

University of Biskra

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THEME ONE: Linguistics in the 20th Century

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1. The Birth of Modern Linguistics

Although it is widely known that modern linguistics started with the publication of the seminal work of Ferdinand De Saussure, “Course in General Linguistics”, the available literature indicates that the real date of the emergence of modern linguistics goes back to the late 19th century. That is, the nineteenth-century linguists developed perspectives and assumptions that laid the groundwork for 20th-century linguistics. It is in the 19th century that the shift of focus from purely historical concerns of changes in languages over time to the idea that a language is a **system of systems** stimulated at a particular point in time could be reviewed.

Modern linguistics is often viewed to have to rise with those grammarian philologists who, for some time, thought that to study a language in a scientific way, they had to create the procedures of objectivity. This means they sought to abandon both prescriptive grammar and the old tradition of philological investigation (Joseph, 1992).

Next, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913) put the real foundations of modern linguistics. For this, he is acknowledged as the Founding Father of modern linguistics. His work has proved a rich field for subsequent investigations and has inspired numerous linguists.

2. Traditional Grammar Versus Modern Linguistics

To understand the principles of modern linguistics better, it is appropriate to see the similarities and differences between traditional grammar and modern linguistics:

- Modern linguistics regards the spoken, and not the written, language as primary. In the past, traditional grammarians had overstressed the importance of the written form of language. However, modern linguistics considers the spoken language more important since speech is the natural and first medium of communication.

- Modern linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive. Modern linguistics is concerned with what people actually say, not what people should say. This markedly contrasts with traditional grammar since traditional grammarians were more interested in what was wrong, and what was not wrong in a language.
- Modern linguistics is synchronic. As opposed to traditional grammar, modern linguistics claimed the crucial need to describe language at a particular point in time, not the search for laws in language change over time, that is the diachronic description of language as De Saussure described it.
- Modern linguistics sees language as a system of systems. For traditional grammar, a sentence is a collection of words that express an idea. Modern linguistics refutes this assumption and considers such an interpretation to be very naïve and superficial. Contrarily, modern linguistics persists that language is a complex system. It is a system of systems and those systems are governed by a set of rules.
- Modern linguistics, mainly De Saussure, considers that language is a social phenomenon. By this assumption, modern linguistics postulates that the sum of rules that a given language are present and by the members of the same community. Traditional grammar, on the other side, focused only on what is produced by a person in a language.

3. Chronological Development of Linguistic Theories

It is more useful to shed light on the major linguistic theories that prevailed since the birth of modern linguistics at the beginning of the 20th century. This elucidation could be necessary to understand how the issues of the study and descriptions have evolved over time and from one linguistic school to another. More importantly, an account of the major principles and limitations of these linguistic theories could facilitate the understanding of how a field as sociolinguistics arrived later on to the umbrella of linguistics.

3.1 Structural Linguistics

The available literature argues that structural linguistics came as a reaction to the comparative study of language in its historical development, especially its actual use. This new linguistic theory was initiated by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure. At 15, De Saussure wrote an “An Essay on Languages” trying to derive some linguistic universals from the phonetic structures of the languages he knew. His structuralist tendency was more apparent in the “Dissertation on the Primitive Vowel-System in Indo-European Ages” concerning a system of vowels published at 21. De Saussure never published anything substantial thereafter. In 1916, three years after his death, two of his followers published, in his name, the “Course in General Linguistics” based on his notes taken during his lectures at the University of Geneva, which remains to be the finest introduction there is to the principles on which structuralism rests.

However, though it is De Saussure who put the foundations of structural linguistics, the latter was not the first to label this new trend as such. It is also noted that structuralism, as a general concept, has two senses: a broad sense that refers to a mode of thinking, or rather a philosophical view, and another narrower sense that relates the definition of this term to a method of inquiry, deriving chiefly from linguistics.

