# From Saussure to Chomsky—A Study of Nature of Language (Contrastive Studies)

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**Abstract:** In order to study language, it is necessary to first clarify the nature of language, which is the basis of linguistics and from which all other issues are derived. This paper will study the nature of language from the main academic views of Saussure and Chomsky.

**Keywords:** Saussure; Chomsky; Linguistic

## 1. Introduction

The objects of study in language science are not known in advance to be studied directly as in other sciences. But this view was not clear in the early days of the study of linguistics. It was only with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, that the object of linguistics was raised as a central issue. His view, the object of language study is langue but for parole, was the starting point and basis for Saussure's discussion of all linguistic issues. The distinction between langue and parole is objective, not subjective, and the distinction goes beyond methodological significance to the discovery of two essentially different things. Once the object of linguistics was clarified, the next logical question was how to study language as an object. But the later linguist Chomsky, unlike Saussure, who advocated structuralism, had a different view of the nature of language. The author argues that in order to study language, it is necessary to first clarify the nature of language, which is the basis of linguistics and from which all other issues are derived. This paper will study the nature of language from the main academic views of Saussure and Chomsky.

## 2. Saussure: Langue & Parole

Saussure is recognized by later scholars as the founder of structuralism and the founding father of modern linguistic theory. Saussure was the father of modern linguistics and he shaped linguistics into a highly influential and independent discipline. According to Saussure, words are "representatives of sound symbols". In other words, they represent the sound of language. Therefore, words can only fulfill their function of expressing concepts by "expressing (recording) the sound of language". This view has been revered by academics as an "axiom of linguistics" and has become the cornerstone of Saussure's modern linguistics.

Saussure divided speech activity into two parts: langue and parole. Langue is the social part of speech activity, which is not governed by individual will, but is shared by the members of society and is a social-psychological phenomenon. Parole is the part of speech activity that is governed by the will of the individual and is characterized by individual pronunciation, diction, and syntax. But no matter how different the characteristics of individuals may be, individuals in the same society can communicate with each other due to the unifying effect of language. Further, Saussure points out that language has internal and external elements, and thus the study of language can be divided into internal linguistics and external linguistics. Internal linguistics studies the structural system of language itself, while external linguistics studies the relationship of language to ethnicity, culture, geography, history, etc. Saussure states that the study of linguistics is, first and foremost, the study of the system (structure) of language, pioneering structuralism.

The fundamental attribute of Saussure's philosophy of language is to sever the connection between language and the external world (the real world) and to find the ground of meaning within the linguistic system. This point of departure, in terms of the need for the construction of Saussure's ordinary linguistic thought, is his reflection on the nature of the linguistic sign. Saussure's thinking about the nature of linguistic signs is first expressed in his distinction between the energy and the reference of linguistic signs. The signifier and signified, the two constituent elements of linguistic signs, refer to the sound image and the concept represented by the sound image, respectively. The link between them is a signification or signifying relationship, which is realized at the level of the linguistic sign. "What is connected by linguistic signs is not things and names, but concepts and sound images". Since concepts and sound images are mental entities, the process of signification is a mental operation, which is fundamentally different from the denotational relationship between names and things. Based on the above-mentioned nature of linguistic signs and the process of their denotation, the characteristics of Saussure's philosophy of language become evident.

The first principle of Saussure's theory of meaning is the arbitrariness of linguistic signs (which is also the first principle of Saussure's system of ordinary linguistic theory). The establishment of the arbitrariness of the relation between energy and reference

is essentially the logical consequence of his rejection of the denotational view of the meaning of words, and is the first step in the search for a place for meaning within the linguistic system. At the same time, the establishment of symbolic arbitrariness is also important for the construction of Saussure's theory of meaning, that is, various characteristics of symbols, such as psychological properties, social properties, and intentionality, can logically enter into the generation and analysis of symbolic meaning and constitute the elements of the theory of meaning. The second step of finding the meaning in the linguistic system is to establish the meaning of the linguistic symbols (specifically, the symbolic energy) by taking the "system" as the reference and the "value" as the ontology of the concept. Such a meaning is not determined by the world outside the symbol system or any other factor, but is the result of the symbol system itself. In this way, the definition of the meaning of a symbol that constitutes the system cannot be done in a "positive" way, but only in a "negative" way.As the main representative of the semiotic view of language essence, Saussure's view of language essence is mainly based on the natural properties of language. He considered language as a kind of symbol, a special system of symbols, and affirmed the symbolic and systematic nature of language, showing the special nature of language. In this sense, Saussure's view of the nature of language is of great theoretical and pioneering significance, and it is indisputable that Saussure is responsible for it. However, due to the limitations of his time, Saussure's view of the essence of language has some weaknesses and shortcomings. First, Saussure's view of the nature of language is essentially an explanation of the nature of language at the level of its natural properties, rather than a comprehensive explanation of the nature of language as a whole. Second, Saussure's semiotic view of the nature of language is based on his view of language as a static, co-temporal system, which not only ignores the ephemeral state of language and the existence of people in language, but also leads to the exclusion of speech from the object of his linguistic study, which is detached from the living practice of language. Again, Saussure's semiotic view of the nature of language actually has the effect of leading to a view of language as a sign that is dominated by people, without seeing the dynamic role of language for people.

