
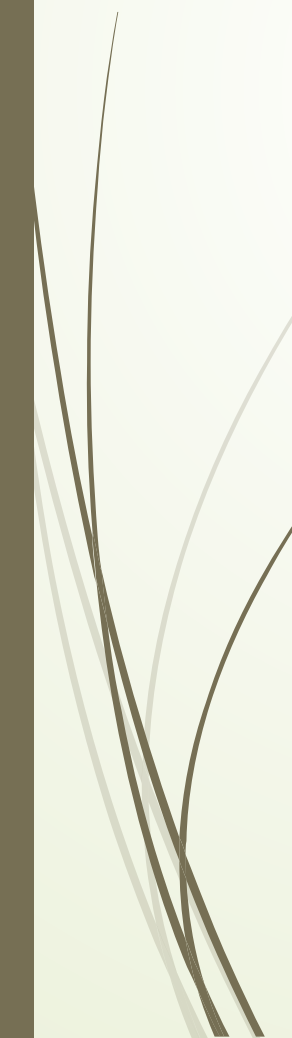


# European Structuralism




Prepared by: Dr. Nour Toumi

# Objectives

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- ☒ By the end of this lecture you will be able to:
    1. define what a linguistic theory is
    2. define structuralism and its fundamental concepts
    3. understand Saussure's contribution to Linguistics


# Linguistic theory

- ⊠ “There is nothing more practical than a good theory” (Kurt Lewin, 1952, 169)
- ⊠ A theory is a system of ideas intended to explain something/ a set of accepted beliefs or organized principles that explain and guide analysis, and one of the ways that theory is defined is that it is different from practice, where certain principles are tested.




⊠ The aim of linguistic theorizing can be summarized as follows


1. Linguistic theories in the fields of **grammar** (including **phonology**, **morphology** and **syntax**) are formulated to understand the nature and the structure of languages.
2. Theories in linguistic **semantics** aim at providing scientific accounts of how linguistic elements and structure can convey **meanings** .
3. Theories in linguistic **pragmatics** model how communication works and how understanding comes about

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4. **Psycholinguistic** theories try to model what goes on in the **minds of language users** during ongoing processing of languages.
  5. **Cognitive** linguistic theories try to model how the structure of languages relate to other cognitive abilities like **memory** and **attention allocation**.
  6. Theories in **historical** linguistics try to understand why and in which ways **languages change** and are related to each other historically.

# Pre-structuralist tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

- 19<sup>th</sup> century Linguistics is dominated by the comparison of languages, driven to a large extent by the goal to unveil their historical development and genealogical relations. This period is known as **comparative-historical tradition**.
- Dominated by German Philologists such as Jakob Grimm, Franz Bopp and August Friedrich Pott, 19<sup>th</sup> century Linguistics is marked by the quest for laws and principles of how languages change and eventually split into new languages in long-term development.

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- 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars were mainly interested in inflectional morphology and lexical similarities across languages.
  - Linguists tried to reconstruct dead languages on the basis of the similarities that were found to exist between languages thought to be related historically to those dead languages.
  - In short, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholars in linguistics worked from a historical, diachronic perspective.



Ferdinand de Saussure was not satisfied with the historical comparison of language. He stated that such comparison only answered where a language came from, but not what language actually is.



