University of Batna 2
Department of English Language and Literature
Module: **Linguistics**
Second-Year BA/ Groups 6& 7
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Chapter Two: European Structuralism

(The Structural Approach to the Study of Language)

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist who is considered *the father of modern linguistics*. He studied comparative linguistics in Leipzig and Paris and later taught at the University of Geneva. His students compiled his lectures into *Course in General Linguistics*, published in 1916. Saussure introduced key ideas such as the linguistic sign, langue and parole, and the importance of studying language at a single point in time. His work laid the foundation for structuralism (modern linguistics).
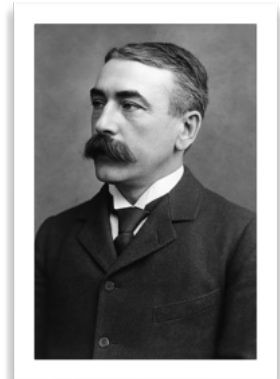
Introduction

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the field of linguistics underwent a profound transformation, shifting its focus from a primarily historical perspective to a modern, scientific one. This was a crucial evolution, moving away from treating language as a collection of historical artefacts to be catalogued and towards understanding it as a living, functioning system. The catalyst for this change was the **Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure**. His ideas, posthumously (after his death) compiled and published by his students in the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Course in General Linguistics, 1916), provided the foundational text that guided the development of modern linguistics. Saussure's work established a new approach, later known as **structuralism**, which proposed a new way of seeing language altogether.

1. Defining Structuralism: Language as an Interconnected Structure

- The central thesis of structuralism is that language must be understood as **a self-contained system of interrelated elements**. This was a revolutionary departure from the prevailing 'atomistic' method, which tended to study linguistic items in isolation.
- Structuralism posits that words, sounds, and grammatical structures **do not possess inherent or independent meaning**; rather, **they derive their value and significance from their relationship to all the other elements within the linguistic system.**
- Saussure rejected the study of individual words, arguing that the **whole structure** is what gives meaning to its parts, and that these parts only make sense through **their relationships of contrast and connection with each other.** To move from this abstract principle to concrete analysis, Saussure developed a powerful toolkit of conceptual dichotomies designed to systematically map the internal structure of language.

Structuralism is a linguistic **approach** where language is understood as **a system of interrelated elements.** In this view, words, sounds, and grammatical structures do not possess meaning in isolation. Instead, they derive their **value from their position and function relative to other elements within the system.**

2. Saussure's Framework for Analysis: The Four Key Dichotomies

To dissect and understand the intricate workings of the language system, Saussure introduced four foundational dichotomies, or **pairs of opposing concepts**. These conceptual pairs serve as the primary analytical toolkit for structuralist linguistics, allowing us to examine language from different perspectives and reveal its *underlying organisation*.

a. <u>Synchronic vs. Diachronic Analysis</u>

Saussure drew a critical distinction between two different temporal perspectives for the study of language: the synchronic and the diachronic.
→ **Synchronic:** This is the study of a language at a **specific moment in time**, be it past or present. It is a static 'snapshot' that analyses the system as it functions for its speakers at that point, without considering historical change. *For example, analysing how English speakers use the present simple tense today would be a synchronic study.*
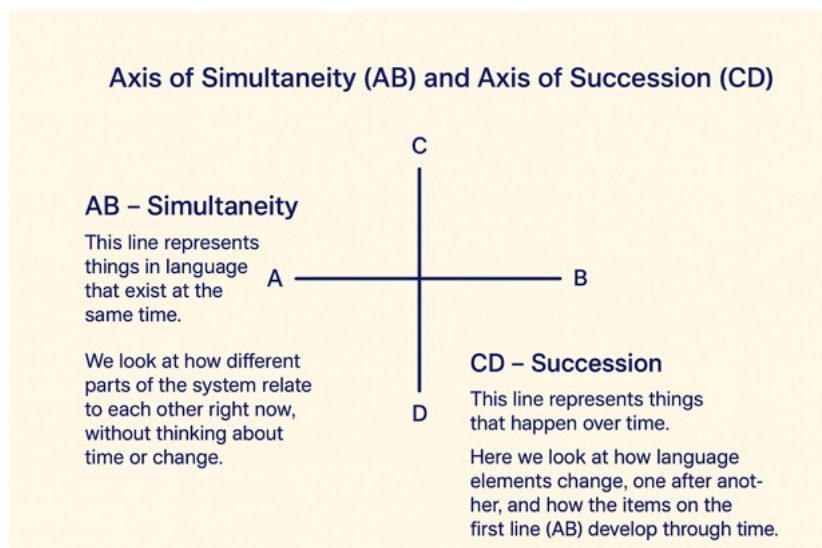→ **Diachronic:** This is the examination of a language's **evolution over a period of time**. It is a **historical** and evolutionary perspective that traces how linguistic elements have changed. *For instance, studying the vowel shifts from Old English to Modern English is a classic example of diachronic analysis.*

