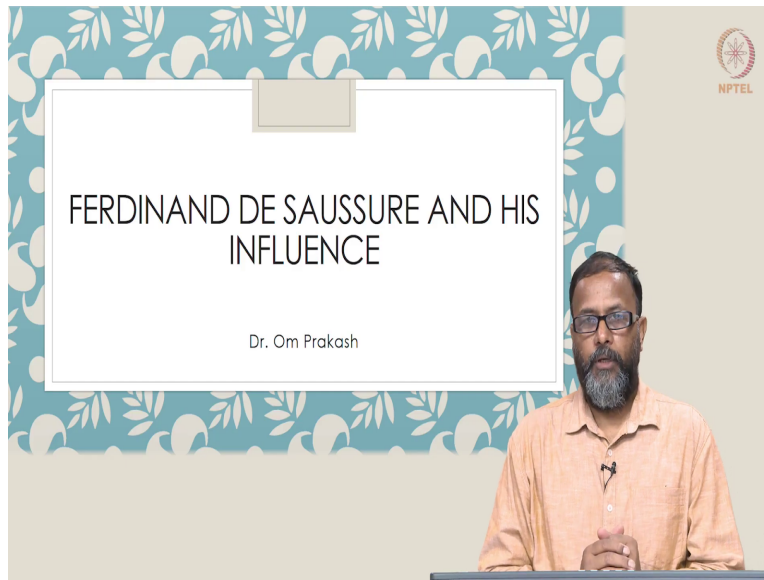**Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics**
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**Ferdinand de Saussure and his Influence**

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Welcome to class. Today, we are going to talk about a very significant paradigm shift that happened in the first half of the 20th century, 18th century and a larger part of 19th century is dedicated to study of language, language change, reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European language family, and looking at the regions for language change, patterns of language change, so historical linguistics and linguistics philology.

But the first half of the 20th century and specifically the first quarter made a huge shift in paradigm, the way we looked at language, the way we looked at language studies. So, today we are going to talk about Ferdinand de Saussure and his influence on linguistics in particular and overall social sciences in general. Ferdinand de Saussure is a landmark name in the history of modern linguistics. He is considered as the father of modern linguistics, and is considered as the proponent of structuralism in social sciences. His works not only influenced linguistics and language studies, but extends up to a significant influence in areas like literature, literary studies, psychology, sociology, anthropology and other related social sciences. So today, we are going to

talk about Ferdinand de Saussure and his influence on social sciences in general and linguistics in particular.

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Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist, born on 26th November 1857. And his journey of life ended on 22nd February 1930. He was a Linguist, a Semiotician, a Philosopher and a profound influencer of theoretical approaches and perspectives in the early 20th century. His ideas made significant influence and changes in linguistics and semiotics in the first half of 20th century and continue to guide the understanding of the same till date. Saussure's contribution is not limited only to linguistics, but to the whole range of human sciences that include philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, and culture.

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## Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

- Ferdinand de Saussure was born in Geneva.
- Saussure received his doctorate from University of Leipzig in 1880, and taught ancient and modern languages in Paris till 1891. At University of Geneva, he taught Sanskrit phonology, Greek, Latin, and Germanic languages till he died of heart failure in 1913.
- He studied Sanskrit and comparative linguistics in Geneva, Paris, and Leipzig, where he came in contact with the circle of young scholars known as the Neogrammarians.
- Brugmann, was his mentor, but he was very close to Karl Verner and others of the circle.
- Saussure is considered as the father of modern linguistics and structuralism.

Saussure received his doctoral degree from University of Leipzig in 1880, and taught ancient and modern languages in Paris till 1891. At University of Geneva, he taught Sanskrit, phonology, Greek, Latin and Germanic languages till he died of heart failure in 1913. He studied Sanskrit and comparative linguistics in Geneva, Paris and Leipzig, where he came in contact with a circle of young scholars known as Neogrammarians. And this was the time, when historical linguistics was the latest linguistic approach of understanding language changes. Brugmann was his mentor, but he was very close to people like Karl Werner and others of the circle. He is considered the father of modern linguistics and structuralism.

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- From the late 18th century extended up to 19th century, the period witnessed studies in Historical Linguistics and reconstruction of Proto Indo-European language by tracing the divergence to contemporary languages of India, Iran and Europe.
- An early 20th century saw an emergence of Descriptive Linguistics, which was primarily concerned with the description of a single language at a given point in time.
- The beginning of the 20th century witnessed a very influential work *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*) by Ferdinand de Saussure, which was published posthumously in 1916 by two of his former students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye out of their lecture-notes that they had taken from Saussure's lectures in Geneva (Macey, 2009).

