

Lecture №5 Basic Concepts in Early Modern Linguistics



Introduction

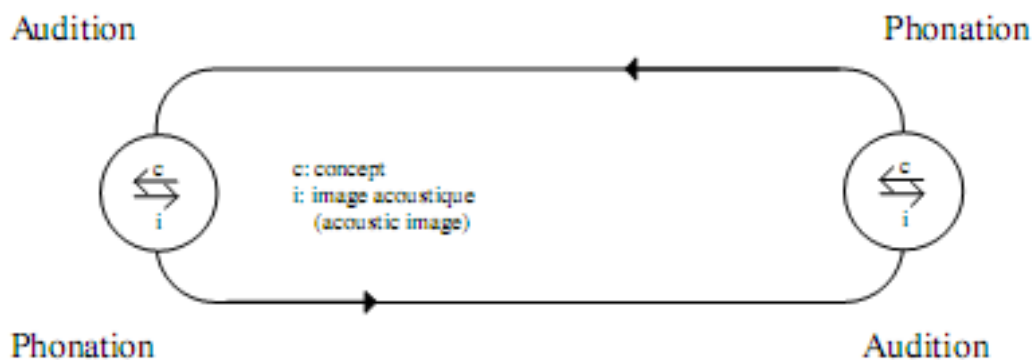
The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is sometimes thought of as the father of modern linguistics. Although Saussure was well known in his lifetime for his work in the history of Indo-European, his most influential work was not published until after his death, when some of his students got together and, on the basis of their lecture notes, reconstructed the course in linguistics that he had taught in Geneva. *The Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) became one of the key texts in linguistics, and ushered in the era of structuralism which we might argue continues today. In the *Cours*, among a number of important statements and illuminating comparisons, Saussure made a number of fundamental distinctions which are still basic to linguistic thinking. These are outlined below.

1. Language and Communication

Human beings can communicate with each other. We are able to exchange knowledge, beliefs, opinions, wishes, threats, commands, thanks, promises, declarations, and feelings. We can laugh to express amusement, happiness, or disrespect, we can smile to express amusement, pleasure, approval, or bitter feelings, we can shriek to express anger, excitement, or fear, we can clench our fists to express determination, anger or a threat, we can raise our eyebrows to express surprise or disapproval, and so on, but our system of communication before anything else is language. Communication by means of language may be referred to as *linguistic communication*, the other ways mentioned above – laughing, smiling, shrieking, and so on – are types of *non-linguistic communication*. Language and communication do not have the same meaning. Communication is the sending and receiving of messages. It refers to any message, not just the highly structured messages of language. Communication is a broader concept than language, and language is included within what is meant by communication.

Saussure's model of the speech circuit

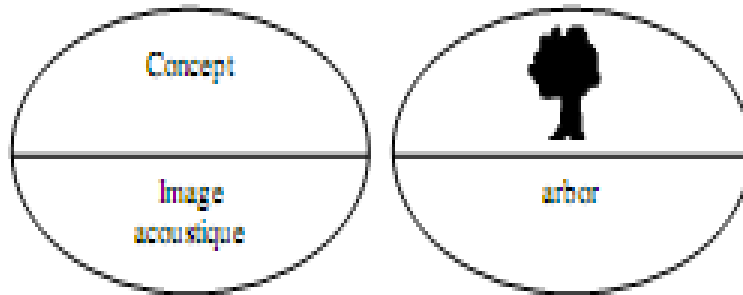
On the one hand, communication is linear in that two persons, A and B, communicate in a way that a message is conveyed from one to the other: A → B. On the other hand, the participants in the communication process are both simultaneously active. Person B does not only listen, she or he may answer or at least show some reaction. On the basis of this understanding, Saussure devised a circular communication model, i.e. the model of the speech circuit. It shows the mechanisms of a dialogue: Acoustic signals are sent from a speaker A to a receiver B, who then, in turn, becomes the sender, sending information to A, who becomes the receiver. Saussure outlined two processes within this framework. The first one is phonation. Here the sender formulates mental signs in the mind and then gives acoustic shape to them. The second one, audition, is the opposite process of the receiver transforming the acoustic message into mental signs.