**the rise of  
Structuralism**



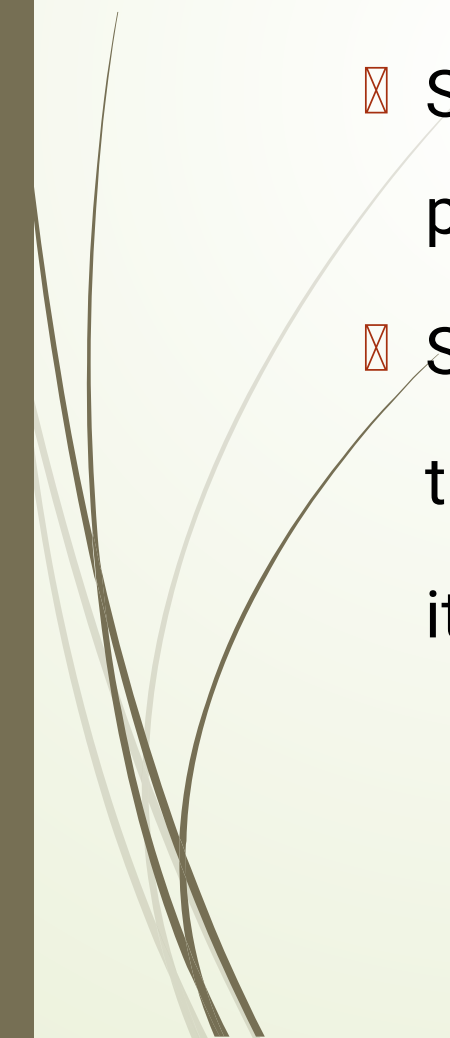



# Ferdinand de Saussure

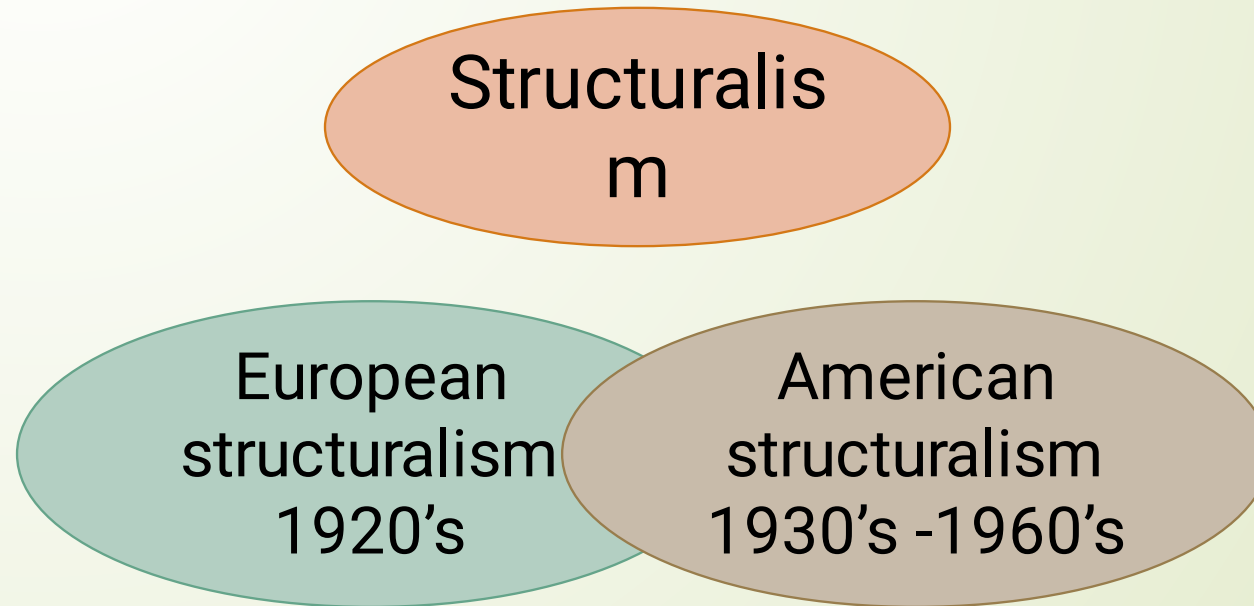
- ❑ Swiss linguist, working on Indo-European philology came to invent the system, the way language is theorized
- ❑ Course in general Linguistics, posthumously compiled from notes and lectures
- ❑ The father of modern linguistics
- ❑ Semiology (langue Vs parole).



# What is structuralism?

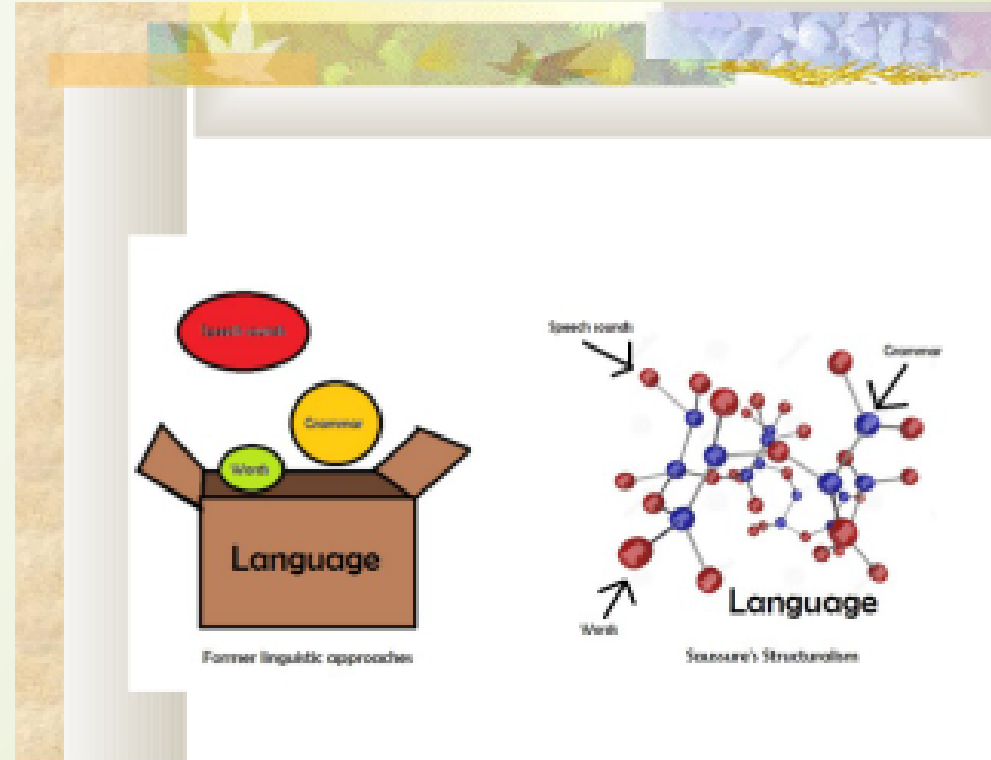
- ❑ Structuralism is a school of thought that refers to a set of principles of language study
  - ❑ Structural linguistics is an approach to Linguistics which treats language as an interwoven **structure**, in which every item is defined in relation to the other items in the **system**.
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- ⊠ All Linguistics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is structural in this sense, as opposed to Linguistics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was common to trace the history of individual words.





