

Chapter 3

SOME MAJOR LINGUISTIC CONCEPTS

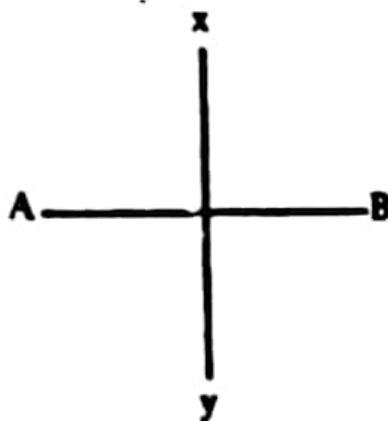
SYNCHRONY AND DIACHRONY

Synchrony is the study of a language in a given time, **diachrony** through time. **Synchronic** or **descriptive linguistics** studies a language at one period in time; it investigates the way people speak in a given speech community in a given point in time. **Diachronic** or **historical** (or **temporal**) **linguistics** studies the development of languages through time: for example, the way in which French and Italian have evolved from Latin; it also investigates language changes. Saussure says: "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. Diachronic linguistics on the contrary, will study relations that bind together successive terms not perceived by the collective mind but substituted for each other without forming a system." Synchronic linguistics deals with systems, diachronic with units. These two approaches had to be kept clearly apart and pursued separately. Saussure considered synchronic linguistics to be more important: "the first thing that strikes us when we study the facts of language is that their succession in

time does not exist in so far as the speaker is concerned. He is confronted with a state. That is why the linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony."

The difference between descriptive (synchronic) and historical (diachronic) linguistics can be illustrated by the following diagram of Ferdinand de Saussure, who was the first person to stress the necessity of distinguishing between the two approaches:

In the diagram, axis AB is the synchronic, static axis. It can intersect at any point with XY, the moving, diachronic axis.



(Figure

LANGUE AND PAROLE

Among Ferdinand de Saussure made a sharp distinction between three main terms — *le langage*, *la langue*, and *la parole*, and then *focus* concentrated on two of them. He envisaged *le langage* (human speech as a whole) to be composed of two aspects, which he called *langue* (the language system) and *parole* (the act of speaking).

Le langage has no exact equivalent in English, it embraces the faculty of language in all its various forms and manifestations.

Le langage is the faculty of human speech present in all normal human beings due to heredity, but which

requires the correct environmental stimuli for proper development. It is our faculty to talk to each other. Taken as a whole it is many-sided and heterogeneous, straddling several areas simultaneously—physical, physiological and psychological—it belongs to the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts for we cannot discover its unity. **Langage**, thus is a universal behaviour trait—more of interest to the anthropologist or biologist than to the linguist, who commences his study with **langues** and **paroles**. To quote Saussure '*La langue est pour nous le langage moins la parole*' —Language is for us **le langage** less speech.

Langue, according to Saussure, in the totality (the 'collective fact') of a language, deducible from an examination of the memories of all the language users. It is a storehouse, 'the sum of word-images in the minds of individuals. It is not to be confused with human speech (**langage**) of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. 'It is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty. **Langue**, therefore, is a corporate, social phenomenon. It is homogeneous whereas **langage** is heterogeneous. It is concrete and we can study it. It is a system of linguistic signs which are not abstract but real entities, tangible to be reduced to conventional, written symbols. Putting it loosely **langue** is grammar + vocabulary + pronunciation, system of a community. As stated by Hjelmslev, **langue** as used by Saussure includes three different concepts:

- (a) the language scheme (the pure language form defined independently of its social realization and physical manifestations);
- (b) the language norm (the material form defined by its social realization but independent of particular manifestation);
- (c) the language custom (a set of customs accepted by a particular society and defined by observable manifestations).

Ultimately, **langue** has to be related to **parole** which is the actual usage of individuals, which a community manifests in its everyday speech, the actual, concrete act of speaking on the part of an individual, the controlled or controllable psycho-physical activity. **Parole** is the set of all utterances that have actually been produced, while **langue** is the set of all possible grammatical sentences in the language. From this it follows that **parole** is a 'personal, dynamic, social activity, which exists at a particular time and place and in a particular situation as opposed to **langue** which, exists apart from any particular manifestation in speech.'

