

DEMOCRATIC AND POPULAR REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF ABOUBEKR BELKAID TLEMCEM
FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



Prof. N. BENMOSTEFA

THE STRUCTURALIST SCHOOL

Structuralism is a school of linguistics that focuses on the structure of language. It emerged through the ideas of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who is considered as the father of modern linguistics and the father of structuralism. Saussure's famous influential work entitled *Cours de linguistique générale* (Course in General Linguistics, 1916). Despite all the vagaries of its composition, *Cours de linguistique générale*, with its four dichotomies, was the cornerstone in establishing linguistics as an independent discipline in Europe and emerged across America.

European Structuralism

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is often described as the founder of modern linguistics because he was the first who turned European linguistics away from its *exclusive occupation with historicity*, i.e. *the historical explanations of linguistic phenomena* towards *descriptions of the structure of language at a particular point in time*. In the 19th century, linguists mainly focused on the comparison of Indo-European languages and on discovering the principles guiding the changes undergone by the languages. Hence, linguistics in the first half of the 20th century - following the lead of Saussure - became a largely **synchronic** enterprise. He chiefly maintains that studies of the evolution of languages should be kept apart from **synchronic** language studies which aimed at *describing a language as a whole at a particular point in time*. The distinction between **synchronic** and **diachronic** language study is the *first* of the four famous Saussurean dichotomies.

The distinction between *langue* and *parole* is Saussure's *second* dichotomy. The language is described as a system, which Saussure labels *la langue*. *Langue* is the *underlying system or shared knowledge of the speakers' language* and *parole* is the *actual utterances speakers may produce in concrete situations*. However, no speaker has the complete command of *langue*, which only exists fully as a shared, social phenomenon. *Parole*, on the other hand, is always an individual realization of the system.

In Saussure's view, the linguistic system is considered as a system of signs. By **sign**, he means *the arbitrary relationship between* a concept, the **signified**, and some acoustic noise or graphic form which represents the concept, the **signifier**. In addition, the signs in the language system are tied to each other in two ways, that is, there are rules for their combination, and there are contrasts and similarities between them - the **syntagmatic** and the **paradigmatic** dimensions of language. On the syntagmatic axis, words are chained together according to grammatical rules, but on the paradigmatic axis, called the axis of choice, one may make choices about which words to be linked together. Saussure's linguistic theory had a huge influence on the linguists of **the Prague School** and **the Copenhagen School** in Europe.

The Prague School

In Europe, the Prague school which grew out of the Prague Linguistic Circle is a branch of structuralism. Its members hold the idea that a language to be a system of functionally related units and focus on the observation of linguistic realia (observing the collected (linguistic) data through experiments and research tools). They are interested in language change mainly concerning the analysis of the sounds of language, and not in maintaining Saussure's key tenets (*langue* and *parole* or synchrony and diachrony). The starting point of the Prague School was to explain the function of the various elements of actual utterances.

The Copenhagen School

Another significant structuralist school is the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle, founded by Louis Hjelmslev and Viggo Brondal, who foresee the emergence of an "algebra of language", called "glossematics", a formalist linguistic approach, which strongly emphasizes form, and developed the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. This theory of language is interested only in describing the formal characteristics of language, and a high degree of mathematical, logical rigour.

American Structuralism

After its emergence in Europe, the structural views travelled to America and were embraced by Edward Sapir, Leonard Bloomfield, and many other followers. However, American structuralists studied language on other dimensions relating it to culture, thought, and focusing on empirical, logical rigour.

Features of American Structuralism

The German-born American anthropologist **Edward Sapir** (1884–1939) emphasizes that *language is tightly related to culture*. Sapir views that an individual will never learn to interact meaningfully or to transmit his thoughts within a given community. This has been illustrated by the observation of mentally abused children and autists or any other psychological disorders that influence the process of manipulating or acquiring language.

The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** is another controversial legacy in structural linguistics that emphasizes *the relationship between language, thought, and culture*, developed by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941) and his teacher Edward Sapir. Their hypothesis

has two main facets: (1) *Linguistic determinism*; the language habits of the community we live in effectively condition the perception of experience and the choices made in interpreting that experience. (2) *Linguistic relativity*; each language is different from the other languages.

Leonard Bloomfield (1933) views that structuralism gives too much importance to grammar, and the main element involved in structuralism is *the immediate constituent analysis* (ICA) introduced as a system of grammatical analysis that divides sentences into constituents. The (ICA) considers *the sentence as the basic unit of language*. Bloomfield illustrated the notion of ICA through the sentence ‘*Poor John ran away*’. This sentence is composed of *two constituents: the subject* (poor John) and *the predicate* (ran away). *The subject* involves two constituents: the head (John) and *the modifier* (poor). *The predicate* includes a *verb phrase* consisting of *the verb* (ran) and *the particle* (away). The ICA ideas were more developed when **Chomsky** added rules for the generation of sentences to create *generative grammar rules*.

General Principles of Structuralism

- Structuralism forms the basis for *semiotics*, the study of signs (a sign is a union of *signifier* and *signified*) and through semiotics, structuralism leads us to see everything as *textual*, i.e., made of signs, governed by conventions of meaning, and ordered according to a pattern of relationships.
- Structural linguistics relies on the idea that *langue* is abstract and *parole* is concrete. Thus, the role of the linguist is to study the concrete level of language.
- It focuses on the spoken language, its culture, and structure.
- It relies on the objective, empirical study of language.
- It gives importance to the synchronic study.

Generally speaking, Saussure’s views changed the old perspective of traditional linguistics, which studied language through its phonetic changes over time and places, into a structural approach that helped in founding semiology - the science of signs, and affected many other sciences such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology.