University of M'sila/Faculty of letters and foreign languages
English Department
Module: Linguistics/ Level: Second Year/ 1st Semester
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Course four

<center>**The Saussurean Dichotomies**</center>

Introduction

De Saussure's book « Les Cours de linguistique générale » became one of the key texts in linguistics, and ushered in the era of structuralism which we might argue continues today. In his courses, 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. Diachronic Vs. Synchronic View

Until the beginning of the 20th century, scholars were occupied with research on the history of languages and the roots of words in ancient tongues. De *Saussure* coined this approach the *diachronic* analysis and moved to the analysis of the system of language, which he assumed to be of greater importance. He made a distinction between diachronic (i.e., historical) studies, which compare langue at different points in time, and synchronic studies, which study langue at one particular point in time.
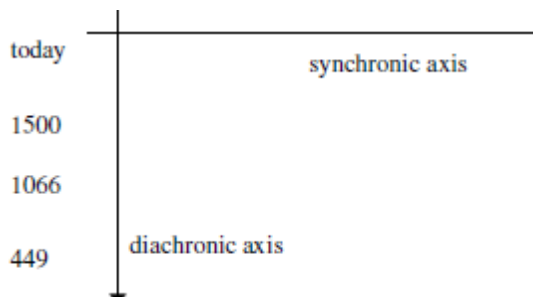
Diachrony

Diachronic linguistics views the historical development of a language. Thus, on the diachronic axis we can go back and forth in time, seeing the language with all its features change.

Synchrony

Synchronic linguistics views a particular state of a language at some given point in time. This could mean *Modern English* of the present day, or the systematic analysis of the system

of Shakespeare's English. However, no comparisons are made to other states of language or other times. Modern linguistics, following Ferdinand de Saussure, is primarily interested in the synchronic point of view. Saussure postulated the priority of synchrony: no knowledge of the historical development of a language is necessary to examine its present system. He arrived at this radical viewpoint due to his conviction that linguistic research must concentrate on the *structure* of language. Later, the whole paradigm was hence called *structuralism.*

2. Syntagmatic vs. Paradigmatic relation

Limiting the structure of language into sentences and words, as it was done before de Saussure, seems a very rough and simplified view of the language structure. A linguist should ask about the types of relations that exist in these sentences and words. The signs in the language system are interdependent. Each sign has a value, by which Saussure means something very like meaning, and each sign has the value it has just because this is the value that all of the other signs have not got. The signs in the language system are related to each other in two ways: there are rules for their combination, and there are contrasts and similarities between them for the sake of substitution. Saussure proposed that there are two fundamental relations among signs which define a structural system: co-occurrence (syntagmatic) and substitution (paradigmatic).
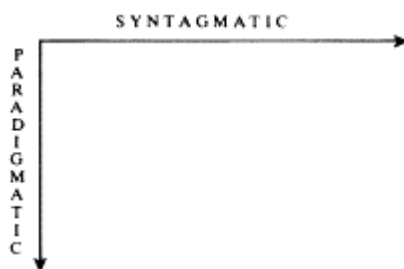
On **the syntagmatic axis**, words are linked together according to grammatical rules, but we make choices about which words to link together on **the paradigmatic axis**, the axis of choice. Syntagmatic relations define the frame in which paradigmatic relations exist, and the elements in a paradigmatic relation to each other constitute classes which are in syntagmatic relation to each other. syntagmatic and the paradigmatic relations can be lexical, syntactic or semantic (sense) relations in principle**.** Thus, Paradigmatic sense relations are relations between the meanings of words which can occupy the same syntactic slot, and serve to unite the range of lexical meanings available at a particular point in a sentence into a more or less coherent structure.

e.g. John grows a number of ………in his garden
John grows a number of **trees** in his garden

John grows a number of **flowers** in his garden

But never: John grows a number of **chairs** in his garden

The alternative choices made by the speaker to "tree" should provide an articulation of the experienced world and should have syntagmatic relations with the rest of elements in this sentence.

3. Langue vs. Parole

De Saussure divided *"langage"* the whole of language, into *'langue'* and *'parole'* and identified langue as the focus of linguistic study. *"Langue"* **is** translated as language system and **"Parole"** as speech.

Langue

it refers to the totality of regularities and patterns of formation that underlie the utterances of a language, or it is simply the underlying system on the basis of which speakers are able to understand and produce speech. However, no speaker has complete command of langue, which only exists fully as a shared, social phenomenon. Langue "is not complete in any individual, but exists only in the collectivity' (Saussure 1969 [1916], p. 30).

Parole

It is the actual utterances speakers produce. Parole is observable in the behaviour of the individual. According to Saussure, it is not homogeneous.

While language **(langue)** is a system of signs, speaking **(parole)** is the use of the system on particular occasions. A linguistic **sign** is the association of a sound (signifier) and a meaning (signified). Saussure argued that the proper subject for linguistic investigation is the system of signs, not the use of the system.

The main change brought to the distinction between langue and parole is the addition of a third level **"the Norm"**. Our *langue* would allow us to say what the time is by saying *It is ten minutes before four o'clock*, or *It wants ten minutes to be four o'clock*, or *In ten minutes it will be four o'clock*, or *It is five minutes after a quarter to four*. We do not find such utterances attested in *parole*. Rather, we find multiple utterances of *It is ten (minutes) to four*. This cannot be related to vagaries of *parole*, because it is extremely homogeneous within relevant speech communities. Neither can it be a matter of *langue*, because *langue* allows us to say the same thing in many different ways. It is a matter of norm that we say *It is ten to four* rather than one of the alternatives. Note that different dialects may have different norms.

4. Signifiant vs. Signifié

Signifier and signified form a trichotomy with "sign", which means the relationship between a concept/meaning/function, that is "le signifié "or "the signified", and some acoustic noise or graphic form which stands for the concept, namely "le significant" or "the signifier". The bond between the signified and the signifier is absolutely arbitrary and their connection is purely conventional; for that reason there exists different labels for the same concept across different languages and even within the same language as well as different meanings for the same word (e.g. tree= arbre= baum=شجرة; واسع=شاسع=فسيح; bank=place where we store money/or bank of the river). The fact that the relation between the word(signifier) and to what it refers to (signified or meaning) is arbitrary does not mean speakers can go around renaming concepts at will—at least not if they want to be understood by other speakers. As de Saussure maintains there is a type of contract in operation in a society by virtue of which langue exists, and which binds speakers to rely on it when engaging in parole.