

Saussure ve Chomsky'nin Dilbilime Katkıları Üzerine Genel Bir Bakış**A General View on the Contributions of Saussure and Chomsky to the Linguistics****Zekiye SEİS¹****Öz**

Dilbilim, sözdizimi, anlambilim, biçimbilim, fonetik, fonoloji ve pragmatik kapsayan önde gelen bir bilimsel dil çalışmasıdır. Önemli bir alan olduğundan, diğer dilbilimcilerin ilgi alanlarını düşünmek, analiz etmek ve dilbilim çalışmasına katkıda bulunmak çok fazla çalışma ve değerlendirme gerektirir. Bu dilbilimciler arasında, İsviçreli dilbilimci ve filozof Ferdinand De Saussure, Amerikalı teorik dilbilimci Noam Chomsky dilbilime büyük katkılarda bulunan dilbilimciler olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışmada, tarihi sıralamalar kullanılarak iki tanınmış dilbilimcinin katkıları daha ayrıntılı olarak sunulmuştur. Böylelikle, aynı konu üzerinde çalışan çok fazla modern akademisyenin ilgisini çekerek iki dil bilimcinin fikirlerinin anlaşılmasına yardımcı olmak amaçlanmıştır. Ayrıca dilbilimin İngilizce öğretimindeki yeri de vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Dilbilim
İşaret
Teori
Semioloji
İngilizce Öğretimi

Abstract

Linguistics is a leading scientific study of language encompassing syntax, semantics, morphology, phonetics, phonology and pragmatics. Since it is an important field, it requires a lot of work and evaluation to consider, analyze and contribute to the study of linguistics by other linguists. Among these linguists, the Swiss linguist and philosopher Ferdinand De Saussure and the American theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky are considered to be linguists who have made great contributions to linguistics. In this study, the contributions of two well-known linguists are presented in more detail using historical order. In this way, it is aimed to attract the attention of many modern scholars working on the same subject and to help understand the ideas of the two linguists. In addition, the place of linguistics in English language teaching is emphasized.

Keywords

Linguistics
Sign
Theory
Semiology
English language teaching

Başvuru Tarihi/Received
10.11.2024

Kabul Tarihi /Accepted
26.06.2025

|Derleme Makalesi / Review Article|

Citation Information: Seis, Z. (2025). A General View On The Contributions of Saussure and Chomsky To the Linguistics. *Giresun Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 2(1), 38–45.

¹ Giresun Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Giresun, Türkiye;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4773-2607>

A General View on the Contributions of Saussure and Chomsky to the Linguistics

Thinking, analyzing, and contributing to the study of linguistics require a great deal of effort and awareness of other linguists' concerns. It is so impressive to take the attention of numerous contemporary scholars working in the same field and to guide them to recognize these points. One of the great contributors to linguistics is Ferdinand De Saussure, a Swiss linguist and thinker; and another intellectual is Noam Chomsky, the American theoretical linguist. Therefore, it is essential to take a closer look at the contributions of two prominent linguists according to historical rankings.

Ferdinand De Saussure was born on November 26, 1857 in Geneva, Switzerland and died on February 22, 1913 in Vufflens-le-Château ("Saussure," n.d. in Britannica). He is known as the father of modern linguistics or a modern master. Saussure, as a structuralist, was interested in language as a system or the design of structure. He was the first person who emphasized the importance of viewing language as a living phenomenon. His highly reputed books are *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* "Memoir on the Original System of Vowels in the Indo-European Languages" (1878), and *the Cours de linguistique générale* "Course in General Linguistics" (1916). *The Cours de linguistique générale* (shortly CLG) was taken as notes by the students having attended his lectures and edited after his death. This book was first published in 1916, and since then it has been republished in three subsequent editions. Also, this book has been translated into many different languages and has had a great impact on the field of linguistics so far. However, the significance of Saussure's thoughts became important, especially in the second half of the twentieth century related to the structuralist movement that had a superiority in different fields such as anthropology, psychology, and philosophy.

Saussure took the attention of a great many scholars thanks to his effective contribution to the history of linguistics with his intellectual theories. He made his own terminology and it changed and developed in every part of the book, CLG. His theoretical ideas had a great decisive role in shaping linguistic thoughts in Europe.

