**Lecture one**

**The Rise of Structuralism**

**Introduction**

Linguistics is referred to as the ‘scientific study of language’, which implies that there is, or was, a non-scientific study of language. The contrast between scientific and non-scientific study of language is roughly that between traditional and modern linguistics.

**Traditional grammar** grew out of the work of ancient philosophers – the Greek, Roman, and Arabo-Islamic scholarship- throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 1999). It refers to the entire grammatical work done in Europe and America before the twentieth century, and which signaled the beginning of **modern linguistics.** Those studies were interested in classical languages -mainly Greek and Latin- rather than other languages which they consider vernacular. Besides, the objective of the studies was not to understand how languages work, but to establish sets of rules that ought to be respected in order o use the language correctly and to protect it from change. This type of grammar is known as “prescriptive grammar or prescriptivism” (Trask, 2007).

With Renaissance, the discovery Sanskrit – the classical language of India- and its connection to Latin, Greek and other Indo-European languages set the origins for “**comparative philology”** (labelled also historical linguistics)**.** Franz Bopp is often credited for establishing historical linguistics as an independent area of scientific study with the goal of finding out the origin, the relationships between languages, and classifying them into families on the basis of comparative studies (Strazny, 2005). During the thirty years that followed Bopp’s discovery, scholars engaged in a game of comparing numerous languages but they lacked technical means to justify their findings and to be really scientific.

However, calls for the replacement of the historical orientation in linguistics came from a number of quarters (De Saussure in Switzerland, Baudouin de Courtenay in Russia, and Boas in America) at roughly the same time. Although they showed characteristic differences, they put emphasis on the study of living languages and their structures. Hence, structural linguistics is divided into European structural linguistics and American structural linguistics.

**1. European Structural Linguistics**

**1.1. Ferdinand De Saussure**

F. de Saussure was a Geneva-born Swiss linguist (1857-1913). He is widely considered the ‘father’ of 20th century linguistics. He died without having written any major work on general linguistics, but his students collected his lecture notes and published them under the title “*Cours de Linguistique Générale”*, translated as *“Course in General Linguistics”* (1916) which exerted a major influence on the course of linguistics particularly in Europe.

De Saussure’s crucial contribution was his explicit statement that all language items are essentially interlinked. This was an aspect of language which had not been stressed before; nobody had seriously examined the relationship of each element to all the others. For further clarification, De Saussure introduced the ‘chess analogy’; he suggested that language is like a game of chess, a system in which each item is defined by its relationship to all the others. He went further explaining that a person can be a good player of chess without knowing anything about the background of the game but by knowing the rules, and concentrating on the game not around it.

His insistence on the fact that language is a carefully built structure of interwoven elements initiated the era of Structural Linguistics, which merely means the recognition that language is a pattern of system composed of interdependent elements rather than a collection of unrelated individual elements. He introduced the following dichotomies:

1. ***Langue / Parole:*** De Saussure was the first who drew distinction between the language system and the use of language.

Langue is the language system (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation…) of a community; it is something that the individual speaker can make use but cannot affect by himself; it is a social phenomenon (or social fact). Langue is the abstract linguistic system that is shared by all the members of the speech community and no one possesses it, it exists perfectly only within a society.

Parole is idiosyncratic; the product and the actualization of langue by individuals when putting it into practice. De Saussure pointed out that parole, as being the speech of individuals, is not perfect and may contain mistakes like: slips of tongue, hesitations, false starts, sentences broken off halfway and other familiar characteristics of informal speech. Thus, if ever there is a mistake, it is considered as a mistake of parole. In this view, linguists should ignore these features and seek for the system behind them, this system is the proper object of a linguistic study, it can be regarded as an object which is relatively stable, free from idiosyncrasy and that exists outside the individual who can neither create it for himself nor modify it arbitrarily.

1. **Synchrony/ Diachrony:** Before de Saussure, linguistics was diachronic (historical) or

philology. This kind of study was prescriptive i.e. it is used to set up rules to the speakers (grammatical rules), how language should be used and not how it is used. One of its main aims was to group languages into families on the basis of their development from a common source. Accordingly, this kind of study deals with the evolution of language through time as a continuously changing medium e.g. a diachronic study of English might treat its development from old English to Middle English or the way in which Italian and French evolved from Latin.

