

Saussure's Linguistics

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Abstract: Ferdinand de Saussure is widely regarded as the father of modern linguistics, and his theories have laid a solid foundation for structuralism. This paper explores the core concepts of Saussure's linguistic theory, primarily focusing on the fundamental distinctions between langue and parole, internal and external linguistics, and synchronic and diachronic linguistics. In addition, it examines his pivotal views on the arbitrariness and systematization of linguistic signs. Furthermore, this paper evaluates the profound impact of his ideas on the development of linguistics and related disciplines (e.g., philosophy, sociology, and anthropology), while also objectively addressing certain limitations of his theories, such as the relative neglect of external social factors. Ultimately, this study highlights Saussure's enduring legacy and significant contributions to modern academic research.

Keywords: Ferdinand de Saussure; structural linguistics; langue and parole; linguistic signs; synchronic and diachronic

I. Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure, born in 1857 in Geneva, Switzerland, into a family of scholars, is an important founder of modern linguistics. He is often described as the "father of modern linguistics" and "a master of a discipline which he made modern" (Culler, 1978).

Saussure's greatest contribution to linguistics lies in his theory of General Linguistics. From 1907, he lectured on General Linguistics three times. After Saussure died, his two students collected class notes and compiled them into the "Course in General Linguistics", which was published in 1916 (Suo, 1994). The book has been translated into many language versions and has become an important classic in the history of linguistics and even in the history of academia. It is this work that has opened a new stage in the study of the overall structure of language. Since the book was not written by Saussure himself, there has been continuous work on textual criticism and annotation. Everything indicates that the book is essentially faithful to Saussure's ideas. The essence of Saussure's idea provided a theoretical basis for the study of linguistics and semiotics, and had a significant impact on the development of linguistics, semiotics, and even philosophy (Wang, 2008:66).

II. Main ideas of Saussure's linguistics

Saussure put forward the basic concepts, research directions and tasks of linguistics, and his linguistic theories mainly include: the distinction between Langue and Parole, Synchronic linguistics and Diachronic linguistics, internal linguistics and external linguistics, arbitrariness and systematization of linguistic signs, etc. Due to the universality and profundity of their perspectives and methods, these ideas have had a profound impact on modern linguistics, semiotics, and other disciplines, and have become an important source of structuralism. Due to space limitations, this paper focuses on four main ideas in Saussure's linguistics.

2.1 Langue VS. Parole

Saussure argues that the previous study of linguistics, despite its indisputable merits, has not been built into a real science of language, and has not figured out what the real object of linguistics is. He held that the first problem to be solved is to determine the real object of linguistics by scientific methods. Saussure regarded langue as the primary object of linguistic inquiry and distinguished it from parole, whose concrete manifestations involve physical, physiological, and psychological aspects. He pointed out that it is difficult to determine the true object of linguistics. To get out of such dilemma, Saussure distinguished between langue and parole (Yao, 2003).

In separating langue from parole, we are at the same time separating: (1) what is social from what is individual; and (2) what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental (Saussure, 1959:14). Langue is social, primary and purely psychological. It is an abstract system of linguistic rules that all members of a social community follow, which is a social psychological phenomenon that exists in people's minds and is relatively stable and homogeneous. For example, the grammatical rules, vocabulary system, and phonetic system of English form the overall framework of the English language, and all English speakers subconsciously follow these rules to communicate and express themselves. Its mode of existence can be expressed by the formula: $1+1+1+1+\dots=1$ (collective model) (Saussure, 1959:19). Parole is individual, secondary and psychological-physical. It refers to the specific use of language by individuals in actual communication, which is the external manifestation of language, characterized by being individual, diverse and changeable. For example, different people speak English with their own unique accents, vocabulary choice habits, grammatical errors, etc., and these specific linguistic behaviors fall under the category of speech. The distinction between langue and parole separates the socially shared linguistic system from individual acts of speech, while recognizing that actual language use has both collective and individual dimensions. In parole there is only the sum of particular acts, as in the formula: $(1+1' +1' ' +1' ' ' +\dots)$ (Saussure, 1959:19). This distinction enables linguists to abstract a relatively stable linguistic system from the diversity of individual speech acts, thereby providing a clearer object for structural description.

