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# **Structuralism in Linguistics**

from de Saussure via Bloomfield  
to Chomsky

# Consciousness





# Structuralism

- ‘the cataloguing of languages structures and ... the comparing of structural types’ (Harris, 1951:3)



## Structure and System

- The idea of structure presupposes the reduction or breaking down of linguistic segments or features.
- A structure presupposes a notion of unity existing above particular segments or features, of a whole above the composing and functioning elements.





# System

- The notion of system here is to be contrasted with the idea of inventory – a non-ordered list of elements – that was important and prevalent at one stage in the development of linguistics.
- (e.g. Neogrammarians, followers of Darwinian theory, or even in the introspective and normative approach so much in use in traditional linguistics during the Renaissance and after).

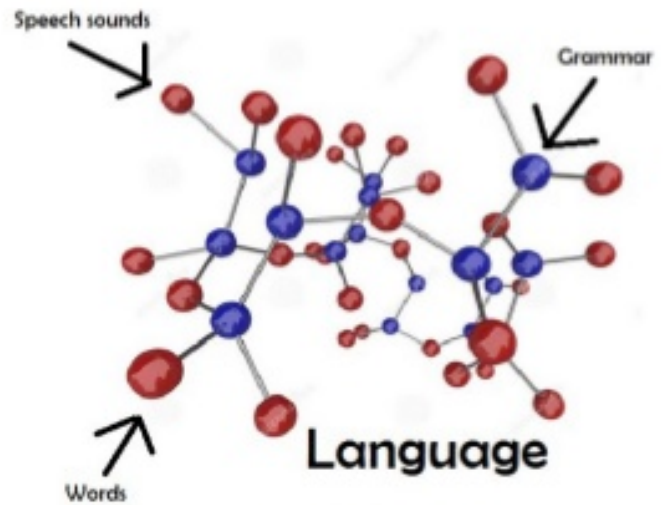


## **Ferdinand De Saussure**

De Saussure did not explicitly use the notion of “structure”; for him the essential notion was that of “system”.



Former linguistic approaches




Saussure's Structuralism





## Four basic principles of Saussure

1. Saussure stated that the meanings we give to words are arbitrary. The physicality, or structure of a word, holds no bearing to its connotation or denotation. (The only exceptions may be onomatopoeia; however, because even these vary by language, it is not necessarily correct.)

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2. Saussure stated that the meanings of words are relational. "No word can be defined in isolation from other words" (Barry). It is necessary to have other words frame a context to understand one word.

SIGNIFIER

SIGNIFIED


signifies

P-E-A-R




(word)

(concept)



3. According to Saussure, there are no intrinsic, or fixed meanings in words. If a group of people were asked to think of "dog," some people may mentally conjure a border collie, others a beagle, and others a Labrador, etc. While these are all dogs, and would correctly fit under the category of "dog," this word would not accomplish simultaneous thought, or a fixed meaning.

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4. And the fourth principle according to Saussure is that language constitutes our world. Because language exists, thought exists (think *1984* and the removal of words from the dictionary). Because the word "freedom" exists, we understand the concept; however, if no such word existed, the thought would be vague or unclear, at the very least.

