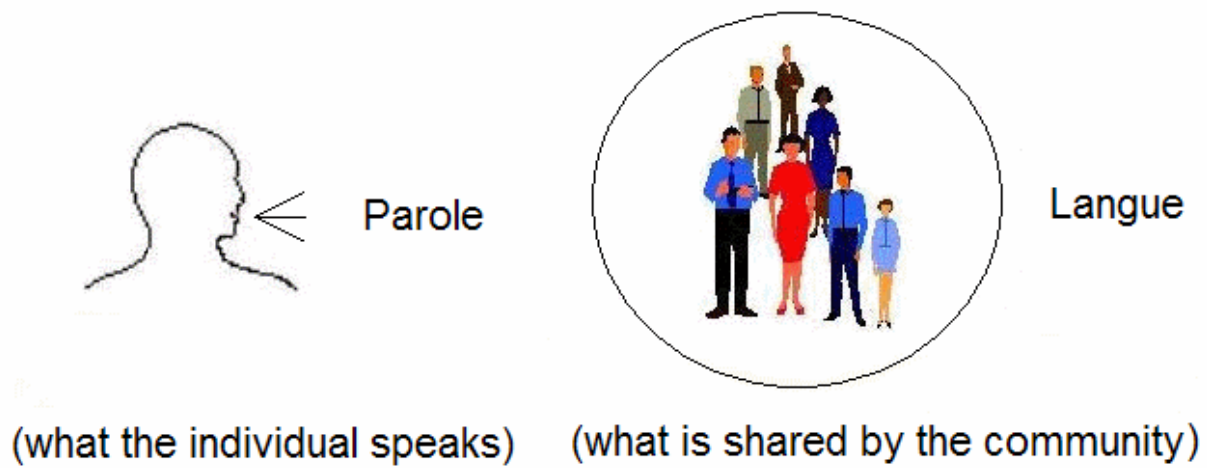
### 1.2.3. Synchronic/Dichronic

Contrary to the entirely historical view of language of the earlier hundred years, Saussure emphasised the value of seeing language from two dissimilar views, which he called **synchronic** and **diachronic**. A **synchronic approach** to language studies investigates **the state** of language at a **particular phase** of its development without allusion to its history. Saussure referred to this state as **an état de langue**. In order to study this, linguists will collect samples of language within a **fixed period**, describing them **not considering any historical factor** which might have influenced the state of language up to that time. The time factor is irrelevant. A **diachronic approach**, in contrast, is the study of **the history of a language**, focussing

on **language change** in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. This approach deals with the never ending successions of language states. A diachronic study presupposes a synchronic study. Saussure emphasised that modern linguistics should be synchronic in perspective.
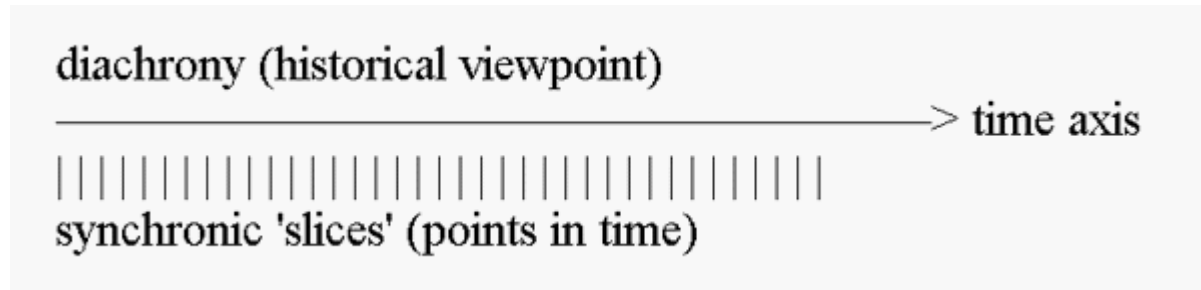


### 1.2.4. Syntagmatic/Paradigmatic

**Syntagmatic relationships** exist between items in a **sequence**. They are also called **linear**, **co-occurrence**, **sequential** or **horizontal relations**. By contrast, **paradigmatic relationships** hold between existing items and other items in the same language that can **take the same position** in the sequence: between actual elements and their substitutes. Taken together, all elements form a class, a system. These relationships are also called **associative**, **substitution**, **vertical relationships**. According to Saussure, language, then, has a two-dimensional structure.



## 2. Structural Schools in Europe

Structuralist ideas have gained a wide recognition in Europe following Saussure's death. Many linguistic schools in Europe promoted structuralism, especially in Geneva, Prague, London, Copenhagen and France. These schools have subjected Saussure's ideas to extension as well as

criticism. Important in these works is the linguists' attempt to build on the model laid down by Saussure himself.

## 2.1. Prague School

**Prague School** of Linguistics is highly inspired by Saussure's works. The founder of this school is **Vilém Mathesius** (1926). He took the step **to integrate formal linguistics** with **the functional linguistics**. This means that a relationship was created between the **structure** of the language (that looks at the patterns within a language) and its **communicative** properties (that is how a language functions). The school focuses more on the **functional** aspect of it nevertheless (Luelsdorff 1994). Two other prominent members of The Prague School of Linguistics are Nikolay Trubetskoy and Roman Jakobson. The school developed its famous "Distinctive-feature analysis" of sounds. This means that each sound has a number of distinctive acoustic features and two similar sounds can be distinctive if one of those features of a sound is different in juxtaposition to the other similar sound. Unlike, Saussure, this European school does prefer prescriptive linguistics to a limited extent, bringing the social aspect of linguistics in the picture.

## 2.2. London School

The **London School** of Linguistics, along with **phonology**, focuses more on the **semantic** aspect of language. Not to mention that it too follows Saussure's path of synchrony. It "rejects the concepts of the speech collective and social experience and studies the speech of the individual person" (encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com). The key figures of this school are Henry Sweet, Daniel Jones, J.R. Firth, Michael Halliday, and R.A. Hudson. The London School of Linguistics has a major role to play to establish linguistics as an academic discipline.

J.R. Firth is an important name in The London School of Linguistics as he contributed to the phonology with his theory of **prosodic analysis** and to semantics by adopting and developing ideas of Polish anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) into a contextual theory of meaning. This idea later on inspired Halliday to develop his theory of **"systemic functional grammar"**. This concerns the nature and import of the various choices one makes to utter one particular sentence out of infinitely numerous sentences available in a language. This idea led to developing a taxonomy for sentences.