Saussure emphasized the history of a language and developed an approach using certain concepts and distinguishing them: diachronic linguistics and synchronic linguistics. The former focuses on the changes in language through the years (historical); the latter is the work of the linguistic elements and focuses on the usage of a language at a distinct (static). Synchronic linguistics sees language as a living whole, existing as a "state" at a particular point in time. De Saussure was determined to mark and define the divisions of language study. Even though both of them had merits, Saussure was in favor of the synchronic approach-descriptive linguistics. He stated the importance of synchronic with this statement:

Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with the logical and psychological relations that bind together co-existing terms and form a system in the collective mind of speakers.

(Saussure, 1974, pp. 99- 100)

The diachronic approach is historical representing the interaction of historical events and on the other hand, the synchronic approach is related to the structure of language. Saussure claimed that these viewpoints did not have a mutual concession. He said,

Diachronic linguistics will study relations that bind together successive terms not perceived by the collective mind but substituted for each other without forming a system.

(Saussure, 1974, pp. 99-100)

His great example, the analogy of chess, could make these concepts much clearer. When a chess game proceeds, the value of the piece changes (the diachronic approach, in other words, historical analysis). The rules of chess (grammar of language) are defined as the synchronic approach for the pieces of chess interacting with each other at a given time showing the changes in their values. This directly illustrates the rules of the game.

The synchronic facts of a language present their systemic nature. According to Saussure, adopting a diachronic approach leads to observing a series of events that modify it (Saussure, 1974). The distinction between diachronic and synchronic linguistics drew attention to the current structural

properties and historical dimensions of language. Also, he might have aimed to distinguish philology and linguistics.

This distinction led Saussure to divide the term language, in other words, the human language faculty into *langue* and *parole* as seen in this formulation: *Language* (human speech) = *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* means the linguistic system found in all members' minds of a speech community, in other words, a social rule-governed system. *Parole* refers to individual utterances or acts of speech. *Langue* is a social phenomenon and rule, whereas *parole* is an individual phenomenon and behavior. The former represents a static situation, but the latter shows a dynamic situation. Saussure worked on *langue* rather than *parole*. *Langue*, *language* and *parole* are not available in English, however, *language and speech* are used instead.

Semiology was the science of signs initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure. He was interested in abstract systems of signs. He presented a coherent system of language and human sign systems. Peirce, known as the father of pragmatics, defined the sign with these words:

A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity (Peirce, 1931) .

However, Saussure stressed that there is no isolated sign. For him, a sign is formed by its relation with an object, a user, or another sign belonging to the same sign system. He argued that language is a prime substantiality, with a logical structure that is separated into single signs. Saussure drew attention to the importance of signs and said;

As for all the other elements of speech activity, then linguistics could completely do without them (Saussure, 1974).

According to Saussure, the sign has two components and is formed from the union of the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the concept represented). To him, there was a link between sound and the concept of signs, and the sign was the basic unit of communication (e.g., "book"- the signified and the sound of the word "book"- the signifier), and the relationship between them is arbitrary. To make them clear, he differentiated *meaning* and *value*. Meaning emerges from the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Value signalizes the position of an element in a system. Signs have no positive or integral value. The meaning of a sign and its value is determined through its difference and relationship to other signs and positions. The Saussurean approach could be named as a holistic approach and it is noticeable that speech also has a semiotic nature. He hypothesized that sign is not an empirical case and cannot be conducted in the same way as other objects.

With semiology, Saussure studied "the life of signs within society" (Saussure, 1974). Structuralism, a critical, philosophical, and cultural movement pointing to Saussurean semiology has produced extensive new descriptions of human culture via sign systems since Saussure explained. This literary theory can be considered as one origin of the theory of "intertextuality". The semiotic notion of intertextuality is linked with poststructuralist theorists. Intertextuality refers to the 'influences' of writers on each other.

Though intertextuality as a term appeared some three decades ago, and the twentieth century has proved to be a period especially inclined to it culturally, intertextuality is by no means a time-bound feature: the phenomenon, in some form, is at least as old as recorded human society (Coyle et al., 1991).

Another relationship in a language system emphasized by Saussure is the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationship. The syntagmatic (horizontal) relationship is the combinatorial relationship or the relative position of a sign along a temporal chain (e.g. word in a sentence or program in a TV schedule) . This relationship is restricted to certain orders. As Saussure (1974) claimed, a term acquired its value because it stood in opposition to everything preceding or following or to both. The most important kind of relation between units in a signifying system, according to Saussure, is a syntagmatic relation. This shows a linear relation. In spoken or written language, words come out one by one. Because language is linear, it forms a chain, by which one unit is linked to the next. The terms in a syntagm gain 'value'.