Parole is the only object available for direct observation to the linguist. Utterances are instances of **parole**. The underlying structure in terms of which we produce them as speakers and understand them as hearers is the **langue** in question (Persian, Chinese, etc.) and is independent of the physical medium (or substance) in which it is realized. A **langue**, on the other hand, is not spoken by anybody, but is a composite body of linguistic phenomena derived as it were from the personal dialects (**paroles**) of all native speakers.

COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE

Noam Chomsky's concept of competence and performance is some what similar to Saussure's concept of language and parole. Competence, according to Chomsky, is the native speaker's knowledge of his language, the system of rules he has mastered, his ability to produce and understand a vast number of new sentences. Competence is the study of the system of rules, performance is the study of actual sentences themselves, of the actual use of the language in real-life situation. So the speaker's knowledge of the structure of a language is his linguistic competence and the way in which he uses it is his linguistic performance.

Competence is, then, an underlying mental system, it underlies actual behaviour, linguistic institution ability to analyse language, detecting ambiguities, ignoring

mistakes, understanding new sentences, producing entirely new sentences. Whereas competence is a set of Principles which a speaker masters, performance is what a speaker does. The former is a kind of code, the latter is an act of encoding or decoding. Competence concerns the kind of structures the person has succeeded in mastering and internalizing, whether or not he utilizes them, in practice, without interference from the many of the factors that play a role in actual behaviour. For anyone concerned with intellectual processes, or any question that goes beyond mere date arranging, it is the question of competence that is fundamental. Obviously one can find out about competence only by studying performance, but this study must be carried out in devious and clever ways, if any serious result is to be obtained." In this way, the abstract, internal grammar which enables a speaker to utter and understand an infinite number of potential utterances is a speaker's competence.

This distinction has caused a lot of arguments in current-day linguistics. Some socio-linguists regard it as an unreal distinction which ignores the importance of studying language in its social setting. They say that many of today's grammars are based on unjustified assumptions concerning a speaker's competence rather on his performance. But the division is a useful one, if not carried to extremes. In an ideal situation, the two approaches should complement each other. Any statements concerning a speaker's competence must ultimately be derived from data collected while studying his performance.

Although Chomsky's competence/performance dichotomy closely resembles Saussure's *langue/parole*, yet the main difference is that Saussure stresses the sociological implications of *langue*, while Chomsky stresses the psychological implications of competence. These distinctions are also parallel to a distinction made between code and message in communications engineering. A code is the pre-arranged signalling system. A message is an actual message sent using that

COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Comparative Historical Linguistics is the diachronic study of languages based on comparison between two or more languages. Descriptive linguistics studies the characteristics of language systems or dialects at given points in their histories, while historical and comparative linguistics describes changes in language systems over periods of time and considers the familial and genealogical relationships of languages. Adopting a historical approach to the study of language, it traces the evolution of languages and, by comparing one with another, establishes relationships between them.

The historical linguist, therefore, is the paleontologist of language. From a few surviving clues, and the extrapolation of the principles of historical linguistics, he attempts to reconstruct languages that have now disappeared. He also divides languages into families based on phonological and morphological resemblances. But the transformational generative approach to language change says that it is not languages that change, but rather grammars. Generative linguists have been slow to take up significant work in historical linguistics, and the literature on the subject to date is rather limited.

THE PURPOSE OF COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

The purpose of comparative historical linguistics has been summed up by Ferdinand de Saussure under two headings:

(1) To describe and trace the history of all observable languages, which amounts to tracing the history of families of languages and reconstructing as far as possible the mother languages of each family.

(2) To determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, and to deduce the general laws to which all specific historical

phenomena can be reduced. (This function now-a-days is being carried on under language universals).

SCOPE OF COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Comparative historical linguistics tries to prove that a language is derived from an earlier language, and that particular words in it are derived from particular earlier words. Another concern of the historical linguist is to understand how languages change. By a long series of historical processes the Proto-Indo-European parent language gradually split up into a number of separate languages such as Germanic, Celtic, Slavic and these in turn evolved into their numerous modern descendants. The same process of change are responsible for the diversity of dialects within English—and after some millennia they may well have resulted in a number of languages descended from English in just the same way that English, German, etc., are descended from Proto-Germanic. The nature of these processes stands as the question basic to all further work in historical linguistics.

