

University of M'sila/Faculty of letters and foreign languages
English Department
Module: Linguistics/ Level: Second Year/ 1st Semester
Teacher: Mrs. Harizi
Course Three

De Saussure and the Rise of Structuralism

Introduction

Structuralism, in fact, did not initially emerge as a school of thought or a philosophical tendency. Yet, toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century, structuralism had established itself as a major force to reckon with, reaching its pinnacle of glory by the 1930s. Structuralism swept across almost all fields of inquiry, making significant contributions to the humanities and the social sciences. Among the most important names associated with the movement is Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) who hailed as the Father of Modern Linguistics. His book *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916; *A course in general linguistics*) inaugurated the structuralist revolution in linguistics. Indeed, de Saussure published little (a Neogrammarian work on the vowels of Indo-European in 1878 and a doctoral dissertation in 1881 on the genitive in Sanskrit) and nothing on the topics for which he is best known, and yet he became one of the most influential scholars in twentieth-century linguistics and modern intellectual history. The book mentioned above was published after his death in 1913 and was compiled from his students' notes from his course in general linguistics (given three times between 1907 and 1911) at the University of Geneva. This book is credited with turning the tide of linguistic thought from the diachronic (historical) orientation which had dominated nineteenth-century linguistics to interest in the synchronic (non-historical) study of language. In this book, de Saussure emphasized the synchronic study of language structure and how linguistic elements are organized into the system of each language.

What is language for de Saussure?

“**Langage**”, which is the faculty of speech which all humans are endowed with, forms a trichotomy with *langue* and *parole*. According to De Saussure **language (langue)** is a grammatical system of arbitrary signs in opposition to one another that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity. De Saussure who was influenced by the social thinking of Emil Durkheim (1858–1917) (founding figure in sociology), held that language is primarily a “social fact” rather than a mental or psychological one, and that there is a “collective consciousness” which is both the possession of society at

large but also defines society. “Social fact” and “collective consciousness” are terms associated with Durkheim and adopted by Saussure. Indeed, his famous dichotomy, *langue* (language, as socially shared and as a system) versus *parole* (speech, the language of the individual), reflects the French social thinking of the day.

The following characteristics of language can be listed:

- Language is a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts. It can be localized in the limited segment of the speaking-circuit where an auditory image becomes associated with a concept. It is the social side of **speech (langage)**, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community. That is, “*langue*” is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.
- Language, unlike speaking, is something that we can study separately. Although dead languages are no longer spoken, we can easily assimilate their linguistic organisms.
- 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 meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological.
- Language is concrete, no less so than speaking; Linguistic signs, though basically psychological, are not abstractions; associations which bear the stamp of collective approval-and which added together constitute language- are realities that have their seat in the brain. Besides, linguistic signs are tangible; it is possible to reduce them to conventional written symbols.

Conclusion

Today, nearly all approaches to linguistics are “structuralist” in some sense and reflect Saussure's monumental influence. Saussure's structuralism has also had a strong impact on anthropology, literary criticism, history, psychology, and philosophy, promoted and modified by Jakobson, Lévi- Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida, among others.