

## Lesson 11

### Modern Linguistics Some Key Concepts I-Structural Linguistics



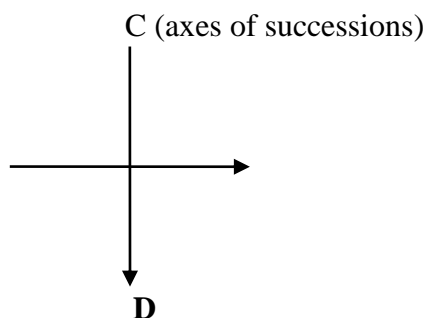
**Ferdinand De Saussure (1875-1913):** Ferdinand De Saussure is considered to be the founder of modern linguistics. His influence was most strongly felt through his lectures at the University of Geneva. After he died, his devoted students collected and edited all their notes from his lecture and published them as “Cours de Linguistique Générale” in 1916 which contributed in the understanding of language as an abstract phenomenon. His book was then translated to German, Spanish, Japanese, Russian and into English in 1959 as “Course in General Linguistics”. In his lectures, De Saussure exposed new theoretical concepts to evaluate the old school (traditional grammar) and to develop a new movement of language analyses. Most of the theoretical distinctions and views he introduced were largely explored, and have become foundations of modern linguistics today. He provided insights into the nature of the language not in its external aspect (phonetics or semantics), but in its internal system. Hence, he was the first to distinguish between:

“Synchronic/Diachronic”  
“Paradigmatic/Syntagmatic »  
“Signifié/ Signifiant”  
“Langue/Parole”

#### **1-Synchronic/ Diachronic:**

Synchronic means the intensive study of language at a given time in history, while diachronic means a historical study of language. Saussure was the first to distinguish clearly synchronic studies of language (those that consider the state of language at a particular period in time) from diachronic studies (which have the history of language change as their focus of attention). Saussure emphasized on the importance of seeing language from two distinct and largely exclusive points of view.

Synchronic linguistics sees language as a living whole, existing as a state at a particular time (un état de langue). For example, the language of present-day working class in Algeria or the language of the present-day educated class in Cairo. In order to study this, the linguist will collect samples within the stated period, describing them regardless of any historical considerations. Diachronic, however; deals with the evolution of language through time as a continuously changing medium (means of communication), in other words, a never ending succession of language states., e.g., we may wish to study the change from old English to middle English. Saussure drew the inter relationship of the dimensions in the following way:



**A-B** is the synchronic axe of simultaneities

**C-D** is the diachronic axe of successions

A-B is the state at an arbitrary chosen point in time on the line C-D.

C-D is the historical path the language has travelled and the route which is going to continue travelling.

**Remarque:**

Saussure used a lot of analogies to define this linguistic relation. Among them, the analogy of “chess game.” He claims that if we walk into a room while chess game is being played, it is possible to assess the state of the game by simply studying the position of the pieces on the board (as long as you know the rules). We do not need to know the previous moves from the beginning of the game.

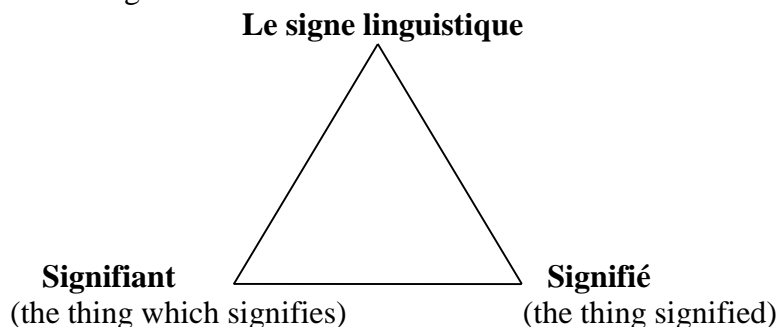
-Language is a never ending phenomenon and it is unlikely to compare it with the chess game.

-None the less, synchronic and diachronic accounts of language are complementary.

-Saussure emphasized the synchronic view of linguistics in contrast to the diachronic view of the nineteenth century since people ignore the history of their language. One obvious advantage of writing a description of the contemporary language is the fact that we can check the validity of our statements by studying the utterances of living speakers.