2.2 Internal linguistics VS. External linguistics

Saussure argued that a distinction must be made between internal linguistics and external linguistics. All the elements that are directly related to the organizations and systems of language are called the internal elements of

language, and linguistics that studies the internal elements of language is called internal linguistics. Internal linguistics has such characteristic: “language is a system that has its own arrangement, any arrangement will not do” (Saussure, 1959:23). All the elements that are not directly related to the organizations and systems of language are called the external elements of language, such as the relationship between language and ethnography, the relationship between language and culture, the geographical distribution of language and dialect fragmentation. While linguistics that studies the external elements of language is called external linguistics. External linguistics can add detail to detail without being caught in the vise of a system (Saussure, 1959:22).

2.3 Synchronic linguistics VS. Diachronic linguistics

Saussure clearly saw the particular difficulties that temporal intervention posed to linguistics, arguing for a strict distinction between Synchronie and Diachronie. The aim of synchronic linguistics is to identify the fundamental principles and constituents of a particular language-state (Saussure, 1959:101). Synchronic linguistics is the study of a language or multiple languages at a certain stage in their historical development, that is, language state, without considering how this state of affairs evolved, also known as static linguistics. For example, the description and analysis of the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical structures of modern English, without taking into account its historical evolution, is a synchronic study. Diachronic linguistics focuses on changes that a language undergoes across successive periods of time, examining relations between successive linguistic states rather than describing a single state in isolation. It is therefore concerned with language change and development over time. What diachronic linguistics studies is not relations between co-existing terms of a language-state but relations between successive terms that are substituted for each other in time (Saussure, 1959:140). For example, trace the evolution of English vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics from Old English to Middle English to Modern English. Saussure argues that the diachronic evolution of language can only be better understood by having a clear understanding of its synchronic system, because the diachronic change of language occurs on the basis of the synchronic system, and the structural characteristic of the synchronic system often restricts the direction and mode of language evolution.

2.4 Arbitrariness and systematization of linguistic signs

According to Saussure linguistic signs can be regarded as mental entities which are composed of signifier and signified. Signifier is the material form of a linguistic sign, such as a sound or written form, and the signified is the concept or meaning represented by the linguistic sign. Saussure pointed out that the most important property of linguistic signs is arbitrariness. The so-called arbitrariness means that the sound image of the linguistic symbol and the concept it represents are like two sides of a coin, which cannot be separated, but there is no natural, intrinsic or logical connection between them. It means that, the connection between the signifier and the signified of linguistic signs is arbitrary and cannot be chosen by speakers freely. For example, in Chinese, the sound and form of 树(shù) is used to represent a plant in nature, and in other languages it may be used in completely different sounds and forms to represent the same concept, such as *tree* in English, *arbre* in French, etc. This suggests that

the relationship between the form and meaning of linguistic signs is determined by social conventions rather than by natural attributes.

Moreover, according to Saussure (1959:16), “A language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems”. Language is a system of interrelated and mutually conditioned symbols, and the value and meaning of each symbol depends on its position in the overall system and its relationship with other symbols. For example, in the Chinese lexical system, the meaning of the word red is not only determined by the color itself to which it refers, but also contrasts and correlates with other words that represent colors, such as orange, yellow, green, etc., which together form the color vocabulary system of the Chinese language. This systemic organization allows linguistic elements to acquire value through their relations with other elements in the system (Lü, 2010).

III. Comment on Saussure’s linguistics

Saussure’s linguistic ideas have made important contributions to linguistics and have influenced several other fields.

3.1 Important contributions of Saussure’s linguistics

Saussure’s linguistic theories have made an indelible contribution to the development of modern linguistics. First of all, his distinction between langue and parole makes linguistic research more scientific and systematic, clarifies the research object of linguistics, and provides a clear research framework for linguists, which helps researchers investigate the nature and laws of language. Secondly, the proposal of synchronic and diachronic linguistics research methods has opened up two complementary paths for linguistic research. The synchronic approach enables linguists to conduct in-depth and detailed analysis of the structure of language and reveal the internal organization mechanism of the language system. The diachronic research method is helpful to understand the evolution and development of language, and the combination of the two provides a powerful tool for a comprehensive understanding of language. For example, when studying the evolution of Chinese vocabulary, on the one hand, it is necessary to conduct a synchronic analysis of the lexical system of modern Chinese to understand the composition and semantic relationship of words. On the other hand, through diachronic research, we can explore the development of Chinese vocabulary from ancient times to the present, such as the origin and evolution path of some words, and the generation mechanism of new words. This combination is helpful to reveal the internal rules and development trends of Chinese vocabulary, and provides important theoretical support for Chinese teaching and lexicography. In addition, the theory of arbitrariness and systematization of symbols profoundly reveals the essential characteristics of language, provides an important theoretical basis for the development of linguistic sub-disciplines such as semantics and lexicology, and also provides enlightenment for later linguists to study the meaning and function of language symbols from different perspectives.

