

Lesson 3: Prague School (Prague Linguistic Circle)

Second year (L2) - Linguistics and Phonetics - Term 3

Moustafa Amrate

moustafa.amrate@univ-biskra.dz

Department of English

University of Biskra

What is structuralism?

What is structuralism?

- It is an approach to linguistics which treats **language as an interwoven structure (interrelated signs)**
- every item acquires identity and validity **only in relation to the other items** in the system.

What is structuralism?

Example

1. “He aims to *perfect* her painting skills”



-
2. “His performance was perfect”



What is structuralism?

Example

1. “He aims to ^{Verb} perFECT her painting skills”



2. “His performance was PERfect”
^{Adjective}



????????????????

- Studied at
- Major works:
- Considered a brilliant



????????????????

18?? – 19??

Born: ???????

Ferdinand de Saussure

- Studied at **Leipzig University** under notable linguists
- Major works: '**Memoire sur le Systeme Primitive des Voyelles**' and '**Cours de linguistique Générale**'
- Considered a brilliant historical linguist
- Influenced on linguists like **Leonard Bloomfield** and **Edward Sapir**



Ferdinand de Saussure
1857 – 1913
Born: Geneva, Switzerland

Saussurean Dichotomies?

Saussurean Dichotomies

At set of **opposing pairs** of concepts that explain how language functions and how it can be studied.



Saussurean Dichotomies

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE OVER TIME

Synchronic study

Diachronic study

THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

Signifier

Signified

LEVELS OF LANGUAGE

Langue

Parole

GRAMMAR APPROACHES

Descriptive grammar

Prescriptive grammar

WORD RELATIONSHIPS

Syntagmatic relations

Paradigmatic relations

European Schools in Linguistics since Ferdinand de Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of Structuralism as a linguistic theory, **inspired** many scholars all over the world and the creation of many schools such as:

1. Prague school
2. Copenhagen school and the
3. London school

Introduction to the Prague School

- Origins: Founded in 1926
- Founders:
 1. Vilém Mathesius (*leader*)
 2. Roman Jakobson (*Russian/
naturalised American*)
 3. Nikolai Trubetzkoy (Russian)
 4. Sergei Karcevsky (Russian)



Founder
Vilém Mathesius
1882 – 1945
Czech Republic

The Prague School of Linguistics

Also known as the “*Prague Linguistic Circle*”, was an influential group of linguists founded in **1926** in **Prague, Czech Republic**.

It contributed significantly to modern linguistics, especially through its focus on functionalism and structuralism.



Key Contributions of the Prague School

The Prague School contributed to Modern Linguistics with the following ideas:

1. Distinctive Feature Analysis
2. Functional Approach to Language
3. Markedness Theory
4. Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis
5. Theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)
6. Communicative Dynamism

1. Distinctive Feature Analysis

- In phonology, Prague School members like Trubetzkoy introduced the concept of **distinctive features**.
- Each sound is seen as a combination of contrasting features, with these contrasts serving as the basis for distinguishing phonemes.

1. Distinctive Feature Analysis

Example

- “fan” /**f**æn/
- “van” /**v**æn/

- The two sounds are quite similar in how they’re produced but differ **voicing**

2. Functional Approach to Language

- The Prague School emphasized function over form
- Every linguistic element serves a particular **purpose** within the **language system**

2. Functional Approach to Language

Example

- "Pat" /**p**æt/
- "Bat" /**b**æt/

- The **function** of these sounds (distinguishing between words like "pat" and "bat") is more crucial to communication than just how they're pronounced (i.e., **form**)

3. Markedness Theory

Markedness describes how one linguistic element can be marked (having a distinctive feature) while another is unmarked (neutral or default).

3. Markedness Theory

Example

- **/f/** is **unmarked** because it lacks voicing, making it the simpler or more neutral sound
- **/v/** is **marked** because it has the **voicing** feature, meaning the vocal cords vibrate when it's produced

3. Markedness Theory

Example

Past tense marked by –ed:

1. Unmarked/ Neutral/ Default: “**Jump**”
2. Marked/ Special: “**Jumped**”

4. Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis

The Prague School believed in the importance of both **synchronic** (studying language at a given point in time) and **diachronic** (studying language evolution over time) approaches.

They argue that they are **interconnected** and that language should be viewed as a **dynamic, evolving** system.

Synchronic study

Example:

Studying the vocabulary used by teenagers in social media posts in 2024



Diachronic study

Example

The evolution of the word “Knight”:

- 1. Old English:** Cniht /kniçt/ - a servant
- 2. Middle English:** Knight /knaɪt/ - a warrior
- 3. Modern English:** Knight /naɪt/- a chivalrous man



5. Theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)

This theory involves analyzing sentences based on their **theme** (the known or given information) and **rheme** (the new information).

5. Theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)

Example:

“The cat is sleeping on the mat.”

Theme: "The cat" is the theme, as it refers to the known or established information.

Rheme: "is sleeping on the mat" is the rheme, as it provides new information about the theme.

6. Communicative Dynamism

- A concept that describe how the **structure** of a sentence is **shaped** by its **communicative purpose**.

6. Communicative Dynamism

Example

1. “John finally solved the problem.”
2. “The problem was finally solved by John.”

6. Communicative Dynamism

Example

In **Sentence 1**, "John" is the focus (the topic of interest), so he appears at the beginning.

In **Sentence 2**, "the problem" is emphasized by being placed first.

Influence and Legacy

The Prague School's contributions extended beyond linguistics, influencing **semiotics**, **literary theory**, and **cultural studies**.

Its ideas laid the foundation for **structuralism** and **functionalism** in linguistics and inspired later scholars, including those from the **Copenhagen School** and the **British functionalist tradition** led by J.R. Firth and Michael Halliday.

Questions?