# Fundamental concepts of European structuralism

- ⊠ Language should be studied as a system, and the relations constituting a language system have priority over the linguistic units they generate.

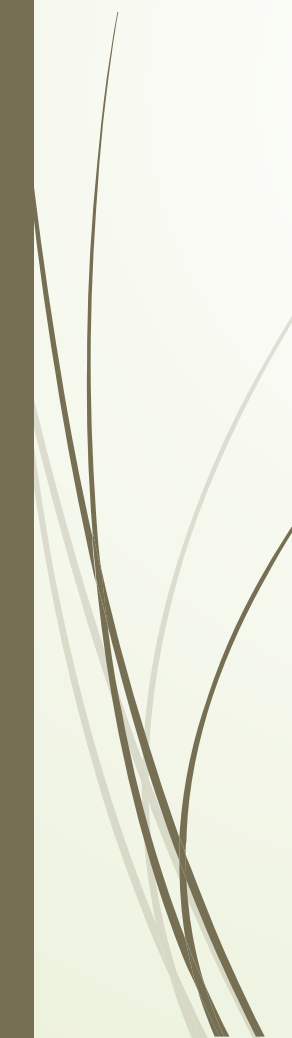



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- ⊠ Language should first be studied from a synchronic point of view, not a diachronic one.
  - ⊠ Structuralists stressed the autonomy of the language system vis a vis other aspects of languages, such as sociological, psychological and pragmatic factors, which are considered “external”- “tout ce qui concerne la langue sans entre dans son system” (De Mauro, 1995, 428)

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- ❑ The meaning given to words is arbitrary. The physicality, or structure of a word, holds no bearing to its connotation.
  - ❑ Meaning of words is relational. No word can be defined in isolation from other words. It is necessary to have other words frame a context to understand one word.



Saussure's major contribution to linguistic theorizing can be summarized as follows:


1. Language is a socially shared system of signs.
  2. The objective of linguistic investigations should not be what speakers do with language (parole) but the structure of the system itself (langue).
  3. Linguistic systems should also be studied from a purely synchronic perspectives.
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4. Signs only have significance in the system by virtue of the differences (oppositions) to other signs; this gives rise to structure, which is of more fundamental importance than the individual elements of the system.
  5. The oppositions making up the system are tacitly agreed upon by the members of the speech community by the way of convention; individual speakers have tacit knowledge about them



# Dichotomies

1. Synchronic Vs Diachronic: A Synchronic description of a language describes the language as it is at a given time. Diachronic description is concerned with the historical development of the language and the structural change that have taken place in it.
2. Theoretical Linguistics Vs Applied Linguistics: The goal of the former is the construction of a general theory of the structure of language. The aim of the latter is the application of the findings and techniques of Linguistics to language teaching.

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3. Signifier Vs Signified: form or acoustic image vs concepts or ideas
  4. Langue Vs Parole: Langue refers to the abstract system shared by all the speakers of the same language. Parole refers to the real speech of the individual, an instance of the use of the system.



5. Syntagmatic Vs Paradigmatic: Syntagmatic relationships exist between items in a sequence (linear, co-occurrence, sequential or horizontal relations). Paradigmatic relationships hold between existing items and other items in the same language that can take the same position in the sequence (associative, substitution and vertical relationships).