What influence did he make in the field; we will come to know shortly. But if you look at the background, and the contemporary period of Saussure, and the status of the thrust and major themes being worked upon in the social sciences, and the area of linguistics, it gives us an understanding of the context in which Saussure emerged as a linguist. So from the late 18th century, and it can be extended up to the 19th century, the period witnessed studies in Historical Linguistics and reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European language. This was the time when linguistic philology and linguistic reconstruction was in fashion. And lots of attention was paid to this phenomenon. And a lot of works published during this period, which influenced and shaped the ideas of Saussure. And that was the period when Proto-Indo-European language was being reconstructed by tracing the divergence of contemporary languages of India, Iran and Iraq. In the early 20th century, that saw an emergence of descriptive linguistics, which was primarily concerned with the description of a single language at a given point in time. That was the context and the background in which Saussure started working.

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed a very influential course in General Linguistics by Gerdinand de Saussure. However, Saussure never wrote a book on this subject. This book was published posthumously by his students, who collected the class notes they had taken in his lectures in Geneva. And it was published in 1916, after his death from the contents of the lecture notes that were taken from Saussure's lectures in Geneva.

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But the ideas and approach of Saussure made a significant paradigm shift not only in linguistics but in a wide range of areas such as literature, philosophy, sociology, and other related disciplines. What was so special about Saussure's approach to language studies? Saussure saw language as a formal system with various constituting elements, linguistic elements, which should be analyzed, despite complexities in real time of his speech production. So he saw language as a formal underlying system. And drawing primarily from the works by Saussure, the 1920s saw an emergence of structuralism in language studies and linguistics. The decade witnessed a shift in approaches with meticulous and sophisticated methods in analyzing language as a system with sub-disciplines like phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, etcetera. So, levels of representation, which later came to be known in American Structuralist tradition, as the building blocks of language.

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# Scope of Linguistics

- The subject matter of linguistics includes all manifestations of human speech comprising savages, civilized, classical or decadent periods. A linguist must consider correct speech, flowery language and other forms of expressions too. He should also consider written texts.
- The scope of linguistics should be:
  - 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 language of each family;
  - 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; and
  - to delimit and define itself. (Saussure, 1959: p. 6)

Saussure, looked at language, and defined the scope of linguistics in following terms. So he says, the subject matter of linguistics includes all manifestations of human speech comprising savages, civilized, classical or descendant periods. So, he is not referring to any human speech or any variety. So, he is talking about an underlying formal structure of a given language.

A linguist must consider correct speech, flowery language and other forms of illustrations too. He should also consider written texts. And this is how he defines the scope of linguistics, linguistics studies. And says, the scope should be number 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 language of each family, and we can relate it to his understanding and background of historical linguistics.

And this very celebrated pharyngeal theory, the Indian theory but in fact. Number 2: To determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, so he is talking about universality and commonality among languages. And to deduce the general laws to which all specific historical phenomena can be reduced. And third, he says to delimit and define itself. So, this is how he sets the scope of the outlines of the scope of linguistics. And we can see two factors emerging out of this definition of scope of linguistics. Number 1, the classification of language, number 2, commonality and universality among languages; and number 3, the underlying structure, which can account for the structure of language itself.

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Then he talks about the object of linguistics. And he introduced concepts like the langue system of language, underlying system of language, and parole, the actual act of speaking. And which you can relate to, the whole Chomsky enterprise, where he talks about two levels. In fact, he talks about deep structure and surface structure.

Or you can relate it to the structuralist idea of underlying structures and building blocks of language like phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, levels of representation. So, he talks about langue, which is an abstract system and a system of structure, a structure of language and then parole, the actual use of it. Roughly, we can talk about competence and performance in that way, the ability of the speaker and the actual use of language. According to Saussure, language is not a function of the speaker, it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual. It never requires premeditation. Speaking on the contrary, is an individual act. It is willful and intellectual. And he gets the idea of sign, signifier and signified, and semiology, semiotics. He says, "Language is a system of signs that expresses idea and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etcetera." We will shortly talk about Saussure's idea of paradox and its opposition, the contrast and opposition of linguistic objects, which is also known as Saussure's paradox, and the underlying formal system of language.

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**Saussure's View of language**

∘ Saussure has two different perspectives in theory of language:
∘
  ∘ language is a system of signs i.e. a semiotic system;
  ∘ a language is also a social phenomenon: a product of the language community.

So, his view of language, if you look at how Saussure looked at language, he has two perspectives when looking at language. Number 1, is he looks at language as a system of science, a semiotic system. And number 2, a language is also a social phenomenon, a product of language community. So, he looks at language as an underlying structure, a formal system and also the actual use of it in the socio-cultural context.