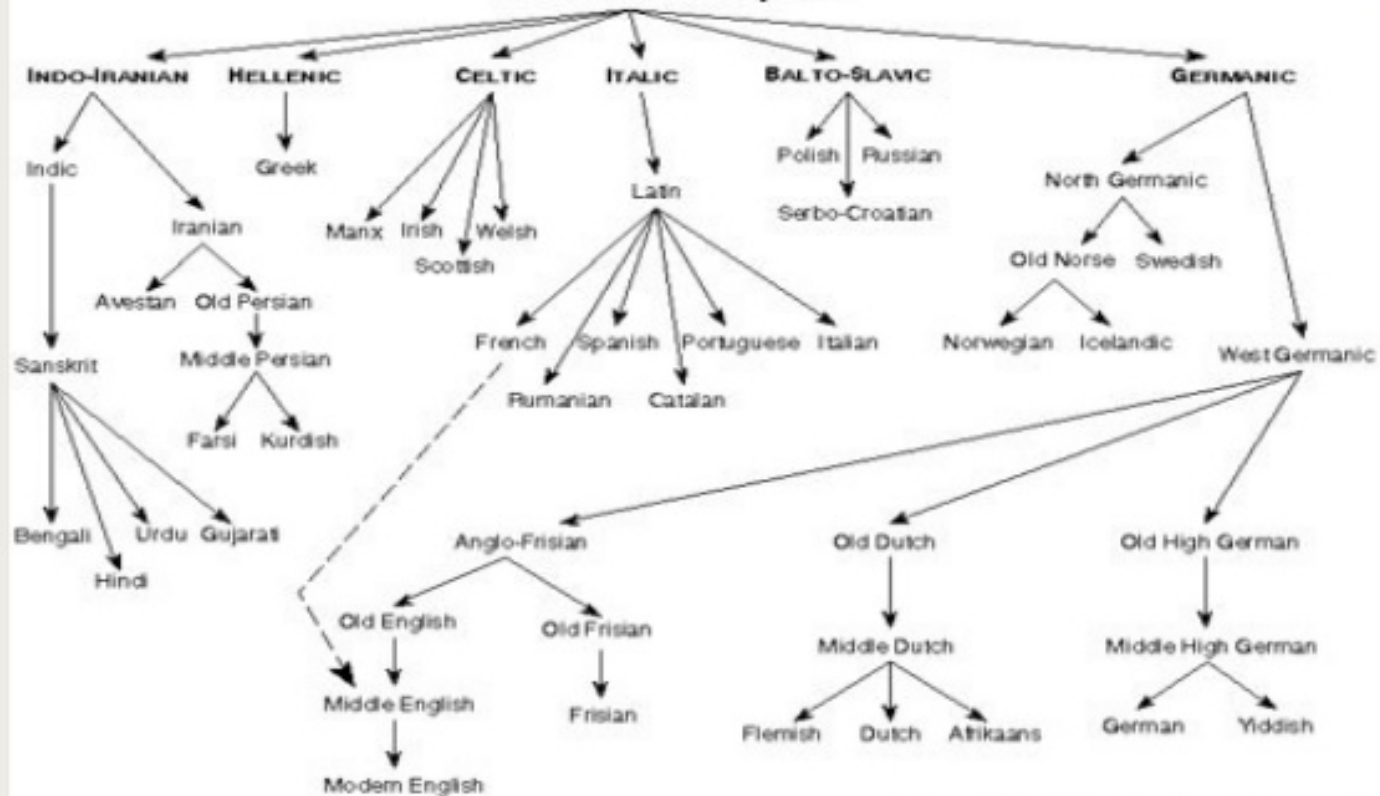





## Diachronic (axis of succession)

- Diachronic(‘through time’)models
- tree model:  
(internal) language development- “genetic”  
relationships
- cross-linking model:  
(external) language contact-“borrowing”,  
“areal”relationships

# Proto-Indo-European



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- **Diachronic** study (meaning a study of how languages change over time—a historical examination of the influences of culture, travel, etc. on the way languages “work”—how they form rules, how they change forms (“morphology), how they grow and how they become “old”, etc
  - Doctor/Patient



## Synchronic (axis of simultaneities)

- **Synchronic** comparisons of languages (meaning how languages compare to each other at any given point in time)
- A synchronic study or analysis, in contrast, limits its concern to a particular moment of time. Thus synchronic linguistics takes a language as a working system at a particular point in time without concern for how it has developed to its present state.

diachrony (historical viewpoint)


—————> time axis



synchronic 'slices' (points in time)

(often the present as in *A synchronic study of the English verb*)





## **Synchronic**

- Language as a system of signs be studied as a complete system at any given point in time.
- E.g. Modern American English and British English have a synchronic relation.

## **Diachronic**

- Change in the meaning of words over time.
- Visibly changes in usage.
- It is based in the dictionary meaning of words.
- 12<sup>th</sup> century English and 21<sup>st</sup> century English where related things exist separated by time.

# Langue vs. Parole





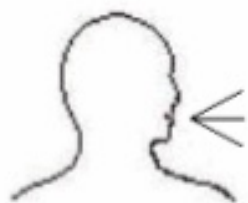
# Langue

- “langue” – the whole set of linguistic signs and habits ‘deposited’ within each individual in form and determining the use of grammar, phonology and vocabulary.



## Parole

- “parole:, seen as speech-utterances, i.e., as the actualization of “langue” at a precise moment by a particular individual.



Parole


(what the individual speaks)



Langue

(what is shared by the community)





## Langue

- Langue is the abstract system of principles language out of which acts of speech (parole) occur.
- e.g. Consider the analogy that the game of chess are the langue and the individual moves of chess itself comprise the parole.