. Key Concepts

- **Structure:** A particular pattern that is available in a language for constructing a linguistic unit, or an instance of it. Structures can be recognised at many levels: Phonemes combine to build words; words combine to build phrases, phrases combine to build clauses and sentences, and so on. At all of these levels, the smaller units must be combined into larger ones in particular ways determined by the rules of the languages.

- **Structuralism:** An approach to the study of language. It sees language as a structured system. Each element in this system is defined by means of the relationship it contracts with the other elements. In this view, it is the system that is the primary object of study, and not the individual elements present within it.

. *Basic Principles*

The basic principles of De Saussure's structural linguistics are defined in his common dichotomies.

- De Saussure emphasised the synchronic study of language structure and how linguistic elements are organised into the system of each language.
- De Saussure viewed this system of language as a system of signs. The linguistic sign, in this context, is considered to be a union of the signifier (the form and sound) and the signified (the meaning and function).
- The particularity of this sign is that the signifier and signified are arbitrarily related. Their connection is purely conventional.
- De Saussure also viewed that the linguistic entities are considered members of a system and are defined by their relations to one another. Each linguistic entity is in horizontal (syntagmatic) and vertical (paradigmatic) relationships.
- De Saussure, influenced by the social thinking of Emil Durkheim (1858-1917), held that there is a "collective consciousness", which is both the possession of society and language. In this sense, De Saussure used the famous dichotomy "Langue" Vs. "Parole". "Langue" is the set of rules shared by the members of a given community. Whereas, "Parole" is the individual, actual use of "Langue".

. *Criticisms (of structural linguistics)*

In the available literature, post-structuralist linguistics presented a set of limitations of structural linguistic theory. This mainly concerned the approach adopted by structural

linguistics to describe language. Overall, these criticisms are about:

- **Corpus Analysis:** A method used by structural linguists to describe language. It consisted of the provision of forms and constructions that appear in a limited corpus. For the critics, these forms do not provide the rules related to constructing an infinite range of grammatical rules. A corpus can never illustrate the whole language, and will only reflect a partial and selective picture of language.
- **Surface Analysis:** Structural linguistics described only the surface of sentences. In doing so, structural linguistics ignored the underlying (deep) structure of a sentence, which is also referred to as the meaning of the sentence.
- **Language Diversity:** Structural linguistics emphasised the structural diversity of languages. In describing these languages, structuralists exaggerated the differences between languages and gave undue focus to the principle that every language is a law unto itself.

3.2 Transformational Generative Grammar

The criticisms of structuralism led to the emergence of a new linguistic theory in the second half of the 20th century. This new linguistic school started with the publication of a revolutionary book “Syntactic Structures” (1957) by the American linguist Avram Noam Chomsky (1928-). This theory is labelled Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). Undeniably, the foundations of TGG caused modern linguistics to make a giant leap in its development. It adopted a mentalist approach to the study of language that is based on the principle of innateness. For Chomsky, the system of rules that govern our language is innate to the human mind. All humans are born with and possess these rules. The latter enables us (we humans) to produce an infinite number of grammatical (correct) sentences. This mental interpretation, as opposed to structural linguistics that totally ignored any role of the human mind on language, is the bedrock of Chomsky’s theory.

. Key Concepts

- **Linguistic Competence:** It refers to a person's internalised knowledge (grammar) of his language. It is the native speaker's ability to produce and understand sentences, including sentences they have never heard before. It also includes a person's knowledge of what are and what are not sentences of a particular language. In short, it is the code that underlies all the utterances in a given language.
- **Performance:** It is the realisation of competence (the code as stated in the previous definition) in actual situations where language is used. It is the person's real use of language in producing and understanding sentences. Performance, therefore, represents a small sample of the utterance of the language. That is, competence underlies performance.
- **Grammar (according to Chomsky's theory):** It is a device that helps generate all and only the grammatical sentences of language. It implies that:
 - A sentence is a basic unit to be described. For Chomsky, the largest unit is a sentence.
 - A "grammar" generates sentences.
 - A "grammar" generates all only the grammatical sentences.
- **Surface Level:** It is the syntactic structure that a person speaks or hears. It is the observable aspect of a sentence.
- **Deep Level:** It is abstract. It is in the native speaker's mind. It refers to generalisations about the structure of a sentence, which are different from its surface. A deep structure contains all the syntactic information needed for the interpretation of a given sentence.

