# **Lesson 3:** Prague School (Prague Linguistic Circle)

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

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 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.

#### **Example**

1. "He aims to *perfect* her painting skills"



2. "His performance was perfect"



#### **Example**

Verb

1. "He aims to *perFECT* her painting skills"



2. "His performance was PERfect"
Adjective



#### 

Studied at

Major works:

Considered a brilliant



#### 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



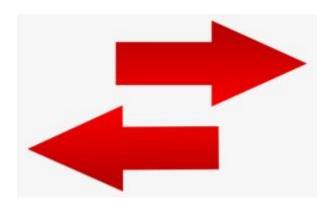
Ferdinand de Saussure 1857 – 1913

Born: Geneva, Switzerland

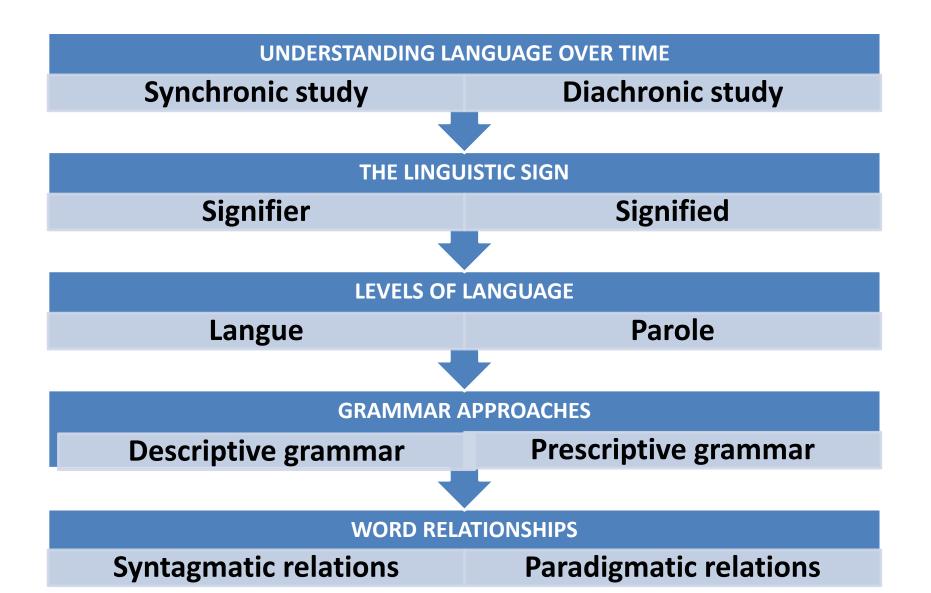
### Saussurean Dichotomies?

#### **Saussurean Dichotomies**

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



#### Saussurean Dichotomies



## 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:

- Prague school
- 2. Copenhagen school and the
- London school

## Introduction to the Prague School

- Origins: Founded in 1926
- Founders:
- 1. Vilém Mathesius (leader)
- 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
- 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" /fæn/
- "van" /væn/

 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" /pæt/
- "Bat" /bæt/
- 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?