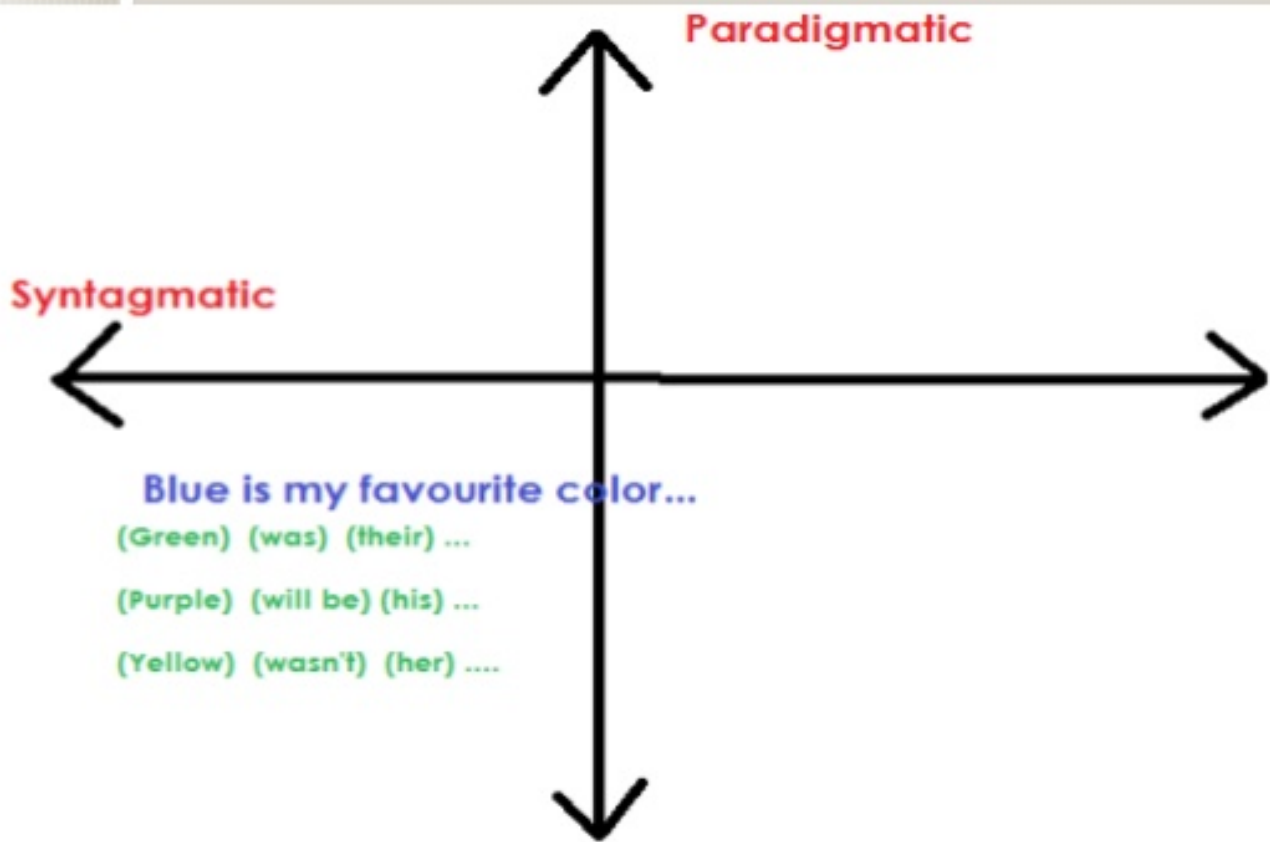
## Parole

- the individual language acts which occur when anyone audibly voices letters, words, sentences, etc.
- Parole is the physical manifestation of speech.

paradigm  
substitute

The colour of this shirt is very bright  
volume music loud  
taste cheese salty  
blade knife sharp

syntagm  
associate



Paradigmatic

Syntagmatic

Blue is my favourite color...

(Green) (was) (their) ...


(Purple) (will be) (his) ...

(Yellow) (wasn't) (her) ....




## Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic

- ‘whereas a syntagm immediately suggests an order of succession and a fixed number of elements, terms in an associative family occur neither in fixed numbers nor in a definite order’ (De Saussure, 1959: 126).



Syntagm and paradigm govern how signs  
relate to one another.






## Syntagmatic

- A syntagmatic relationship is one where signs occur in sequence or parallel and operate together to create meaning.
- The sequential nature of language means that linguistic signs have syntagmatic relationships.

## Paradigmatic

- A paradigmatic relationship is one where an individual sign may be replaced by another.
- Thus, for example, individual letters have a paradigmatic relationship with other letters, as where one letter is used, another may replace it (albeit changing meaning). Letters and numbers do not have a paradigmatic relationship.



## Syntagmatic

- Thus, for example, the letters in a word have syntagmatic relationship with one another, as do the words in a sentence or the objects in a picture.
- Syntagmatic relationships are often governed by strict rules, such as spelling and grammar. They can also have less clear relationships, such as those of fashion and social meaning.

## Paradigmatic

- Items on a menu have paradigmatic relationship when they are in the same group (starters, main course, sweet) as a choice is made. Courses have a sequential (syntagmatic) relationship, and thus an item from the starter menu does not have a paradigmatic relationship with the sweet menu.
- Paradigmatic relationships are typically associative, in that both items are in a single membership set.




## **Bloomfield and Post-Bloomfieldians**



## American Structuralism

- the name of Leonard Bloomfield must be mentioned although it is commonly held that American structuralism is more post-Bloomfieldian than Bloomfield per-se



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- The post Bloomfieldians (cf. Bloch, Harris, Hockett, and others) developed a system of mechanical procedures for the analysis of linguistic structures, and methodological statements (frameworks) with distribution as the criterion of relevance: that was an attempt to get away from analytical operations that would have to refer to ‘meaning’ as was the case for Bloomfield, for whom ‘the study of speech-sounds without regard to meaning is an abstraction’ (1933: 139), and whose trouble was that ‘the statement of meaning is ... the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state’ (1933: 140).