# 086. A guide to the science of language: Ferdinand de Saussure's central concepts in linguistics

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the central concepts put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure in the field of linguistics. In the 20th century, linguistics began to develop in various perspectives, and it would not be wrong to acknowledge that famous Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure made a notable contribution to the emergence of those theories. Saussure, the central examination of the present study, scrutinizes language as a structured system of signs and introduces many ideas that have shaped the development of language studies. In this context, the paper defines and thoroughly elucidates the terms that Saussure pioneered to present his theory of language. The research includes expressions on the nature of the language, its origin, and functioning from Saussure's linguistic point of views. Therefore, we would like to believe that this research constitutes a contribution to the elaboration of linguistic theory and Saussure's ideas of what language really is.

**Keywords:** Linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, Structuralism, Saussurean Linguistics

## Ferdinand de Saussure'ün dilbilimdeki temel kavramları

## Öz

Bu çalışma, Ferdinand de Saussure'ün dilbilim alanında öne sürdüğü temel kavramlara odaklanmaktadır. 20. yüzyılda dilbilim çeşitli açılardan gelişmeye başlamış ve dilbilim alanının temelini oluşturan bu teorilerin ortaya çıkmasında ünlü İsviçreli dilbilimci Ferdinand de Saussure'ün önemli katkıları olmuştur. Saussure'ün teorileri ile beraber dilbilim alanı bilimsel anlamda bir disiplin olarak kabul görmeye başlamıştır. Bu bağlamda makale, Saussure'ün dil teorisini sunmak için öncülük ettiği terimleri tanımlamakta ve detaylıca açıklamaktadır. Çalışma, Saussure'ün dilbilim alanındaki temel kavramlarının kuramsal bir değerlendirmesini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla çalışmada literatür taramasından yararlanılmış ve Saussure'ün kuramını açıklamak için kullandığı terimler detaylı örneklerle açıklanmıştır. Araştırma ayrıca Saussure'ün dilbilimsel bakış açısıyla sunduğu dilin doğası, kökeni ve işleyişine ilişkin ifadelerine de yer vermektedir. Bu nedenle, bu araştırmanın dilbilim teorisinin ve Saussure'ün dilin ne olduğu konusundaki fikirlerinin detaylandırılmasına ve anlaşılmasına bir katkı oluşturacağına inanılmaktadır. Ayrıca çalışmanın bu alanda gelecekte yapılacak çalışmalara yol gösterici olacağı umut edilmektedir.

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**Anahtar kelimeler:** Dilbilim, Ferdinand de Saussure, Yapısalcılık, Saussurcü dilbilim

## 1. Introduction

It is safe to say that significant developments in the realm of language were seen and important evaluations which can be considered to be principles in the field were settled in the 20th century (Aksan, 2020). When we look into the literature, we see that two names in the field prominently stand out in the birth of the structuralist linguistic tradition. One is the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and the other is American linguist Edward Sapir. Sapir made notable contributions in laying the foundations of structural linguistics (Sturrock, 1986). Also, we see the contributions of Russian formalists, Prague and Copenhagen Schools, and then Chomsky to the development of the structuralist linguistics (Güngör, 2020); however, Saussure undeniably directed the process of turning the field into a scientific discipline.

Along with these developments mentioned above, many of the important findings in the field of linguistics were put forward by Saussure. It goes without saying that Saussure's theory has guided the features of language as well as various aspects of language that could not be well comprehended, and at the same time, determining what linguistics is and in which directions it should take its course (Scholes, 1974). Saussure laid the foundations of linguistics, and it has gained great importance today. The common current of today's linguistics is structural linguistics, and it should be noted that the foundations of this current are based on Saussure's theory (Aksan, 2020).

Contemporary linguistics foregrounds binary oppositions which Saussure discussed in "Cours de Linguistique Generale (2016)." In this fundamental work of Saussure, language is considered to be a set of elements ruled by contexts. In Cours de Linguistique Generale, we can clearly see why Saussure was the first linguist to domain linguistics in the 20th century and beyond. In his masterpiece, Saussure both tried to establish a linguistic method and sought for an epistemological connection. Saussure designed language on a universal semiotic base and formed the basis of today's philosophical thoughts of linguistics. Saussure's principle that "the real subject of linguistics is language in and for itself" explains the tendencies of linguistics in every realm. (Kıran & Kıran, 2018).

## 2. Literature review

Because human beings cannot live without communicating with one another, language developed over time (Çağlar, 2012), and communication developed thanks to this improvement. In its broadest sense, we can define language as the transformation of sounds into words (Lee, 1998). Sign, signifier, and symbol are the basic constituents of the structure of language (Güngör, 2020). These are the basic elements of the organization of language into a semiotic system (Saussure, 1976).