Saussure's emphasis on the synchronic perspective was a strategic move essential for analysing language as a **living, functioning system** for its contemporary community of speakers.

Saussure illustrated the relationship between these two dimensions using two crossing lines to show two ways of studying language. **AB: Simultaneity (the horizontal line) and CD: Succession (the vertical line).**

In short:

- AB = relationships that exist at **one** moment (Synchronic)
- CD = how those elements change **over** time (Diachronic)

Axis of Simultaneity (AB) and Axis of Succession (CD)

AB – Simultaneity
This line represents things in language that exist at the same time.

We look at how different parts of the system relate to each other right now, without thinking about time or change.

CD – Succession
This line represents things that happen over time.

Here we look at how language elements change, one after another, and how the items on the first line (AB) develop through time.

The Chess Analogy:

SAUSSURE'S ANALOGY OF THE CHESS GAME

He suggests that if you enter a room while a chess match is happening, you can understand the current state of the game just by looking at the positions of the pieces on the board—if you know the rules of chess. This shows the synchronic perspective: you can study the system at one moment in time without looking at the moves that led up to it.

However, the current positions of the pieces are also the result of previous moves. This represents the diachronic perspective, which focuses on how things change over time. So, to fully understand the arrangement on the board, you need to consider both the current state (synchronic) and the history that created it (diachronic).
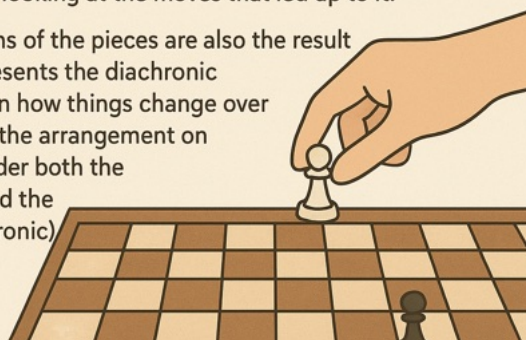
b. <u>Langue vs. Parole</u>

This distinction separates the abstract, social system of language from its concrete, individual use.
→ **Langue**
Langue (French for "language" or "tongue") denotes the shared, abstract system of rules, conventions, and knowledge that exists within the collective mind of a speech community. It includes grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation patterns that speakers internalise implicitly. Langue is a social product, a structured system that members of a community inherit and share.
→ **Parole**
Parole (French for "speech") refers to the concrete, individual acts of language use. It encompasses the actual speech or writing produced by a person at a particular moment and reflects the ways in which individuals express the underlying system of langue. For instance, a non-standard utterance such as "I goed" exemplifies parole, demonstrating an individual's application of language rules, even when they deviate from the conventions of the langue.
Saussure used the analogy of a chess game: Langue is like the fixed rules of chess, which all players know and share, while parole represents the unique moves made by players in a specific game.