An example of this in English is word order that governs meaning. "The dog sat on the sofa" means different from "The sofa sat on the dog " because word order- the position of a word in a chain of

signification -contributes to meaning. These sentences also differ in meaning because "dog " and "sofa " are not the same words within the language system.

Combinations or relations formed by position within a chain are called syntagms. Examples of these could be any phrase or sentence that makes a linear relation between two or more units. Syntagmatic relations are critical in written and spoken language, in discourse.

Signs are stored in memory in associative groups. The words are with other words that have similar associations. Paradigmatic / Associative (vertical relations) are contrastive and the set of signs that might have been alternated with the chosen sign (e.g. the words that have similarities of sounds or meanings like learning, study, knowledge (associative relationship or the set of talk shows).

Syntagmatic relations are useful for making new words (neologisms) and on the other hand, paradigmatic relations allow to creation of metaphoric expressions.

Saussure, known as the founder of general linguistics, also helped to promote historical and comparative linguistics, especially for the elder generation. As Sanders (2004) stated, Saussure's work was related to Roman culture and its development. For most of the linguists, he compared the phases of related languages to find out which family they belonged to. He was concerned with their antecedents and remote parent languages. Saussure proved this by re-establishing all basic Greek, Latin, and German roots to a pattern of the type Consonant + Vowel Consonant. Thus, patterns of development were recognized. Also, Saussure was concerned about the regularity of sound change.

Saussure not only wrote articles in his twenties on Indo-European, Greek, and Latin subjects but also on comparative grammar, the 300 -page-monograph called *Mémoire*, which was defined by Antoine Meillet, French linguist, as the most beautiful book of comparative grammar ever written.

The book focuses on the vocalism of Indo-European language, in other words, Ablaut or vocalic apophony. Sanders (2004) emphasizes that the book presents not one sound, but a whole phonological system, its contrasts, its hierarchies, and its morphophonemic functioning. The *Mémoire* addressed the emerging difficulties before being discussed in the area of linguistics. Furthermore, he precisely showed the evidence of Ablaut alternations (Sanskrit) and comparison. Although some remarkable neogrammarians, one of whom is Hermann Osthoff, rejected Saussure's work somehow, a great number of linguists (e.g. Møller, Kurylowicz, Benveniste, and Cuny) followed Saussure. The laryngeal theory is the concept of vocalic alternations presented in this book, where Saussure successfully used two main methods of linguistic comparison and reconstruction. Aside from the *Mémoire*, Saussure wrote four articles and two short notes about peculiar problems of Indo-European considering comparison and historical parts. In addition, he worked on the use of the genitive absolute in Sanskrit in his doctoral dissertation, which was published in 1881.

Saussure was called 'l'homme des fondements' who looked for the general characteristics underlying the diversity of empirical data by the linguist, Emile Benveniste. Noteworthy questions about phonological and morphological systems are addressed in his book, the *Mémoire*.

The contributions of Saussure to linguistics were extremist and his work had an advanced impact on the theorems of numerous linguists and the field of linguistics. He was a forerunner in doctrines that transformed the theory of language and contributed to the sciences of society and culture and became the founder of general semiology (Benveniste, 1964) . Lastly, a statement from Jonathan Culler (1976) will reveal his importance:

Ferdinand de Saussure is the father of modern linguistics, the man who reorganized the systematic study of language and language in such a way as to make possible the achievements of twentieth-century linguists. This alone would make him a Modern Master: master of a discipline which he made modern.

Another intellectual cognitive revolutionist and theoretical linguist of our age is Avram Noam Chomsky, who was born on December 7, 1928, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S. He was the child of William Chomsky, a Hebrew scholar, and referred to as one of the world's foremost Hebrew grammarians, and Elsie Simonofsky, a story writer. He spent his early childhood in a school where individual creativity

was strengthened. His genetic heritage and his early learning had a great effect on his thoughts and his whole life. His study of David Kimche, a Hebrew grammarian, made him interested in philology. Also, he aimed to make descriptive explanations. He was in favor of the synchronic structure of the language. Besides, wars, revolution movements, and international policy shaped his ideas. With this awareness and knowledge, he has contributed to the fields of linguistics, cognitive psychology, philosophy, mathematics as well as domestic and foreign politics since the 1950s. Also, his works including over eighty books, hundreds of articles, thousands of speeches, and letters made him a landmark of modern linguistics. He studied linguistics, mathematics, and philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2002, he retired as a Professor (Emeritus) in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Chomsky is also known as the founder of Transformational-Generative Grammar (TGG).