Saussurean linguistics approaches language in a different way (Yücel, 2005). First, it rejects the notion that a language can be conceived as a mere and simple set of words. According to this scheme, language is a collection of words corresponding to a univocal form, that is, from term to term. In other words, according to this understanding, a language is something formed by words only, neglecting the context perspective of language. In this approach, differences between languages can be reduced to differences in just naming things. For example, the word carpet is carpet in English, while Zustand in German. This reduction takes language learning out of its context, and learning another language simply means memorizing a list of words. In this case, naturally, the sound productions themselves will be created with the same sounds in all languages, and there will be no difference between languages. The only

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difference from one language to another would be in the way these words come together for each word and in the choice. Saussurean linguistics reveals the fallacy of such comprehension. In this sense, each language corresponds to a special arrangement that arises from experience and context. To learn a language is not simply to put new tags on familiar objects, but to analyse that language in a contextual way. Linguistic refers to a complex process, not words that are out of context. According to Saussure, the reality of language corresponds to the elements of concrete concepts, sound-images, and the spoken word (Bourse & Yücel, 2012).

To Saussure, language is not a set of terms, but a system of signs (Firth, 1957). During the conversation of two people, the concepts in the mind of the speaker depend on the designs of the signs or sound images (Kayaalp , 2020). As individuals, we exchange information through meaningful units called signs. A sign is an object or phenomenon that shows something other than itself and can take its place. Every single sign consists of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound-related concrete part of the linguistic sign. The signified is the thought or concept that the signifier awakens in our minds (Birkiye, 1984). For example, the signifier of the female sign is the combination of the sound in the form of /w.o.m.a.n/. This combination is not just a sound, but an image formed by the combination of sounds. The sound can be heard, but the sound image is not transformed into speech in our minds. When we hear the /w.o.m.a.n/ sound combination, the concept of woman comes to mind, and when we want to talk about a woman, the /w.o.m.a.n/ sound combination comes to mind, that is, it combines a sign concept with a sound image (Özkan, 2010).

According to Fiske (2019), there are 3 main fields of study in semiotics. First, the field of study focusing on the sign itself includes the exploration of the kinds of signs, the ways in which they convey meaning, and the way they are associated with the people who use the signs. Because signs are human constructions, they can only be understood in the forms and contexts where people use them (Çevikbaş, 2002; Erkman, 1987; Sayın, 2014; Firth, 1968). Another study subject of semiotics is the codes or systems wherein signs are organized (Saussure, 1959). These studies focus on codes developed to meet the needs of society or culture and the search for ways to operate existing communication channels for the transmission of these codes. The third area of study is culture (Saussure, 1974). Codes and signs are processed within the culture. The very own existence of culture and form also depend on the use of these codes and signs (Saussure, 1983; Tagai, 2009).

There are various objects, entities, events, and movements in the nature that surrounds us (Bloomfield, 1933; Evans & Green, 2006; Mills, 1997). For instance, a mammal is named in English with the word dolphin. This sign does not connect the animal we call the dolphin with its name; it combines a concept in a language unity with the sound image that is attached to it in the human mind. This sound image, which Saussure calls the signifier, is not the sound, but the trace, the image of the sound in our minds; however, when it is pronounced with our speech organs, it turns into sound. The concept or the signified is the design of the object in our minds (Aksan, 2021; Chomsky, 1965).

## 3. Method

We conducted this study aiming to present a theoretical evaluation of Saussure's basic concepts in linguistics. With this aim, we utilised literature review to elucidate Saussure's terms thoroughly (Karasar, 2005; Neuman, 2008). We believe that this paper will contribute to the literature because Saussure's theory of language plays a crucial role in the advancement of linguistics as a scientific field of

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study. We also hope that since this study elaborates Saussure's complex concepts in his theory, it will be guiding for future studies in the realm.

## 4. Discussion

As we look into the developments in the field of linguistics, we can see why Saussure is often referred as the father of the linguistics. Saussure's linguistics foregrounds sign, which consists of signifier and signified (Asher & Simpson, 1994; Bayrav, 1998; Hervey, 1982; Young, 1981). Therefore, we must begin with elucidating what he indicates by these terms. Signifier is the sound of the letters we use to define things, such as table. Signified, on the other hand, is the actual concept of the thing we talk about (Lyons, 1977; Robins, 1993). In that case, signified is the thought of a table. The actual real thing in the world is the referent (Vardar, 2001). Here, the referent is the real table. Because one cannot exist without the other, sign can also be defined as a two-sided psychological entity. Saussure emphasizes that there is an arbitrary and conventional relationship between the signifier and the item which we signify (Vardar, 1998). First of all, it is arbitrary as there is no natural reason why we identify a table a table. That is why same things are called different things in different languages. Second of all, by the convention of the language, it is referred to the idea that a speech community needs to hold on to the same connections between a signifier and its signified. For example, we, Turkish speakers all share very similar concept of table when we hear that word. A speaker cannot call a table something else and await anyone to know what she is talking about. This applies to other languages and nationalities as well.

