

The Structuralist School of Linguistics

I. Introduction to Structuralism

Definition:

Structuralism is an approach to linguistics that analyzes language as a structured system of interrelated elements. It focuses on understanding the rules and patterns underlying language use. It is Originated in the early 20th century and influenced by the work of **Ferdinand de Saussure**, often called the "father of modern linguistics."

Ferdinand de Saussure defines language as a **system of signs** organized according to a set of rules and relationships. This definition emphasizes the structured, systematic, and relational **system of arbitrary signs**. It focuses on how elements within the system relate to one another to create meaning, emphasizing the study of rules and patterns over individual use or historical development.

II. Core Principles of Structuralism in Language

1. Language as a System

Structuralism views language as a system of interdependent elements. Instead of studying individual words or sounds in isolation, structuralists analyze how these elements function together.

"Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems." (Saussure, 1966, p. 16)

"Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflection enters into its use only for the purpose of classification." (Saussure, 1966, p. 14) Structuralism focuses on **langue** rather than **parole** because it represents the social and systematic aspects of language, which are stable and analyzable. **Langue**: The abstract, structured, and shared rules governing language (e.g., grammar, rules, vocabulary, and sound systems). **Parole**: The actual use of language in speech or writing by individuals

Example: The rules for forming plural nouns (e.g., adding -s) belong to **langue**, while a person saying "dogs" is **parole**.

Example: The sentence "Cats sleep often" follows the syntactic rules (**langue**) of English, but its specific usage (**parole**) depends on the speaker's intention.

2. Arbitrariness of the Sign

“The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. The idea of ‘sister’ is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French.” (Saussure, 1966, p. 67). Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the *signifier* (the sound/form/picture) and the *signified* (the concept or meaning) is arbitrary. **Example:** The word “dog” in English, “chien” in French, and “كلب” in Arabic all represent the same concept, but there is no natural connection between the sound and the concept.

3. Synchronic vs. Diachronic Analysis:

Saussure emphasized studying language at a specific moment in time (**synchronic analysis**) rather than focusing on historical evolution (**diachronic analysis**). Synchronic analysis for example analyzing how /p/ and /b/ are phonemes in present-day English. While diachronic analysis tracing how the Great Vowel Shift altered English vowel pronunciation between the 15th and 18th centuries.

4. Levels of Analysis:

Structuralism divides language into layers: phonology (sounds), morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence structure), and semantics (meaning). Structuralists analyze how these levels interact to create meaning. For example in the word “unhappiness,” structuralists would analyze:

- Phonology: The individual sounds /ʌn/, /hæp/, and /nəs/.
- Morphology: The root morpheme “happy” and the affixes “un-” (negation) and “-ness” (state).
- Syntax: How the word fits grammatically in a sentence.

IV. The Relationship between Structuralism and Behaviorism

1. Behaviorism in Psychology

Behaviorism, led by figures like **John B. Watson** and **B.F. Skinner**, focuses on observable behavior rather than internal mental states. Behaviorism claim that learning is a result of stimulus-response mechanisms and that reinforcement strengthens behavior.

2. Behaviorism in Language Learning

Leonard Bloomfield, influenced by behaviorism, viewed language learning as habit formation. They belief that learning, including language acquisition, is shaped by stimuli, responses, and reinforcement.

Example: A child hears “apple,” associates it with the fruit (stimulus), and says “apple” (response). Parental praise (reinforcement) encourages the repetition of this behavior.

References

1. **Crystal, David.** *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 8th ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 2023.
2. **Lyons, John.** *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press, 1968.
3. **Saussure, Ferdinand de.** *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, translated by Wade Baskin, McGraw-Hill, 1966.
4. **Skinner, B.F.** *Verbal Behavior*. Copley Publishing Group, 1957