**2-Signifié versus Signifiant:**

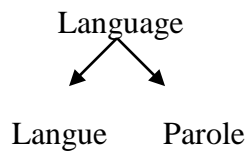
De Saussure introduced two terms into linguistics: Signifiant (signifier) and signifié (signified) and “le signe linguistique”; assuming that meaning is a “three fold” relationship. To explain it, he used his famous triangle



The significant is the word given arbitrary to the concept it defines; whereas the signifié is the concept referred to. Saussure calls the relationship of signifier signified as “le signe linguistique” or the linguistic sign, which is the basic unit of communication. The significant changes from one language to another while the signifié is always the same. Language, says De Saussure, is a symbolic system based on pure or arbitrary conventions infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers.

### 3-Langue versus Parole

De Saussure also envisaged two aspects of language study, which he called langue and parole.



Langue refers to the totality of a language, i.e., the language system which is shared by all members of the speech community.

Langue = Grammar + Vocabulary + Pronunciation system of a community.

Parole is the concrete act of speaking on the part of an individual. It is idiosyncratic (proper to the individual) and specific to the situation in which it occurs.

Language is that faculty of human speech present in all normal human beings.

Saussure believes that linguistics is fundamentally the study of langue, although; some later scholars have suggested that there might also be a linguistics of parole. Had corpus linguistics been a concept with which Saussure was familiar, he would no doubt have dismissed it as dealing with parole rather than with langue. Saussure makes the distinction in order to claim that la langue should be the object of study not parole. i.e. the social form of language is what determines meaning, not the use of these rules by an individual speaker.

In one of his famous images, he suggests that when an orchestra plays a symphony, the symphony exists externally to the way in which it is performed: that existence is comparable to langue in language study. The actual performance, which may contain idiosyncrasies or errors, is to be compared to parole.

### 4-Syntagmatic versus Paradigmatic:

Everything is based on relations. According to De Saussure, language has two dimensions or relations: Paradigmatic and syntagmatic.

Paradigmatic relations are relations of substitution: it means the relations between units that can substitute for one another in the same spot in a linguistic structure. They are relations of exclusion; the presence of one unit excludes the presence of the other. Syntagmatic relations are relations of combination: it means the ways in which linguistic units can be combined into larger structures. The following example illustrates both dimensions:

Linguistic units have a paradigmatic relation with all words which can occur in the same context and syntagmatic relation with all words forming their context, for example:

1-read this book.

2-read this letter.

3-donne moi cette fleur.

4- donne moi cette lettre.

5-البننت في الحديقة.

6الولد في الحديقة

There is a syntagmatic relation between read + this +book in the first example and a syntagmatic relation between read +this + letter in the second example. On the other hand, there is a paradigmatic relation between book and letter, because they can occur or replace one another

in the same context. In other words, a syntagmatic relation is a linear relation that holds between the elements which are present in the sentence or context.

Each element is in a syntagmatic relation with the elements that constitute its context as in examples 1 and 2 or 3 and 4 or 5 and 6.

Whereas a paradigmatic relation holds between an element present in a sentence or context but which can stand in the same position and have the same function as exemplified with book and letter in examples 1 and 2; with fleur and letter in examples 3 and 4, with بنت-الولد 5 and 6.

Therefore, syntagmatic relations are viewed according to a horizontal level or horizontal dimension and paradigmatic relations are viewed as vertical level or vertical dimension. Syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations exist at all levels of linguistic description: lexical, grammatical and phonological. For instance, at the word level, we may have a combination of three units: un + friend + ly in unfreindly.

At the phonological level, we have c + v + c like in cut

#### **Fixed and Free Sequence in Syntagmatic Relation:**

Another aspect of syntagmatic relations is the influence of word order. This means that syntagmatic relations, i.e., relations between units, which are co-present, may or may not be in sequence. In some languages, the sequence is **Free**, in others, it is fixed. In English, for instance, at the phonological level, the sequence tends to be rather fixed since we can have c +v +c as in cat,c+v+0 as in be, c +c +c +v +c as in strange but not c +c +c +c +v.

We can find a certain more flexibility at the grammatical level, for example:

a-He whispered the answer softly.

b-Softly he whispered the answer.

c-He softly whispered the answer.

In these examples, the permutation of the adverb does not alter the meaning. Therefore, the sequence is free. In French, we can have fixed and free sequence as in the followings:

a- C'est une immense université.

b- C'est une université immense.

This pair of sentences illustrates free sequence since the meaning is not affected, whereas the following pairs:

a- Un homme grand. (tall)

b- Un grand homme. (exceptional, remarkable from the personality and professional point of view)

illustrate fixed sequence since the meaning changes in each case.

At the lexical level, the sequence tends to be fixed, but sometimes it be free.

a-She is nice looking.

b-She looks nice.