In addition, Saussure distinguishes between parole and langue (Guiraud, 1994). Parole is the use of a language, whereas langue is the system of it. Langue is the system of the language, and similar to syntax and phonology, it is an abstract system (Cobley & Jansz, 1999). However, by parole, Saussure refers to the use of that language. This is the individual side; it is the individual speech and the actual use of language (Thibault, 1997).

Furthermore, synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics have an important place in Saussure's system of linguistics (Harris, 1988; Rıfat, 2011). Synchrony is a complete language system at one point in time. This time usually refers to present, but it can be considered as a snapshot of language at a particular time in the past. Diachrony, then again, refers to how that language develops over time. It is how meanings of the words change over time. It is basically the study of the history of words, which is also known as historical linguistics (Holdcroft, 1991). We may notice changes in languages over our life time, for example, different words appear or disappear (Harris, 2001). This conveys us to diachrony.

Also, context has a key role in Saussure's system. According to Aksan (2017), if we consider context in terms of words, it can be defined as the holistic relationship that a sign creates with other elements that it coexists and is connected to on a particular subject (Halliday, 1964; Sözen, 1999). Here, the emphasis is not solely on one meaning of the word. Let's take the word "break," for instance. The sign basically means to separate something into pieces. When we use it within an amount of money; "Can you break a ten?" here, it implies changing money. In another context; the example is "He was aware of the fact that he was breaking the law." Here, it means doing something illegal. Additionally, we can say that "When the scandal broke, the head of the department resigned immediately." In this example, break refers to something coming to the public's attention. In another context, a speaker might say "We arrived at the party as a storm was breaking." In this perspective, the storm starts suddenly, and the verb break has a different meaning. We can increase the number of these examples further in every language. These examples show us how words acquire new and different meanings in different contexts.

Finally, paradigm and syntagm are two terms we should touch upon in this paper. By paradigm, a set of linguistic objects are referred, and these objects have similarities (Culler, 1985; Günay, 2002). When we replace one with another in syntagm, the statement still makes sense. For instance, "the baby ate the whole meal." In this statement, the word baby can be replaced with "the woman." However, we cannot replace the word "baby" with the word "plane." Nevertheless, in a different system, these words could be used in the same syntagm (Culler, 1975). For example, "It is usual to be fussy on the planes, especially for babies." Another way this can be elaborated is that syntagm is the words in a sentence, and how these words follow a particular pattern (Culler, 1981; Hawkes, 1989). When we look into sentence "The kids are playing in the garden," we see that word order in the sentence is unalterable without distorting the meaning. Similarly, the letters in a word cannot be changed. For instance, once the letters in the word "garden" is scrambled, the arbitrary connection between the signifier and the signified no longer exists.

## 5. Conclusion

As can be seen in the literature, linguistics has made significant developments with F. de Saussure, especially after the turn of the 20th century. The understanding of language system has notably settled, and the spoken language has gained importance as well due to the developments in communication technologies (Chandler, 2002; Rifat, 2009). Today's linguistics comprises universal dimensions covering all the languages of the world (Rıfat, 2019). It has spread over a broad framework, starting from the examination of languages in terms of sound, structure, syntax, semantics to language acquisition, mother tongue education, foreign language teaching, text linguistics, and literature review. It would not be off the ground to claim that the border between linguistic and literary studies has also almost disappeared. In this regard, all kinds of language studies has started to be carried out by making use of the possibilities of the computer age, and interrelated studies with other fields of science have brought linguistics to an interdisciplinary science (Aksan, 2004).

Saussure's ideas laid foundations not only in linguistics but also in semiotics. Saussure presented his theory of language from two points of views. First of all, he considered language to be a system of signs. Secondly, Saussure emphasized the social side of language, which is the product of the communities. Saussure, the central examination of the present study, scrutinized language as a structured system of signs and introduced many ideas that have shaped the development of language studies. Sign, signifier, signified, referent, parole, langue, synchrony, diachrony, paradigm, and syntagm are some of the terms he used so as to explain his theories of the nature of the language. In this study, we proposed to develop a detailed presentation of our reading as to what these terms mean.

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