. Key Concepts

The basic principles of Chomsky's theory, TGG, are grounded in these assumptions:

- Chomsky's objection to corpus analysis is based on his elicitation of the two concepts: competence and performance. For him, there may not always be an exact correspondence between the speaker's competence and their performance since the latter could usually be influenced by external non-linguistic factors, such as memory lapses, attention lapses, stress, noisy surroundings, and so on. Consequently, a speaker may produce false starts, changes of plan, speech restrictions, etc. In this view, linguistics is concerned with the ideal, not the real. This is to say that TGG describes the competence of an ideal speaker-learner, in a completely homogeneous speech community, and who perfectly knows his language.
- Chomsky, rejecting the formal analysis of sentences, distinguished between two levels of syntactic structures in a sentence: the surface and deep structures. For him, grammar is not confined to formal description, but it should incorporate the internal processes that take place in the speaker's mind. Thus, this grammar is a grammar of the external, as well as a grammar of the internal aspects of sentences.
- According to Chomsky, language is creative and behaviourism is totally incapable of explaining that creativity. For him, humans possess an innate, mental ability to enable them to produce an infinite number of sentences. By this, Chomsky refers to the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). He adds that language acquisition takes place not as a result of imitation (stimulus/response), but because of the LAD.
- For Chomsky, the linguistic theory should be concerned with linguistic universals. These are the common characteristics shared between human languages. According to him, the deep structure is common for all languages. Whereas, these languages differ only at the surface level.

. *Criticisms (of TGG)*

Regardless of the merits of this linguistic theory in giving contributory insights in describing language, TGG has also presented flaws and weaknesses. These criticisms are mainly:

- Chomsky's refusal to acknowledge the influence of the child's language acquisition is a flaw in itself. The question, therefore, is: If all basic rules of grammar of the child's language are innate and the environment is not useful, what accounts for the frequent errors in the child's communication. The simple answer is that the environment cannot be eschewed.
- For some critics of TGG, Chomsky over-emphasised the role of competence over the recognition of the performance aspect of language use. Regardless, performance has proved that it is the way and manner people need to make use of language skills. This performance skill allows for an endless number of possibilities for the use of language to suit different situations.

4. The Birth of Sociolinguistics

The fact that structural linguistics accounted for the study of language structure and form, ignoring meaning, and Chomsky's theory over-emphasised the description of idealised competence in an idealised speech community, these linguistic doctrines led linguists to consider that asocial linguistics is essentially incomplete (Hudson, 1980; Spolsky, 1988). Consequently, a new linguistic perspective, endowed by post-Chomskyan linguists, came up to the scene of linguistics. The latter consisted of moving from conceiving language as a closed system to studying it with consideration to the context where it operates.

This new linguistic orientation was fastened by the development of Hyme's (1971) new concept, "Communicative Competence". Communicative competence sees that describing language and the rules of its use resulting from the interplay of external factors should be taken

into account. For Hymes, Chomsky's theory presents shortcomings when it comes to questions about real-world language problems (Djenane, 2018). On this point, Schmenk (2017) demonstrated that Chomsky's neglect of the socio-cultural factors in his theory rendered the latter useless. For Schmenk, Hymes sought to shift the focus study of language from a purely linguistic theory that is concerned with ideal speaker-learners in a completely homogeneous community, towards understanding more about the members of speech communities with an emphasis on their language use.

Interest in the social dimension of language paved the way to the emergence of the new field, Sociolinguistics. This branch of linguistics aimed to describe language as an open system by accounting for the rules of use. Djenane (2018) citing Fishman (1972) indicates that the purpose of sociolinguistics is the formula "Who speaks what language to whom and where" (p.5). In short, this suggests that the fundamental principles of sociolinguistics are about language use, variation, and change.