2. Linguistic Sign and Semiology

The word 'semiology' is used, being derived from Ferdinand de Saussure's coinage of *sémiologie* (from the Greek *semeîon*, a sign), to refer to 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life'. The most common definition of a sign is that it is a meaningful unit which is interpreted by sign-users as 'standing for' something other than itself. Saussure saw linguistics as a branch of this new science. A linguistic object possesses both form and meaning. The concept of the linguistic sign is a very simple one: every linguistic object has two aspects, or facets: the sound image (called

by Saussure the *signifiant*, or ‘signifier’) and the concept (the *signifié*, or ‘thing signified’). However, he stressed that the relationship between them is arbitrary. For example, the English word dog has a particular form (a sequence of three meaningless phonemes) and also a particular meaning (a specific kind of animal). The two together make up a single linguistic sign in English.



A sign, with its signifier and signified, has to be, finally, acknowledged by a social group, or language community in order to be regarded as a sign. That is to say, a random utterance of one individual, although he or she may want it to signify something, may not have gained sufficient acknowledgment to be regarded as a sign. This is because Saussure regarded semiology to be a social science. According to him, signs are collective entities.

3. Langue and Parole

Saussure says there are two sides to language: *langue* and *parole*. While the French terms are generally used in English, they are sometimes translated as ‘language’ and ‘speech’ respectively. *Langue* is the abstract language system shared by the speakers of a language whereas *parole* denotes to the individual's actual utterances. According to Saussure, parole is not homogeneous. 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. Langue and parole have been modified over the years into dialect and idiolect.

Langue	Parole
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a system (Grammar + vocabulary + pronunciation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the individual act of speaking or writing (concrete) an external aspect of language

<p>shared by community of speakers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exists in the brains of members of speech community (within the collectivity) • stable and systematic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unstable and imperfect due to limited knowledge, fatigue, or carelessness.
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4. Synchrony and Diachrony

We can study a given language in two ways, Saussure maintains. The first is that we can look at the language as it is (or was) at any particular point in time. Thus, we might study the syntax of American English in the early twenty-first century, or the phonology of seventeenth-century French or the patterns of compounding in Classical Chinese. These are all *synchronic* studies (syn- ‘alike’, chronos ‘time’). The alternative is to look at the way in which a language develops or changes over time. In this way we might consider the development of the English verb system, or changes in Arabic phonology from the classical period until today. These are *diachronic* studies (dia- ‘through’, chronos ‘time’).

The synchronic and diachronic accounts of language are complementary in that the latter is dependent on the former. That means it is necessary to carry out some degree of synchronic work before making a diachronic study. Before we can say how language has changed from x to y we need to know something about x and something about y. Thanks to the idea of de Saussure that comparative linguistics appeared and grew up.

5. Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relationship

An equally important insight in language study we owe to Saussure is that each linguistic item needs to be considered not in isolation but in relation to the whole system of other items of which it forms part. Language is the self continued system, the meaning of an item can be determined only through the study of its function in language. Saussure believes that the most important of language is relationship. Linguistic elements enter into two main types of relation with one another: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Linguistic elements enter into a *syntagmatic relation* with other elements with which it forms a serial related into a linear stretches of writing or temporal flow of

speech. At the same time, it enters into a *paradigmatic relation* with other elements of the same class which may appear in a given context and which are mutually exclusive in that context.

Example:

In the example below, the word 'cat' has a syntagmatic relationship with other words such as 'the', 'sat', 'on', 'my', and 'mat'. It also has paradigmatic relations with other words of the same class 'girl', 'student', and 'frog'.

S Y N T A G M A T I C

The	cat	sat	on	my	mat
This	girl	sits	across	your	bed
That	student	walked	over	her	car
A	frog	ran	by	his	lap