Saussure's linguistic theory provided an important foundation for the development of structuralist linguistics, which views language as a system of interrelated and mutually constraining elements, with the meaning and value of linguistic elements determined by their positions within the system and their relationships with other elements. This idea inspired many structuralist linguists, such as the Prague School and the Copenhagen School, who further developed the theories and methods of structuralist linguistics on the basis of Saussure's ideas (Liu, 2013). In the study of phonology, the Prague School used Saussure's structuralism to develop phonology and the theory of distinctive features, and conducted an in-depth analysis of the structure of the phonetic system. The Copenhagen School, on the other hand, emphasized that the relationship between form and meaning in language is determined by the structure of the language system. Structuralist linguistics played an important role in the development of linguistics in the 20th century, having had a profound impact on the study of all aspects of language, and Saussure's theory was undoubtedly the cornerstone of its development.

Saussure's linguistics has influenced not only linguistics but also several related disciplines, contributing to broader interdisciplinary discussions of language and signs. In the field of philosophy, his theories about the arbitrariness and systematization of linguistic signs have triggered philosophers to think deeply about the relationship between language and thinking, meaning and reality (Zhan, 2016), for instance, Saussure's theory of signs became an important reference point in later discussions of language, signs, and meaning. In the field of sociology and anthropology, language is an important part of social culture, and Saussure's ideas provide a new perspective and method for studying the role of language in social structure and cultural inheritance. For example, by analyzing the characteristics of language use and language variants of different social groups, the interrelationship between sociocultural factors such as social class and cultural identity and language can be revealed, which promotes the in-depth understanding of sociocultural phenomena in sociology and anthropology.

3.2 Limitations of Saussure's linguistics

Despite its great theoretical value, Saussure's ideas are not perfect. On the one hand, his distinction between langue and parole is sometimes difficult to define clearly in practical research, and there is a complex interrelationship between the two, and an overly absolute distinction may lead to an incomplete explanation of some linguistic phenomena. In the process of language acquisition, children gradually grasp abstract language rules through exposure to concrete examples of speech, and speech also has an impact on the development of the language system to a certain extent, but Saussure's theory has relatively little elaboration in this regard. On the other hand, Saussure emphasized the internal structure and relationships of the language system, and relatively ignored the influence of external factors on language, such as society, culture, history, cognition, etc. However, language, as an important tool for human social communication, is inevitably constrained and shaped by these external factors. For example, there are significant differences in vocabulary richness, semantic connotation, and grammatical usage habits between languages in different cultural backgrounds, which are not only determined by the internal structure of the language system, but also closely related to cultural traditions, social lifestyles and other factors.

3.3 Influence and development of Saussure's linguistics

Saussure's linguistics became an important foundation for structuralist approaches in twentieth-century linguistics, and many linguists further developed and refined structuralist linguistics on the basis of his theories. For example, the Prague School and the Copenhagen School were profoundly influenced by Saussure's theory, and they made important research achievements in the fields of phonetics, phonology, and grammar, which further enriched the theoretical system of structuralist linguistics. In addition, Saussure's ideas have also had a wide influence on other related disciplines, such as literary criticism, sociology, anthropology and other fields, all of which have borrowed his structuralist analysis methods to explore the internal structure and laws of cultural and social phenomena from different perspectives. Although later approaches such as generative and cognitive linguistics developed theoretical frameworks that differ substantially from Saussurean structuralism, Saussure's distinctions and theory of the linguistic sign remain important reference points in the history and theory of linguistics (Wang & Yu, 2013).

IV. Conclusion

In summary, Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theories, particularly the distinctions between *langue* and *parole* and between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, as well as his concept of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, laid an important foundation for modern linguistics. Despite certain limitations in accounting for the influence of external social factors, his linguistic ideas have had a lasting influence on linguistics and have also contributed to the development of structuralist approaches in fields such as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy.

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