In these examples, the permutation of the two lexical items which constitute or form the combination looks +nice and nice+ looking does not affect the meaning . In other cases, changing the sequence or word order is not possible as in all cases of idiomatic expressions such as idioms, proverbs, fixed combinations, compound words and so on, for example: heavy smoker, head master, to put up with(tolerate), tout ce qui brille n'est pas or,...

#### **Free Variation and Contrast in Paradigmatic relations:**

Another important aspect of these relations is that the elements having a paradigmatic relation can be similar or different in meaning, consider the following examples:

a-She is terribly nice.

b-She is remarkably nice.

Terribly and remarkably are in paradigmatic relation because they can occur in the same context and without changing the meaning. So they are synonymous or in free variation. However, in the following examples :

a-The girl came to see us yesterday.

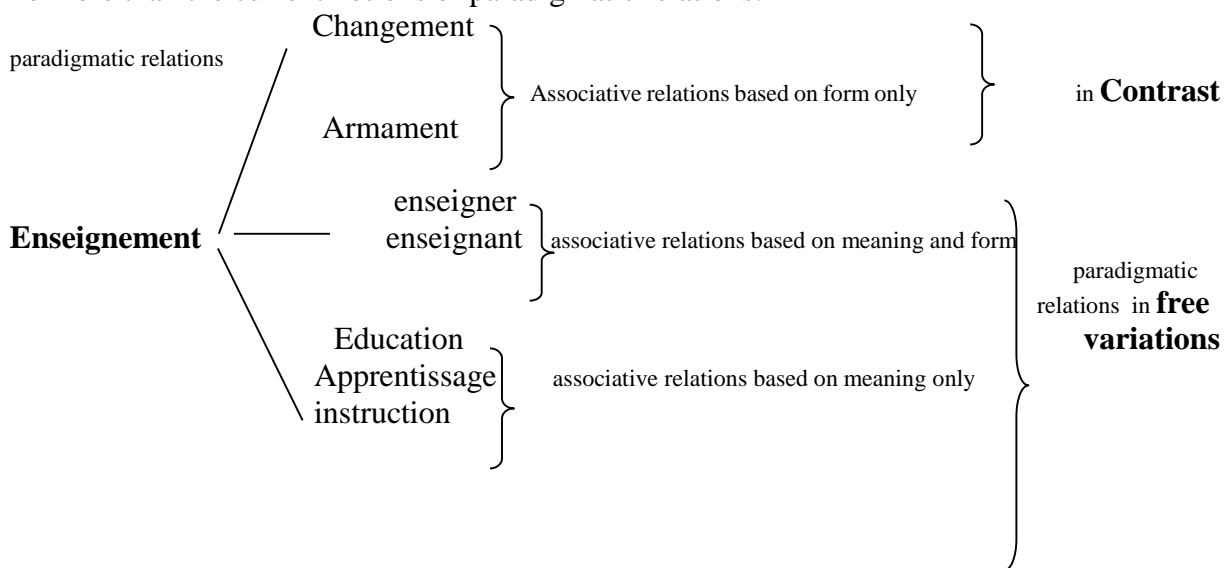
b-The boy came to see us yesterday.

The elements which function as subject of the verb, i.e., the boy and the girl are in paradigmatic relation and different in meaning. So, they are in contrast.

According to De Saussure, these paradigmatic relations are no more than the associative relations, i.e., relations between words which have something in common but which are not always present in the same context. They belong to the individual’s internalized knowledge or langue. These associative relations can be based on:

- **form**
  - unbelievable
  - unreliable
- **Form and Function**
  - teaching
  - teacher
  - Teach
- **Meaning**
  - Change
  - variation
  - Modification

If we take Saussure’s example, we will see once again that the associative relations are no more than the current notions of paradigmatic relations:



To conclude, we can say that every linguistic unit in any human language has a certain place in a system of relationships. Each unit or element has both a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic role: syntagmatic role because of its capacity to combine with other units to form structures (phrases or groups, clauses or sentences) and paradigmatic role by virtue of being part of a system or sub-system. This is exactly what De Saussure meant when he said that any language constitutes an integrated system of relations, i.e., “un système où tout se tient”.

Saussure’s courses influenced many linguists between WWI and WWII

.In America, for instance, Leonard Bloomfield developed his own version of Structural linguistics, as did Louis Hjelmsleo in Danmark and Alf Sommerfelt in Norway.

In France, Antoine Meillet and Emile Benveniste would continue Saussure’s programme.

Most importantly ,however ,members of the Prague School of linguistics such a Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy conducted research that would be greatly influential.