**Module:** Linguistics

**Level:** L2

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 **Unit 2:** **Schools of Linguistics**

**Lesson two: Structuralism**

**The Development of Structuralism in Linguistics:**

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 seminal *Cours de linguistique générale* (Course in General Linguistics, 1916) was edited and posthumously published by two colleagues and a student who assiduously took notes at his lectures in Geneva University. Despite all the vagaries of its composition, *Cours de linguistique générale* is a hugely influential work and has probably contributed to the establishment of linguistics as an independent discipline than any other single book.

Although Saussure had a background in the historical study of language, he was unusually critical of neogrammarian philology, which he accused of being overly absorbed in diachrony (that is, issues of the evolution of languages). Saussure also criticized traditional grammarians for neglecting entire aspects of language, but allowed that their method was fundamentally correct and that they properly emphasized synchrony. Hence, whereas the discipline of historical linguistics that grew up in the 19th century was almost entirely diachronic in its orientation, linguistics in the first half of the 20th century - following the lead of Saussure - became a largely synchronic enterprise. It was not long before European structuralism crossed the Atlantic to become the predominant methodology of American linguistics.

The German-born American anthropologist Edward Sapir (1884–1939) was responsible for many enduring concepts in linguistic research. As an author of the landmark volume *Language* (1921), Sapir emphasizes that language is tightly linked to culture. For Sapir, language is an acquired function of culture rather than being biologically determined. This view is completely opposed to that of the mentalists (to be further explained in the next lecture ‘Mentalism’), who believe (but have not proved) that human beings possess a genetically determined predisposition for language - including many of its most specific and distinguishing features - that is already present at the moment of birth. Sapir is undoubtedly correct when he points out that, sans society, an individual will never learn to talk in meaningful terms, or to communicate ideas to other persons within a given community. This can easily be demonstrated by observation of feral or mentally abused children and in children suffering from autism or other psychological disorders that affect the acquisition and manipulation of language. Similarly, infants who are born into one linguistic environment, but are adopted into a completely different linguistic environment will obviously not grow up speaking the language of their biological parents. If there is any "hardwiring" of linguistic abilities, it occurs around puberty, after which time it becomes increasingly difficult to attain full fluency in a second language or to lose all ability in one's mother tongue. Sapir, of course, could not have predicted the degree to which the mentalists would divorce language from its social and cultural matrix, but he would have regarded it as a fallacious approach to language.

Although Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) was a contemporary and colleague of Sapir, and the two are widely regarded as the founders of American structuralism, they were quite dissimilar in temperament and outlook. Whereas Sapir was more dramatic and imaginative, Bloomfield tended to be methodical and preferred to rely strictly on evidence in formulating his positions. In 1914, he wrote *Introduction to the Study of Language,* which in later editions was called simply *Language* (1933). Bloomfield was responsible for an influential synthesis that brought together three earlier traditions of language study (historical, philological, and practical), and forged them into a coherent whole. He worked hard to establish linguistics as a science. Bloomfield was especially critical of those who took the features of Latin as the normative form of human speech. He was much more favorably inclined toward the grammatical studies of the ancient Indians because the latter were themselves excellent phoneticians who had also developed an intelligent systematization of grammar and lexicon.

In the following section, we will shed light on the emergence of the Structuralist school starting from Europe and moving to America.

**The Prague School**

In Europe, structuralism did not remain a monolithic linguistic monopoly. The Prague school (which grew out of the Prague Linguistic Circle) is a branch of structuralism, but with a difference. The members of this school hold language to be a system of functionally related units and focus on the observation of linguistic realia ( that is the (linguistic) data collected through experiments and research tools) at discrete moments. They are interested in language change, not in maintaining a strict dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* - a key tenet of Saussure - or of synchrony and diachrony. The starting point of the Prague School is to clarify the function of the various elements of actual utterances. The Prague School has made a lasting impact upon many areas of modern linguistics, particularly with regard to the analysis of the sounds of language.

**The Copenhagen School**

Another noteworthy structuralist school is the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle. One of its leading theoreticians was Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965), whose *Prologomena* (1943; English edition 1953) is intended as a series of preliminary statements essential for the formulation of any theory of language. Hjelmslev faults the humanities for being overly descriptive and insufficiently systematizing. He views language as a self-sufficient totality of its own. He foresees the emergence of an "algebra of language," which he calls "glossematics." This novel linguistic approach, which strongly emphasizes form, is intentionally designed to distinguish the ideas of the Copenhagen School from the traditional forms of structural linguistics, such as those of the Prague School. Hjelmslev does adhere to Saussure's basic principles of structuralism, but attempts to make his theory more axiomatic, having been influenced by the logical empiricism of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), Russell, and Carnap. With the ostensible goal of eliminating confusion between the object (language) being studied and the methodology used to describe it, Hjelmslev tries to create noncontradictory descriptive terminology by employing mathematical logic.

**Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**

Another controversial legacy of structuralism that continues to attract attention is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis concerning the relationship between language, thought, and culture developed by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), who was also a student of Sapir and who based his hypothesis on the approach of his mentor. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has two main facets: (1) *linguistic determinism* (the language one uses conditions the way one thinks), (2) *linguistic relativity* (each language is distinct from the other languages.). Whorf did intensive work on North American indigenous languages that have different grammatical and lexical properties from Indo-European languages, so it is altogether comprehensible that his intimate familiarity with their distinctive outlooks would lead him to develop the hypothesis that he did. That a given language determines the thought and perception of its speakers is seen by many to have been refuted by the study of Brent Berlin and Paul Kay on basic colour terms and their supposed universality (1969). The conclusions of Berlin and Kay, however, have not gone un-challenged: John A. Lucy and Richard Shweder have demonstrated significant behavioural differences in regard to colour perception on the part of speakers of different languages. In any event, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis should be easily testable by extensive investigation of the thought patterns of individuals who are thoroughly bilingual (or multilingual) in noticeably dissimilar languages. Simply asking such individuals whether it is easier to think certain thoughts in a given language than in another language, or whether it is impossible to think the thoughts of one language in another language, should go far toward determining the validity of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

**Principles /Assumptions of Structuralism**

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. Structuralism is based on the following assumptions that can be summarize d as follows:

It focuses on the spoken language.

It relies on the objective study of language.

It gives importance to the synchronic study.

It puts emphasis on the structure of language.

It is based on Saussure’s ideas concerning langue and parole.

Structuralism gives too much importance to grammar. The main element involved in structuralism is *the immediate constituent analysis* which was introduced by Bloomfield in 1933. Bloomfield illustrated the idea of immediate constituent analysis through the sentence ‘Poor John ran away’. This sentence is composed of two constituents: the subject (poor John) and predicate (ran away). The subject includes two constituents: the head (John) and the modifier (poor). The predicate involves a verb phrase consisting of the verb (ran) and the particle (away). Immediate constituent analysis considers the sentence as the basic unit of language. Its ideas developed when Chomsky added rules for the generation of sentences in order to create generative grammar. Generally speaking, structuralism contributed to the development of the study of language and helped to make linguistics as a science.

**Further readings:**

This lecture is slightly summarized from: <https://science.jrank.org/pages/9907/Language-Linguistics-Structuralist-Era.html>

Suman Ghosh. “Ferdinand De Saussure and the Development of Structuralism”, Retrieved from: <http://ndpublisher.in/admin/issues/IJSSAv1n1f.pdf>