> *Langue is a* ***storehouse*** *filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For Language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity.*
> **(De Saussure, 1974, pp. 13–14)**

Langue can also be understood as a communal "storehouse" of language, filled by the members of a community through their active use of speech and writing. It has potential existence in each brain but exists fully only within the collectivity. This storehouse contains the resources(rules and words) that every speaker draws from, yet no one person possesses it entirely. Parole is the personal expression of language, the sentences we speak or write in real situations.

<u>In a nutshell:</u>
- **Langue** → the shared, abstract system of rules, grammar, and vocabulary.
- **Parole** → the individual, concrete use of language in speech or writing.
- Langue exists collectively; parole is its individual, situational expression.
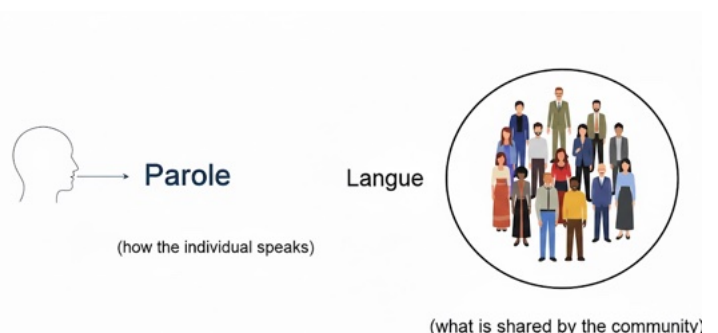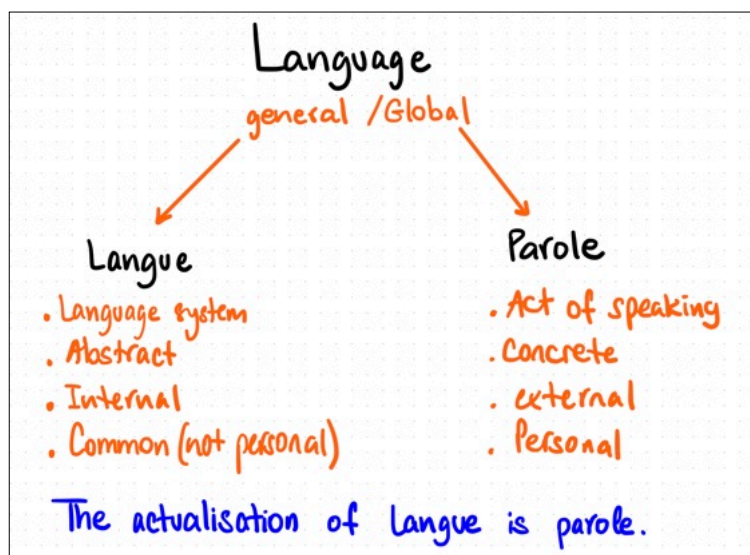
c. <u>Signifier vs. Signified</u>

De Saussure introduced two terms into linguistics: Signifiant (signifier) and signifié (signified) and ''le signe linguistique''; assuming that meaning is a **"three fold"** relationship.
To explain it, he used his famous triangle:
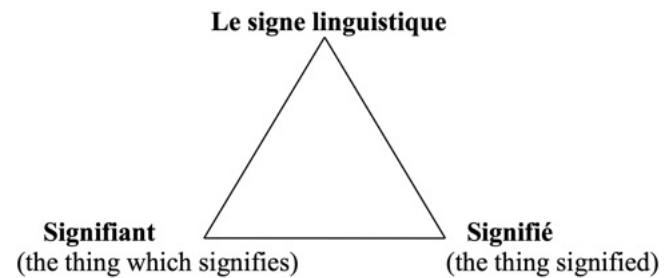
a. The Signifier
The signifier is the **form** or **shape** of the word, the part we *hear* or *see*. For "apple," this includes:

* the **sound-image**: the mental echo of the sound */ˈæp.əl/*, and
* the **written form**: the letters **a-p-p-l-e**.