# 3. Chomsky: Competence & Performance

The relationship between language and mind is a long-standing topic of common interest and debate among several disciplines, including linguistics, psychology and philosophy. Noam Chomsky, a famous American linguist, regards it as the most central issue in linguistic research and believes that an objective understanding of the relationship between language and mind is a necessary prerequisite for correctly posing and answering any linguistic or philosophical questions. In Syntactic Structure, Chomsky insists on the idea of linguistic talent, changing the previous paradigm of thinking that simply depicts grammatical rules and adopting the idea of transformative generation to explore the internal structure of language; changing the discovery procedure insisted on by structuralism to the evaluation procedure of generative grammar, and establishing a theory of human language by deductive methods, pioneering the study of formal linguistics. This work, although "not yet completely free from the structuralist framework," triggered the "avalanche" of the modern cognitive revolution and was Chomsky's manifesto for a radical break with structuralism.

Chomsky's view of language is a continuation of Descartes' view of talent and Kant's idea of the intuitive form of sense, and an inheritance and development of European rationalist thinking. In Chomsky's view, human linguistic ability is a natural ability that does not depend on experience and is in a first position before external speech acts, i.e., human ability "*does not come from experience, but is innate in human beings ...... as a reliable basis for knowing the world*". Chomsky's affirmation of the ultimate material property of mind is reflected in the hypothesis of "language faculty," which gives language an ontological status and affirms the close relationship between language and mind. According to Chomsky, the mind is to the brain what a computer software system is to the hardware of a computer, and is determined by a biological genetic system. "All mental activity is a certain state and function presented by the brain," and the language faculty is a manifestation of mental activity, just as the visual system exists within the human body, so the language faculty exists within the human brain. Thus, Chomsky's syntactic research is based on the view of language as a real object in the natural world and the linguistic faculty as an innate biological organ. Through the study of transformative syntax, he deduced and generalized grammatical rules and realized the abstraction of linguistic functions, thus gaining insight into the nature of human language and the nature of the mind, and finally realizing "the study of brain structure at the level of abstraction". It is important to note that although Chomsky holds the view of "linguistic talent," he does not deny the role of the "trigger" of acquired experience. It is on the basis of innate linguistic faculties that human language acquisition is made possible by the externalized representation of different linguistic forms in different sociocultural contexts.

Chomsky's view of language and methodology has received a great deal of attention from Western philosophical, linguistic, and cognitive circles. Many scholars have praised it, such as Lightfoot, who believes that although the original Syntactic Structure does not mention cognitive research, its ideas have triggered a cognitive revolution; Chomsky is not only re-integrating linguistic materials, but also proposing a discursive philosophy on the nature of language by re-examining linguistic materials and grammar, and by adopting a rigorous and precise research method similar to that of the natural sciences to By adopting a rigorous and precise approach similar to that of the natural sciences, the internal structure of language is interpreted and a theory of language is developed. Smith, Wilson, and Li Gu cheng commented that Chomsky's use of formal arguments for language to argue for the human psyche reversed the way people had argued before, reversing the relationship between linguistics, psychology, and philosophy, and was a revolutionary point in Chomsky's theory of language.

However, some scholars have criticized Chomsky's view of linguistic talent and methodology from different aspects, for example, Wang Yin has commented that Chomsky is evaluating language statically, ignoring the historical nature of language; focusing mainly on the mind and ability of idealized individual speakers and ignoring their social nature. Li Shuguang and Hao Ying argue that transformational generative grammar "does not pay enough attention to the environment and has not really examined language input through empirical studies, but only logically deduces that language input is inadequate in terms of quantity and quality". Chomsky's ability to go against the tide of structuralist linguistics and spark a revolution in linguistics is inextricably linked to his scientific and rigorous methodology. A re-reading of his canonical work shows that although the results of that time have been overturned by

Chomsky himself, his view of linguistic talent and his methodology of rational thought are still in use. As for now, this is what is most worthy of being learned and studied.

## 4. Contractive Study

At a macro level, Saussure's "language" and "speech" are very similar to Chomsky's "linguistic competence" and "language application. "are very similar. First, both "language" and "linguistic competence" focus on the theoretical knowledge of language as the basis and prerequisite for language use; second, both "speech" and "The relationship between language and speech is similar to Chomsky's relationship between linguistic competence and language application, in that they serve as a basis for each other. Despite the many similarities, there are subtle differences between the two that cannot be ignored. For example, with regard to the concepts of language and linguistic competence, Saussure believed that language is an agreed system of symbols with a high degree of stability, while Chomsky proposed that linguistic competence, although to some extent a reserve of linguistic knowledge in an ideal state, is not innate and not carried at birth; he argued that what is present in the human brain from the beginning is only He argues that the human brain starts with a "universal grammar", which is applicable to all languages, and that it takes a long process of empirical stimulation to convert it into the grammar of our native language, eventually reaching a state of "individual grammar". Thus, Chomsky says that linguistic competence is dynamic rather than static.

## 5. Conclusion

If Saussure's theory ushered in a new era, then Chomsky was a creative leap forward. Studying both of their theories and ideas helps us to identify the essence of language learning and is a profound guide to our language studies. Therefore, their emergence is a landmark in linguistic research. In studying their theories, it is easy to see that there is a dialectical relationship between opposites and unity in everything, and that we cannot look at things in absolute terms. To observe a thing, we must analyze and judge it from all levels and different angles, and only in this way can we really approach the true nature of things. And everything is developing and changing, not static. We have to look at it with a developmental perspective and accept its mistakes in the development in order to dig into the essence. So, whether their theory is scientifically sound now or not it is one of the influential theories so far, and also plays an inspiring role in the future research of linguistics.

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