Linguists compare languages for several reasons. e.g. to note their dissimilarities; to form a **typology**—the classification of languages into different types; to find out what language have developed from what other languages. Three areas of comparative historical linguistics are of special interest: languages changes (see chapter 19), establishment of language families on the basis of comparison between languages or/and dialects.

According to Meillet, the science of comparative linguistics is interested in three things: 'phonetic laws,' 'analogy and loan words' (i.e. words taken into a given language from another language). The comparative linguistics is thus a rigorous method of finding and testing 'a system of correspondences between an initial language and languages arising at a later period.' Comparative linguistics may also lead to an explanation of how and why certain changes took place in a certain order, in turn creating certain languages.

APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Applied Linguistics is the collective term for the various applications of linguistic (and phonetic) scholarship to related practical fields—foreign language teaching, lexicography, translation, speech pathology and therapy, error analysis, etc. Applied linguistics in the widest sense, therefore, borders on other disciplines, e.g. sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology, computational linguistics, stylistics, etc. The speech therapist, the literary critic, the translator, communication engineer, the language teacher, the syllabus former, the educational planner, the textbook writer, the dictionary maker have found linguistics useful for their work. Applied Linguistics is a consumer, or user, not a producer of theories. As a field of study it is about 30 years old.

If a person knows a language and its structure, it may help him write better text-books teach it more efficiently and translate it more accurately. If a learner who wants to learn a language is told about its systems and sounds scientifically he may learn it sooner and better than he would do it by haphazard, hit-or-miss manner. A learner of a foreign language can acquire with the help of phonetics accurate pronunciation.

Psychologists and neuro-surgeons are interested in the function of the brain and the principle of learning. A child's attempt to learn a language, his ability to categorize, his loss of control over his linguistic skill (reading, writing, speaking and listening with understanding), his conceptual capabilities and failures—all aid the specialist in his field. Engineers who know the properties of speech can devise better telephones, telephones that can operate when you dictate rather than dial the number of subscriber. Instead of touch-typewriter we can have dictation typewriter, and machine can do the translation work done by humans. We can have better radios and better television receivers.

It is believed that each man's voice-print is unique as his thumb-impression. It may be easier for officer of the law to apprehend criminals and bring them before

the bar of justice with the help of tapes of recorded conversation.

Philosophers can take a fresh look at some of the unresolved controversies in their fields with the insights gained by their acquaintance with linguistics—for example, between the rationalist point of view and the empiricist point of view about the nature of learning. They can also study the structure of meaning and the validity of forming linguistic universals.

Sociologists can take a look at the interaction of social groups, the role played by languages and dialects in group dynamics, the problems created by bilingualism, polylingualism, etc. Anthropologists can study a community better if they know the language of the community.

Mathematicians are interested in the formal properties of natural languages and how meaning is mapped into sound. In devising computer languages, such information proves valuable. Teachers of composition can easily diagnose the problems of their students and suggest quick and effective remedies to improve their performance.

Above all, the study of language satisfies our intellectual urge, and we derive satisfaction and pleasure when we come to know about the mysteries of language. Finally the rhetorical question: 'why should anyone want to study the work of Shakespeare, Picasso and so on?' The answer is 'for its own sake'. And so with language study.

Thus the study of linguistics quenches linguistic thirst, gives the knowledge of the properties and mysteries of language, illuminates ancient and prehistoric culture, helps in improving and reforming spellings, vocabulary, pronunciation, usage, interpretation. Some day advances in linguistics may help in the creation of some new international language in developing new kinds of talking machines, in understanding the language of any other species if found on any other planet, although so far there is no proof of

life on any other planet. The study of linguistics is also useful in the information of scripts and spellings, production of teaching materials, dictionaries, grammars and text books.

TYPICAL QUESTIONS

- 1. Explain the dichotomy between.**
 - (a) Synchrony and Diachrony.**
 - (b) Langue and Parole.**
 - (c) Competence and Performance.**
 - 2. Comment on linguistic analysis and native speaker's intuition.**
 - 3. 'Language is form, not substance.' Discuss giving examples from English.**
 - 4. A linguist is concerned primarily with Form or Structure and only casually with the meaning. Discuss.**
 - 5. What is 'applied linguistics'?**
 - 6. What are the major applications of linguistics?**
Or
Discuss briefly the utility of linguistics.
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