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**Saussure's Key Concepts**

∘ Systemic Contrast and Equivalent
∘ Language consists of a string of linguistic Objects: words, phonemes, morphemes, [all in contrast and opposition]
∘ Made a radical change in understanding language as phenomenon:
∘ Langue and Parole: System of language and actual Use
∘ Sign, Signifier, and Signified: Arbitrary and conventional relationship
∘ Synchrony and Diachrony
∘ Syntagm [linear sequence of linguistic object] and Paradigm [similar category linguistic objects that can replace each other]
∘ Language has a formal structure and should be studied in structural perspective.

This is how he looks at language. And I was talking about Saussure's paradox. He looked at language as a Systematic Contrast and objects of, objects with linguistic objects as Systematic

Contrast and Equivalent. So you can understand language in terms of Systematic Contrast and Equivalence. And that is why you can find a binary opposition is Saussure's idea when he talks about language, underlying system and the actual use.

So, language consists of a string of linguistic objects, like words, phonemes, morphemes, all in contrast and opposition, the discrete elements. They are all in contrast and opposition. And that is why we are able to use them. He made a radical change in understanding language as a phenomenon. And he talked about Langue and Parole. So, langue is an underlying system, an abstract system, which you can roughly relate to competence. And parole, the actual use of it, which means you can roughly associate with performance. So, he gave a very important concept of Sign, Signifier and Signified.

So, when we say sign, by the way, we will talk about Saussure's paradox in our next class in detail. But just to introduce the idea, signifier represents the real world objective reality. So, suppose I say, "Cat, C-A-T cat, I say dog, D-O-G dog. So, the word, structure of the word does not have any significant connection with the object it represents. So signifier, and signified, so the object which is being signified and the signifier have no direct relationship, except for onomatopoeic expressions like thud, so you fell down with a thud. So, when you say thud, the word, it actually represents the actual sound of the volume. Cat muse, so muse is the word that actually represents the actual sound the way cat makes. These are onomatopoeic expressions except for these, and which are very counted, and it can be counted, very few in your language, otherwise, majority of the signifiers, the words, as a word as signifier does not have a direct connection with the real world representation. So if I say a fan, F-A-N fan, so the word fan does not actually represent the objective reality or the object in the real world. And that is why different languages have different words for the same objective reality. So, fan is pankha in Hindi. So, even if the word changes, the signified, the objective reality does not change.

So you can understand language in terms of Contrast and Equivalent. So, it gives a very powerful concept of Sign, Signifier and Signified and also says, Signifier and Signified have no direct relationship, they are arbitrary and conventional. So, why you call a fan, a fan? No explanation for that. Why we call a cow, a cow? No explanation for that. But when I say cow, all English speakers will have a mental image of an animal called cow. So the signifier cow and the signified

the animal, they do not have direct relationship, this relationship is conventional, shared by all the speakers of the language. And that is what he is saying about; he is talking about underlying system of language as a formal structure with an underlying system. Another concept he talks about is Synchrony and Diachrony, two language styles. So, synchrony refers to understanding and studying language at a given point of time. But diachrony refers to the period of the period and the evolution of linguistic changes. So, diachronic study in language refers to a periodical study or longitudinal study. Synchrony in linguistics refers to understanding and studying language at a given point of time.

Another important paradox in Saussure's idea is Syntagm and Paradigm. Now syntagm, what is syntagm? Syntagm is a linear sequence of linguistic objects. So, if you have X and Y axis, if you have this axis on the axes you can find syntagm as a horizontal one and paradigm as the vertical one. So, this is the axis, this is syntagm and this is paradigm. What is the difference? Syntagm is the linear sequence and relationship between linguistic objects, however paradigm refers to similar categories, equivalent categories in linguistics which can replace each other. So, when I say, I like apple. Now, if you look at the relationship of I like an apple, the linguistic elements, the constituents in a linear relationship, they cannot be swapped, they cannot change this position, they cannot be scrambled, they cannot replace each other. But, if I say I like bananas, I can replace apples with bananas. I like movies. So, these bananas, apples, movies, that category can be replaced. So, we can make changes and we can replace these linguistic objects in terms of the paradigmatic relationship. So, he gives a concept of syntagm and paradigm, where syntagm refers to the linear relationship and sequencing of linguistic elements with certain constraints and restrictions in the language.

And paradigm refers to related similar categories of elements in the language which can replace each other. And then, he says that linguistics, understanding linguistics in terms of language, as a formal structure, and it should be studied in its structural perspective. And this is the idea which gave birth to structuralism in social sciences, particularly in linguistics, and it has a deeper impact on other social science subjects and disciplines.