Chomsky has always been together with intellectual communities since childhood. In 1945, when he entered the University of Pennsylvania, he met Zellig S. Harris, a structural linguist, who was influenced by him and studied philosophy. He wrote his master thesis called "The Morphophonemics of Modern Hebrew" (a spectacle study in linguistics and generative phonology) in 1951 and the influence of Harris on Chomsky's work could be seen not only in his thesis in which some of Harris's ideas were applied but also in his book named "The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory (LSLT) " in 1975 (the basic principles of transformational generative grammar, and his contribution in terms of syntax and semantics). Noam Chomsky's considerable work was to contribute to grammar by generating sentences. "Syntactic Structures"(1957) was the study of Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). Chomsky believes "language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements" (Chomsky, 1957, p. 13). The speaker of a language can produce a practically infinite number of sentences, which is described as "*performance*" and use a finite number of words and grammatical rules, which is defined as "*competence*". A well-known and debatable sentence '*Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*' included in Syntactic Structures presents the theory of Chomsky and he states that "the notion 'grammatical' cannot be identified with 'meaningful' or 'significant' in any semantic sense" (Chomsky 1957, p.15). Besides these concepts, the creativity of humans is a fundamental element that may create an infinite combination of sentences and arbitrariness providing the relationship between form and meaning (lexical diversity).

Chomskian linguistics is upon generative grammar which is a distinction made between *principles* and *parameters*. Parameter is an abstract grammatical category that controls a great many externally independent surface syntactic traits; positioning the head of a phrase before or after its complement. A further example of the parameter: In English, the preposition precedes the noun, but follows the noun in the Turkish language.

Furthermore, according to Chomsky, there are two features of the syntactic description; *surface structure* and *deep structure*. Surface structure determines the phonetic form of a sentence, while deep structure determines semantic interpretation. The rules between these structures are called 'grammatical transformations' in Transformational Generative Grammar.

In addition, Chomsky objected to the Skinner's behaviorist perspective and proposed that language is not "a habit structure". He emphasized the significance of the rationalist perspective and concentrated on this topic in his other linguistic lecture, Cartesian Linguistic (1966), and was concerned about the relation between characteristic human traits, social setting, and language. Language and Mind in 1968 was another great contribution of Chomsky. His main concern was about understanding human nature. As human nature is complex, linguistics, philosophy, and psychology are considered to be linked to gain new perspectives. To be able to study the mind, nearly all of the disciplines need to be in harmony.

With the help of early background studies, Chomsky started to question how language was used or acquired, and he focused on the system of linguistic competence. He became interested in the underlying structure of language to recognize the way of learning. Chomsky believes that we are born with a tendency to learn and that basic rules for language are complete. He argues that the human species has an innate ability to quickly acquire language at specific stages in the developmental process (Innatism). Before Chomsky, it was highly accepted that language skills were gained through learning and the

environment had a crucial role in that. The behaviorists argued that the mind is completely a blank slate (a tabula rasa) and language learning occurs when there is an interaction between linguistic stimuli and conditioned response, yet Chomsky opposed this with his idea called the language acquisition device, or LAD for short. According to Chomsky, universal grammar is available to the child from the start, but the child's cognitive abilities control the appearance of linguistic universals. He assumed that there is a universal basis, a mental faculty in the mind that domains the basic features of language, and presented his theory "Universal Grammar". He proposed that native underlying knowledge helps us find out how the mind works: Language is a window into the mind.

Chomskyan Hierarchy has been accepted and followed by so many scholars and his continuous writing for more than half a century has made him one of the most cited writers. He made a striking statement about language theory and language teaching to the attention of the intellectuals on the advances of linguistic theory;

I am, frankly, rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology.

(Chomsky, 1966, p. 52)

Also, Chomsky has defined linguistics more than once as a branch of cognitive psychology. He has authored several seminal texts including Syntactic Structures (1957), Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965), Cartesian Linguistics (1966), Language and Mind (1968), The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory (1975), Reflections on Language (1976), Language and Responsibility (1977), Lectures on Government and Binding (1982), Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin and Use (1986), Language and Problems of Knowledge (1988), Language and Thought (1993), Language and the Problem of Knowledge (1994), The Minimalist Program (1995), The Architecture of Language (2000) and On Nature and Language (2002), which have contributed remarkably to cognitive science via linguistics.

