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Understanding the concept of structuralism in an interesting way

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Abstract
The article tries to present the idea of structuralism in linguistics in a simplified way. Undoubtedly, it's a simplification of the broad idea but it can be significantly helpful for the students to enter into the complicated sphere of critical theories in an interesting way. It begins with general questions on the formation, function, and structure of language and tries to explain the mysteries through a synchronic study that emphasizes the present rather than the past. Most importantly, it makes the idea of structuralism easy and clear in its discourse.

Keywords: Sign, Signified, Signifier, Langue, Parole, Syntagm, Paradigm, Laryngeal theory, Diachronic study of language, Synchronic study of language

Introduction
What is language? How does it function? How does its program work to hold ideas, concepts, thoughts, and real things through some phonetic sounds and some other signs? The one great man who first confronted with these fundamental linguistical questions was a Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, a semiotician, and a philosopher. He did his doctoral thesis on Panini's age-old Sanskrit grammar book *Astadyayi*. In the twentieth century, he brought forth a revolutionary theory to decode the hidden codes of language before his students at Geneva University. He died in 1913 before he could give shape to his ideas in the form of a book. In 1916, his students namely Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye compiled his notes and published as *Cours de linguistique generale* in French language. And this book is considered to be the seminal text on Structuralism.

General Idea of Structuralism
Structuralism is, I will prefer to say, a 20th century European intellectual movement to fathom different fields of study and society including language, culture, sociology, anthropology, archeology, history, philosophy, linguistics and so on. This theory opposes to consider the society and literature as a reflection of reality, instead it looks at it as a simulacrum of attributed signs/elements. Structuralists perceive the world as a simulacrum of signs and they try to find out the relations between those signs to excavate/determine the meaning.

The word 'structure' has its origin in the Latin word 'struere' which means 'to build'. The theory of Structuralism says that everything is built following an existing structure. Therefore, there is a structure in everything everywhere. And the elements of the structure are governed and kept stable by a center. So, the structure is permanent and steady. Therefore, the followers of this theory emphasize on the pre-existing, stable and permanent structure and understate its individual elements and its individual use.

Structuralism in Language
Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, for the first time, analyzes the language based on structural concept. Mastering many languages like, Greek, French, German, English, Latin, Sanskrit etc., he comes to an understanding that languages do have an underlying structure. And language is never a reality, instead, it is a structure of some attributed signs. So there is no direct relation between a language and what it means. For example, there is no direct relation between the word - "horse" and an animal - "Quadruped. Graminivorous.

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Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." So the word 'horse' is artificially attributed to the object it refers to. In the same way, there is no relation between the symbol of plus (+) and a hospital; it is attributed, mechanical and imposed. So there is no direct relation between what we speak or write and what we mean by that. Saussure terms the actual things and concepts as signified and its lingual expression as signifier. So language is structured with many signs i.e. words, phrases, etc. and it follows some basic and fundamental rules to produce a meaning.

It is already told that there is no direct relation between signifier and signified. If it is true, a question naturally arises - what is the invisible force that ties a signifier with the signified? How does a signifier hold the signified when they have no intrinsic relation? Perhaps the tie subsists for the acceptance of the relation (though not real) by the community of the particular language-speakers and its long use by them. Saussure says that the meaning of a word is created on the basis of difference. We call cat to 'a small domesticated carnivorous mammal with soft fur, a short snout, retractable claws and some certain habits'. Here the signifier for the signified object 'a small domesticated carnivorous mammal with soft fur, a short snout, retractable claws and some certain habits' is being fixed on the basis that it is not a dog, it is not a fox, it is not a tiger, it is not a human. Therefore, the meaning has no direct relation. Rather, one can say, the relation between signifier and the signified is indirect and arbitrary.

Once the signifiers (i.e. parts of speech) are accepted for their concerned signified objects or concepts, the language forms the sentences for the complete expression through combination of the signifiers based on the rules of the particular language. For further understanding, let it be considered that 'he', 'is', 'going', 'to' and 'London' are accepted as the signifiers of what they actually refer to. Now the combination of these signifiers will produce a meaning following the rules and style of English language and that will be like - "he is going to London." Saussure calls this concept of combination as 'syntagm'. Here one needs to understand that all the rules, all the signifiers, and the style of a particular language belong to and are based on an existing structure. This broader structure of a language is termed as 'langue' and precise utterance of langue at an individual level as 'parole'. In other words, parole is the smallest pragmatic application of the langue. For some extra information, the word 'langue' is taken from the Latin word 'lingua' which means language or tongue and the word 'parole' from 'parabola' meaning speaking or speech.

When signifiers successfully form a meaning through combination, it extends its reach through substitution of the signifiers to express a new thought, idea, concept or any compound or complex signified. We have already seen how language creates a sentence that means "he is going to London." Now if we substitute the signifier 'he' for 'a bird', 'going' for 'flying', 'to' for 'in' and 'London' for 'the sky', it will produce a different meaning and it will be like - "a bird is flying in the sky." Saussure calls this idea of substitution as 'paradigm'.

Let us try to understand how the 'syntagm' and 'paradigm' actually work through a graph

		He	is	going	to		London
A		bird	is	flying	in	the	sky
The	new-born	babies	are	crying	in	the	hospital
A		farmer	goes		to	the	field
His		iPhone	is	stolen	by		someone

Syntagmatic Axis / Paradigmatic Axis

If someone serially combines the signifiers of the syntagmatic axis, it will produce a meaning and substitution of the signifiers on the paradigmatic axis will produce a new meaning. This is how the language is structured. Even the smallest unit of a language follows a certain structural rule. A word is formed with the combination of vowel and consonant phonemes. If there are two consecutive consonant phonemes, they are usually followed by a vowel phoneme (i.e. player, bloom, great etc.) except some exceptional words like 'strike', 'split', 'screen' etc. Even in the exceptional cases, the first phoneme sound is always of 's' (/s/) and the second is of 'p' (/p/), 't' (/t/) or 'c' (/k/) and third is of 'r' (/r/) or 'l' (/l/). So from the formation of words to the use of language, everything yields a broader structure. And it is known as Laryngeal theory of Saussure.

Conclusion
General conception about the development of language is that language is a historical evolution. Studying language based on this general conception is known as diachronic study of language. Structuralism deals with the present, not the past. So Structuralists try not to find out how language has come into existence because it would become an invalid approach of study. Rather they try to find out the internal structure of the language. As a Structuralist, Saussure gives less importance to the diachronic study of it, instead he focuses and emphasizes upon the inner structure and functioning of language in a 'particular time period, not through time'. He terms it as Synchronic study of language. He never denied the importance of diachrony but considered complementary.

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