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              Le signe linguistique
                     /\
                    /  \
                   /    \
                  /      \
                 /        \
                /          \
               /_____\
    Signifiant              Signifié
(the thing which signifies)  (the thing signified)
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b. The Signified
The signified is the **concept/ content/ idea** we associate with the signifier → the meaning that is conveyed (mental image). For "apple," this is the mental idea of the fruit: 🍎 something round, sweet, edible, often red or green.

→ A crucial principle of this model is the **Arbitrariness of the Sign**. Saussure argued that the link between the signifier and the signified is **arbitrary;** not natural or inherent (inexplicable, not based on a reason, not logical) but is based purely on social/ agreed conventions. There is no logical reason why the sound-image /ˈæp.əl/ should be linked to the concept of the fruit. This is powerfully illustrated by comparing languages, where the same concept is represented by entirely different signifiers:
* English: *apple*
* French: *pomme*
* Spanish: *manzana*
* Arabic: تفاحة
→ The only partial exceptions to this rule are onomatopoeic words like *buzz* or *meow,* where the sound of the word attempts to imitate a sound in the real world, making the link less arbitrary.

d. <u>Syntagmatic vs. Paradigmatic Relations</u>

These final two concepts describe the two fundamental ways in which all linguistic elements are connected to form meaning. According to Saussure, every linguistic sign must be understood not in isolation but in relation to the entire system of signs to which it belongs. Meaning arises from these structural relationships rather than from any inherent property of the sign itself.

To him, a sentence is a sequence of signs, each sign contributes to the meaning of the whole, and each sign contrasts with all the other signs in the language.

→ **Syntagmatic Relations** are **'horizontal'** relationships of combination. Linguistic elements are chained together in a **linear** sequence to form larger units, such as phrases or sentences (relationship between signs <u>present</u> in a sentence). In the sentence *The hungry girl ate a sandwich*, the words The and girl combine to form a noun phrase. This is an **'AND' relationship**, as elements are present together in a sequence: The AND hungry AND girl, etc.

→ **Paradigmatic Relations** are '**vertical**' relationships of substitution. These are the choices available to a speaker for a particular 'slot' in a sentence (relationship between a sign in the sentence and other signs not present in the sentence, but part of the rest of language as a whole). For example, in the sentence The dog sleeps here, the noun phrase The dog could be replaced by the cat, my pet, or the child. This represents an **'OR' relationship**: a speaker can choose the dog OR the cat to fill that specific grammatical slot.

It is the constant interplay between the syntagmatic axis of combination and the paradigmatic axis of selection that generates the structural matrix of an entire language.