These two notable figures have shaped the structural understanding of the linguistics. As linguistics is one of the main scientific language studies, its benefits to language teaching and learning cannot be disputable; therefore, the linguistics has been one of the main courses taught in the English language teaching (ELT) departments at Turkish universities. With the help of linguistics, teachers who teach English as a foreign language (EFL) could promote the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of English while explaining the rules of language clearly. By gaining linguistic knowledge, it is aimed that the ELT students are equipped with linguistic knowledge. When the learners are aware of syntactic properties of English, they are able to make meaningful sentences or utterances. Via semantic knowledge, it is much easier to understand the associations between the meanings and the signifiers such as words, phrases or signs and the like. Thus, they are aware of all the theoretical forms via linguistics (Aarts & McMahon, 2006). When the students have difficulty in learning grammar, sentence construction or pronunciation, the EFL teachers could apply linguistic knowledge to address these concerns. Besides, pragmatics could be taught to guide the learners how to use language appropriately in various contexts to enrich communicative competence.

In addition, to stress the relationship between language and culture, linguistics helps teachers how to incorporate the cultural elements into language teaching to enhance intercultural communication. As Grab (2025) underlines, culturally responsive pedagogy requires an appreciation of learners' diverse identities and linguistic backgrounds as integral strengths within academic settings. Regarding Contrastive Analysis, the first and second language acquisition could be enhanced with contrastive analysis because the students' common mistakes could be corrected with their own analysis. Additionally, authentic materials could be analyzed with Corpus linguistics. Hence, in English courses, the English language learners can learn real-world language use and apply them in their learning approaches. The use of technology can also be involved in ELT with computational linguistics as it encompasses AI-driven tools or apps to support the learners to learn English. Shortly, linguistics provides a holistic approach with numerous benefits to meet the needs of the language learners for the EFL teachers.

To sum up, numerous philosophers, linguists, and theorists have tried to deal with the answer to language through observation, analysis, and study. While some linguists have succeeded in identifying many features, processes, and language developments, two leading names attract the attention of all the intellectuals: Ferdinand De Saussure and Noam Chomsky. Both linguists consider language like an abstract system and disdain the individual speech acts. Saussure introduced two aspects of language; language (language system) and parole (the act of speaking), whereas Chomsky pointed out that the tacit knowledge of the language (competence) and the use of language (performance). Their attributions to linguistics, in fact language learning and teaching, cannot be denied at all times.

REFERENCES

- Aarts, B., & McMahon, A. (Eds.). (2006). *The handbook of English linguistics*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Benveniste, É. (1971). *Problems in general linguistics* (M. E. Meek, Trans.). University of Miami Press. (Original work published in French, 1966)
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic structures*. Mouton.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1966). *Cartesian linguistics: A chapter in the history of rationalist thought*. Harper & Row.
- Chomsky, N. (1968). *Language and mind*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Chomsky, N. (1975). *The logical structure of linguistic theory*. Plenum Press. (Original work published 1955)
- Chomsky, N. (1976). *Reflections on language*. Pantheon Books.
- Chomsky, N. (1977). *Language and responsibility* (M. Ronat, Interviewer; Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on government and binding: The Pisa lectures*. Foris Publications.
- Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of language: Its nature, origin, and use*. Praeger.
- Chomsky, N. (1988). *Language and problems of knowledge: The Managua lectures*. MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1993). *Language and thought*. Moyer Bell.
- Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (2000). *New horizons in the study of language and mind*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (2002). *On nature and language* (A. Belletti & L. Rizzi, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
- Coyle, M., Garside, P., Kelsall, M., & Peck, J. (Eds.). (1991). *The encyclopedia of literature and criticism*. Routledge.
- Culler, J. (1976). *Saussure*. Fontana Modern Masters.
- Grab, M.O. (2025). Teaching for Equity: An Exploration of AI's Role in Culturally Responsive Teaching in Higher Education Settings. *Innovative Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-025-09801-4>
- Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. W. Burks, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
- Sanders, C. (Ed.). (2004). *The Cambridge companion to Saussure*. Cambridge University Press.
- Saussure, F. de. (1879). *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* [Memoir on the original system of vowels in the Indo-European languages]. Teubner.
- Saussure, F. de. (1916). *Cours de linguistique générale* [Course in general linguistics] (C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, Eds.; W. Baskin, Trans.). McGraw-Hill. (Original work published 1916)
- Saussure, F. de. (1974). *Course in general linguistics* (C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, Eds.; W. Baskin, Trans.). Fontana/Collins. (Original work published 1916)