

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)



- founder of modern general linguistics
- studied Indo-European languages (Latin, Greek, Sanskrit)
- thesis on the primitive vowel system in the Indo-European languages
- from 1906-1913, de Saussure taught the Course in General Linguistics, which made him famous

Laryngeal theory

- First proposal of what it now known as the laryngeal theory.
- In analyzing the vowel system of Proto Indo European, de Saussure proposed the existence of a previously unidentified element, now known as a laryngeal, that would account for changes in vowels and lengthening within the paradigm of a root.
→ *Saussure hypothesized 3 "laryngeal" sounds (h1, h2, and h3) in Proto-Indo-European words.*
- This proposal was in spite of the absence of this element in any of the daughter languages known in de Saussure's time.

Saussure's Successors

Prague School: developed techniques for the analysis of sound systems in languages! inaugurated phonology

Saussure's Successors (cont)

Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen: he development of precise terminology to describe different parts of linguistic systems and their interrelatedness; called glossematics

American structuralism: study of native American languages – terminology and concepts used in Western linguistics inadequate; the only way to describe these sentences is to start from scratch – collecting the data without theory (Bloomfield)

Structuralism as a paradigm

- first 'paradigm' in linguistics
- the beginning of linguistics as an autonomous discipline → "language must, to put it correctly, **be studied in itself**; heretoforth, language has always been studied in connection with something else, from other viewpoints"
- moreover, the approach to linguistics had been purely descriptive, not theoretical.

Cours de linguistique generale

- Published in 1916 - written by former students on the basis of notes taken from de Saussure's lectures in Geneva.
→ Innovative approach to the discussion of linguistic phenomena
- it presented new views on language that result in **an independent, isolated object of research**;
- it specified the **requirements that observations have to meet** in order to be scientifically relevant;
- it provided criteria for what could count as **adequate explanations** for these observations;
- in other words: it sought to achieve **descriptive and explanatory adequacy**.

Object of linguistics

- speech varies from time to time, place to place and person to person; **it forms a "heterogeneous mass of speech elements"**;
- "whereas speech is heterogeneous, language as defined, is homogeneous. It is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meaning and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological" = **object of linguistics**;
- the object does not exist independently from the theory about it; the theory is not so much derived from some independent observable object; instead, the object is formed on the basis of the perspective.

Linguistic relativity

"Language is not nomenclature."

- speakers of different languages have different mental representations of "reality"
- "Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language."

Syntagmatic and associative relations

Syntagmatic relations: relations between elements that are combined within one larger system; these relations define the possible combinations of elements (their distribution) at various levels (word, sentence); "The syntagmatic relation is **in praesentia**."

Associative relations: relations between elements that have a common association (to teach, teacher, pupil etc.); terms in an associative family; "the associative relation unites term **in absentia**".



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Sign



Signifier and signified

- **Langue:** a huge network consisting of elements related to each other (directly or indirectly) by means of syntagmatic and associative relations;
- the **sign** is a two-sided psychological entity, uniting two elements; the **signifier** and the **signified**;
- **Signifier:** the sound-image; "not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of that sound"; e.g., CAT;
- **Signified:** the concept or object that appears in our minds when we hear or read the signifier – the meaning of the word; e.g., 'a small domesticated feline'
→ the object (referent) is not part of the system

Langue versus Parole

- Parole:** the concrete manifestations of language (the "material" or "executive" side); a messy collection of individual utterances
- Langue:** all concrete manifestations of a particular language, e.g. Dutch or English, exist outside the individual;
- a **socio-psychological phenomenon** – a kind of collective knowledge about language;
- in the collective mind of a speech community; only partially present in the mind of the individual speaker

Principle of arbitrariness

- there is no direct connection between the **sound-image and the concept**;
- a sign is the result of **convention**: speakers of the same language group have agreed (and learned) that certain (combinations of) letters or sounds evoke a certain image;
- exceptions: onomatopoeic expressions and interjections

Signification versus value

- **Signification:** concerns the (vertical) relation between a signifier and its signified;
 - **Value:** concerns the (horizontal) relation between:
 1. **signifieds** (conceptual viewpoint) and
 2. **signifiers** (material viewpoint)the content of a sign in linguistics is ultimately determined and delimited not by its internal content, but by what surrounds it: the synonyms to dread, to fear and to be afraid have their particular values because they exist in opposition to one another
- the value of each element is determined by its relations with other elements in the network; outside the network, it has no value.



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