→ **Language, then, is a system of systems.**
→ Saussure recognised that signs are substitutable but not identical or similar. Therefore, one sign restricts our choice or an ulterior (next possible) item or sign, what he called: **rented choices.**
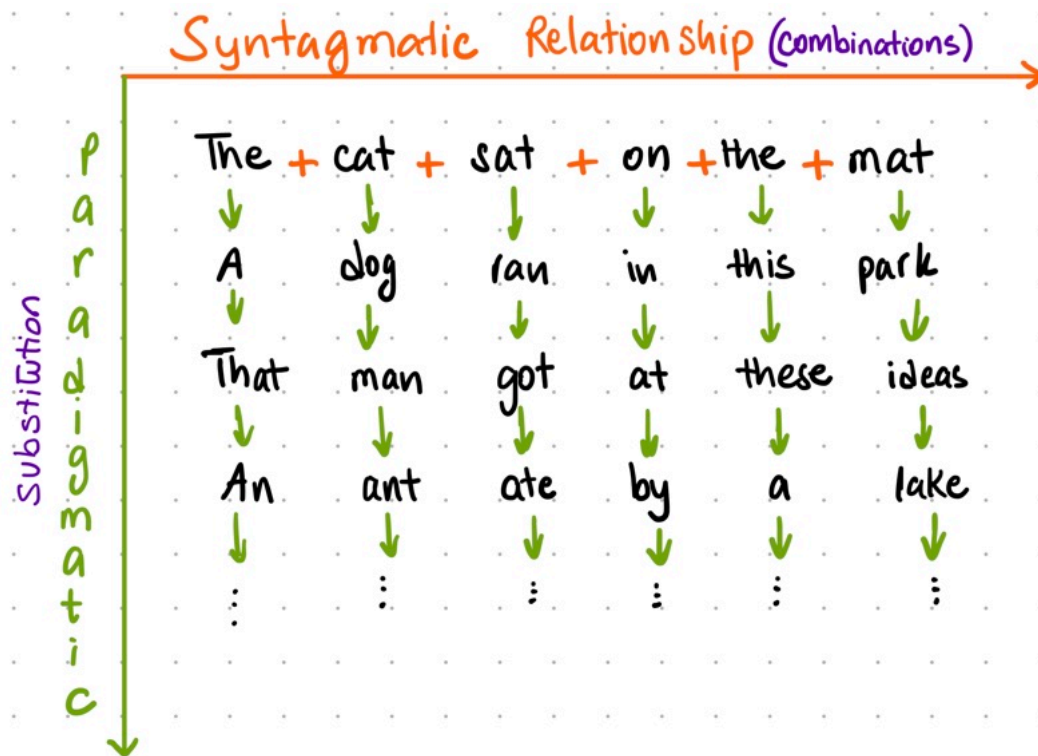
3. Summary of Saussure's Dichotomies

The following table provides a concise summary of the key concepts discussed:

Dichotomy	Core Concept	Simple Explanation	Example
Synchronic	Language at one moment	A "snapshot" of a language's rules at one point in time.	The rules for forming questions in modern English.
Diachronic	Language across history	The study of how a language has changed over time.	The Great Vowel Shift in English.
Langue	The abstract system	The shared grammar and vocabulary all speakers of a language know.	The rule that adjectives precede nouns in English (e.g., *red car*, not *car red*).
Parole	Actual, individual use	Any specific utterance an individual speaker makes.	An individual saying, "I goed."
Signifier	The word-form	The sound or written shape of a word.	The sound or letters "Tree".
Signified	The concept	The mental image or idea the word refers to.	The mental image of a 🌳.
Syntagmatic	Combination (Horizontal)	How words are chained together in a sentence.	The + girl + ate
Paradigmatic	Substitution (Vertical)	The choice of one word over other possible alternatives in a sentence.	The girl → The boy/ child/cat

Conclusion

Ferdinand de Saussure's work laid the foundation for modern linguistics by showing that language is not a random collection of words, but an organised, interconnected system. Every linguistic element, whether a word, sound, or grammatical structure, derives its meaning from its relationships with other elements in the system. Saussure's key distinctions, including **synchronic and diachronic analysis, langue and parole, signifier and signified,** and **syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations**, provide a framework for understanding how language functions both as a shared social system and as a medium for individual expression.

Language, he argued, is a system of systems. Elements combine in sequences through syntagmatic relations and are chosen from sets of alternatives through paradigmatic relations. Signs are substitutable but never identical, and their value emerges from contrast and relational structure rather than from inherent meaning. In Saussure's words, language is *"un système où tout se tient"*, a coherent system in which every part is connected.

His insights fundamentally transformed the study of language, establishing **structuralism** as a scientific approach and providing analytical tools that continue to influence linguistics, literary theory, anthropology, and semiotics. Saussure's enduring legacy is the recognition that to understand language, we must first understand it as a structured, relational, and dynamic system.

Reflection Activity

Write a short paragraph reflecting on one of these questions:
- How do syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships appear in a sentence you use often?
- Can you give an example of langue versus parole from your own language use?
- Pick a word and explain its signifier and signified. Does the connection feel natural or arbitrary?