Synchronic linguistics deals with the study and analysis of one language at a single point in time, it investigates how language is used in a given speech community at a given point in time and describe it to be objective and scientific. e.g., the language of the present-day working class in Manchester. It analyses the phonological and grammatical aspects of language in use.

It was De Saussure achievement to distinguish these two dimensions of linguistics, synchronic (or descriptive) and diachronic (or prescriptive/ historical) as each involving its own methods and principles and each essential in any adequate course of linguistic study.

1. **Syntagmatic / Paradigmatic Relations:**De Saussure declared that language is a two

dimensional system: one horizontal representing the syntagmatic relations, the other vertical representing paradigmatic relations.

Syntagmatic relations are essentially relations of combination, inclusion and co-occurrence i.e. the relations between an item in a particular position in the sentence and other items that occur in other positions in the same sentence (how items combine together to make well-formed sentences).

Paradigmatic relations are essentially relations of selection, substitution and exclusion i.e. the relation between an item in a particular syntactic position and other items that might have been chosen but are not.

e.g. The burglar sneezed loudly

The robber coughed softly paradigmatic relations

The cat hissed noisily

Syntagmatic relations

When we look at syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations we can notice that words belonging to different classes can combine with one another to build large constructions, and words belonging to the same class substitute for one another in the same slot. Rules controlling the combination and the substitution of items are found in ‘langue’.

If one element is affected, the whole system will be affected. Thus, all words have a relation with those words which are present in the sentence and a relation with those words which are not present but are a part of the language.

1. **The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign:** De Saussure defined language as being a symbolic

system (i.e. language is a system of signs and symbols) based on pure or arbitrary conventions (agreements) infinitely extendible and modifiable according to the changing needs and the conditions of the speakers.

For him, the linguistic sign is the basic unit of communication, a unit within the langue of the community. Langue in this sense can be seen as ‘a system of signs’. It unites a concept with a sound-image. The concept is referred to as ‘the signified’ and the sound-image as the ‘signifier’.

Signifier is the word given arbitrary to the object or idea it defines (as perceived by the ear), whereas the signified is the thing, object or idea being referred to. The signifier changes from a language to another while the signified remains always the same. e.g. book, livre , كتاب .

Language is an arbitrary convention, except for some words which are pure ones

e.g. land a plane landed. The French academy introduced:

La terre atterir

La lune alunir

La mer amerir

But in England, so all what is said by people become part of their language and all what they did not say never become a part of it, even if they were put by linguists (philologists) e.g.

1. Double negation gives affirmation: I do not want anything = I want something.
2. It’s I not It’s me.

De Saussure refers to language as being a system. He was interested in words and morphemes; he was not interested in syntax and grammar of words. We are not sure whether he spoke about the combination of words or morphemes or sounds or phrases or sentences. To avoid speaking about them, he introduced syntagms and paradigms. As to avoid speaking about words, signs and symbols, he introduced signifier/ signified.

**1.2. The Prague School**

Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) was developing structuralist ideas at the University of Kazań in Russia at about the same time as De Saussure was lecturing in Geneva. De Saussure was familiar with Baudouin de Courtenay's thinking which was instrumental in the development of the notion of the “phoneme,” and later introduced with his students the terms “morpheme,” “grapheme,” “distinctive feature,” and “alternation,” that are basic terminology in modern linguistics. His thinking survived most vividly through linguists whom he influenced and became associated with the Linguistic Circle of Prague.

Roman Jakobson (1896– 1982) and S. Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) recognized areas of convergent thinking with Saussure. Later, Jakobson and Trubetzkoy became the best known representatives of the Prague School of linguistics. Jakobson, Trubetzkoy, and others of the Prague School developed aspects in structuralism which are important in current theories, for example “distinctive features,” “markedness,” “topic,” and “comment,” and the notion of “implicational universals,” as well as “linguistic areas” (Sprachbund). Jakobson, who emigrated to the US in 1942, had a strong impact on the development of generative phonology both through his student, Morris Halle, and through his influence on Noam Chomsky.

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