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|  | **Faculty of Arts and Languages** |  |
| **Module: Linguistics** | **Dept. of Arts and Foreign Languages** | **Level: First Year LMD** |
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| **Lecture № 04: Major Concepts of Modern Linguistics** |

**1. Ferdinand de Saussure**

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 *Course in General Linguistics*, among a number of important statements and illuminating comparisons, Saussure made a number of fundamental distinctions which are still basic to linguistic thinking: signified/signifier, langue/parole, Synchrony/Diachrony, and syntagmatic/paradigmatic.

**2. Linguistic Sign: Signified/Signifier**

Human beings communicate via signs. 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 “tree” /triː/ has a particular form (signifier: a sequence of three meaningless phonemes) and also a particular meaning (signified: a tall woody plant having a main trunk and branches). The two together make up a single linguistic sign in English.

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| **S I G N** |
| **SIGNIFIER** | **SIGNIFIED** |
| /triː/Accoustic Image | http://images.all-free-download.com/images/graphiclarge/tree_outline_clip_art_11785.jpgConcept |
|  |

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.

**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. All the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, etc. rules that constitute the system of a language are an example of ***langue***. Yet, a writer’s choice and recurrent use of certain structures (Henry James’s recurrent use of long complex sentences or Ernest Hemingway’s preference of compound sentences) is an instance of ***parole***. Saussure believes that linguistics is fundamentally the study of langue.The main points of distinction between Langue and Parole can be summed up in the table below:

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| **Langue** | **Parole** |
| It is stable | It is dynamic |
| It is a social fact and general for the community. | It is individual and idiosyncratic. |
| A scientific study can only be based on ***langue*** | It is not amenable to scientific study. |
| It is an abstraction. | It is concrete manifestation. |
| It is a set of conventions and habits handed down to next generation readymade. | It is diverse and variegated. |
| It is language as a speaker is expected to use. | It is language in actual use. |

**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 Relationships**

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'.

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|  |  **SYNTAGMATIC**  |
|   **PARADIGMATIC** | The  | Cat | sat | on | my | mat |
| This | boy | sits | across | your | bad |
| That | student | walked | over | her | car |
| A | frog | ran | by | his | lap |