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**Influence Outside Linguistics**

◦ The principles and methods employed by structuralism were later adapted in diverse fields by French intellectuals such as
  ◦ Roland Barthes,
  ◦ Jacques Lacan,
  ◦ Jacques Derrida,
  ◦ Michel Foccault, and
  ◦ Claude Levi-Strauss.

◦ These scholars were deeply influenced by Saussure's ideas and the influence is visible in their own areas of study like literary studies, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology etc.
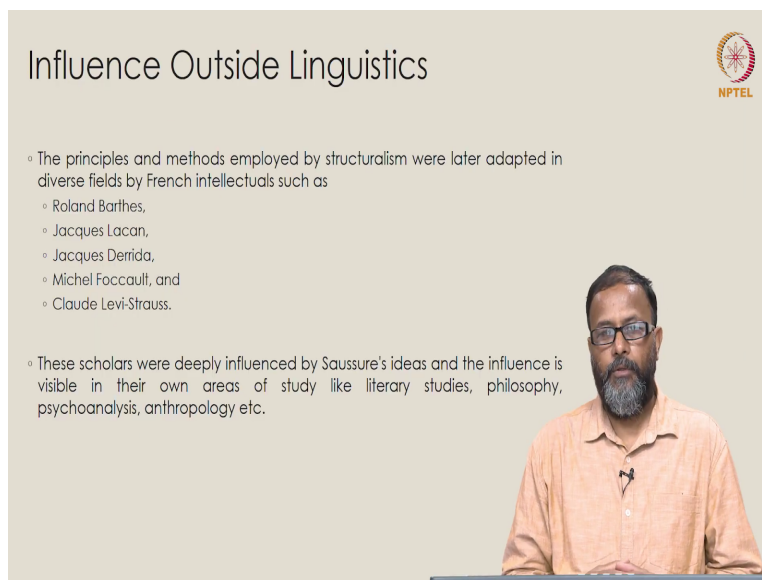
If you look at the influence outside of linguistics, that Saussure made, the principle changes in theoretical approaches that we see is in literature, in philosophy, in sociology, and anthropology, and other related disciplines, and scholars, the French intellectuals and scholars, whom we study in different fields, like Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foccault, and Claude Levi-Strauss. They all were deeply influenced by Saussure's work. And we can see the manifestation of structuralism and influence of Saussure in their work, which gets prominence, prominently visible in their work. And these scholars were deeply influenced. And it is visible in their own areas of studies like literary studies, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, and literature. So, all these disciplines have benefited out of Saussure's work.

And, if we conclude, Saussure remains one of the influencers of the 20th century, early 20th century. And as we are talking in the 21st century, Saussure's impact and influence is visible in all disciplines, all social science disciplines specifically. Saussure is known as the father of modern linguistics, because linguistics saw a paradigmatic shift in its approaches and methodology and techniques of analyzing a language. The structuralism as propounded by Saussure gave birth to American Structuralism. And it influenced people like Bloomfield, Leonard Bloomfield, the whole school of American structuralism that looks at language as a building block, as an underlying system of multiple subsystems, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, these are the levels of representation.

Saussure's work also can be seen influencing the generative paradigm, however there are discussions and debates on it, and, but the fact that language is an underlying system shared by all the speakers of the language, and the parole, see, the actual use of it is the individual expression. So, this idea, the idea of a language as a formal structural system still continues to dominate all language studies till date.

We have moved from structuralism to post structuralism and generative paradigm, and then we can see other theoretical changes, changes in approach and methodology of analyzing language. But the original influence of Saussure in linguistics cannot be overestimated. And the 20th century is, the first half of the 20th century is completely dominated by Saussure's paradigm. And today, we talk about pre Saussure, post Saussure or maybe in the Saussure, in support of Saussure. Saussure becomes a milestone, his work becomes a milestone. And entire social science looks at structuralism in contrast and opposition to his approach. And language studies, linguistic analysis completely changed after Saussure's work was published in 1960.

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The work of Saussure influenced linguistics and language studies in a big way and gave birth to a new paradigm, and we call it structural linguistics or structuralism. He is known as the father of modern linguistics and proponent of structuralism as an approach and theory. And his work extended up to multiple disciplines, be it philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, literature, etcetera. In our next class, we will talk about the Saussurean concepts, key concepts

and the major thrust of his work, something like langue and parole, signifier, signified, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships, synchrony and diachrony, and all other related concepts. And this is it for now. We will talk about all these Saussurean key concepts in our next class. Thank you very much.