

Lecture 1: Survey of the History of Linguistics – in a *Sphota*¹

1.1 Revision of Familiar Ground:

1. What Is Linguistics?
 - 1.1. Sciences versus the Arts
2. Dialectical vs. Metaphysical Reasoning
3. The Spiral of Evolution

1.2 The Evolution of Linguistics in the past 4000 years

1. Introduction & Timeline: 2000 BC to 2010 AD
2. Predominance of Dialectical Reasoning
 - 2.1. Pre-history: myths & legends
 - 2.2. Linguistics developed independently in several societies: Ancient India, China & Mesopotamia
 - 2.3. Western linguistics: **Phase 1** (Ancient Greece)
3. Predominance of Metaphysical Reasoning
 - 3.1. **Phase 2**: Comparative & Historical Linguistics of the XIXth century
 - 3.2. **Phase 3**: Structuralism of the XXth century
4. New Synthesis – Dialectical Linguistics ‘connecting the dots’

1.1. Revision of Familiar Ground

1.1.1. What Is Linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. It is different from school grammar, which gives us the set of rules to follow when speaking or writing; the purpose of grammar lessons is to standardize language use in society and thus facilitate communication.

It is also different from creative writing, which is concerned with effective language use in expressing our thoughts and feelings.

1.1.1.1. Sciences vs. Arts

Sciences examine what is, what exists in the physical world, irrespective of our will. Natural and physical sciences study the laws of Nature, of the physical world; social sciences attempt to understand human behavior and society. Scientists do not imagine, or will things to be one way or another – they discover the way things *are*.

Arts, on the other hand, are human creations; they represent the artists’ perceptions and feelings about the world the way they see it, which is not necessarily the way it *is* – we can imagine things that do not really exist, and create works of art that embody our ideas /perceptions.

Linguistics is a science because it attempts to understand and explain Language and its role in society, examining the way people actually use it – it does not ‘opine’ about language.

Development implies movement, not standing still or going round in circles; it involves rising to a new, higher level in the spiral of evolution. Two opposing approaches have driven all scientific development,

¹ **Sphoṭa** – Sanskrit; literally, "*bursting, opening*" ('flash')

4.41478 – Survey of Linguistic Theories: Semester 1, 2012 ~ Lecture 1
alternating in their prevalence at different points in time: the *dialectical* and the *metaphysical* ways of reasoning. It is important that we distinguish between the two approaches:

2



1.1.2 *Dialectical vs. Metaphysical Reasoning*

Dialectical reasoning aims to understand things in their essential interconnectedness, complexity, motion, development and change – in their origin, evolution, and ending.

Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher of the late 6th century BC, epitomized dialectical thinking in just about a hundred pithy sentences, such as:

You could not step twice into the same river, for other waters are ever flowing on to you.

Heraclitus, *On the Universe*

All is flux; nothing stays still.

Nothing endures but change.

Heraclitus, from Diogenes Laeritus, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Heraclitus believed that, in a certain sense, ‘*All things are one*’, and that their “unity, far from excluding difference, opposition and change, actually depends on them, since the universe is in a continuous state of dynamic equilibrium.”² We can see this union of opposites everywhere we look – in Nature (day and night; life and death; atoms, made up of positrons and electrons; polarity in magnets; rainbows in daylight, etc.) and in human experience (pain and pleasure, love and hatred, excitement and boredom, etc.). In this struggle of opposites within the complex whole, *Quantity changes the Quality*: day turns into night, a seed grows into a tree, ice melts into water, pleasure morphs into pain, etc.).

All existence is a dynamic union of opposing forces, always in motion. Yin-Yang, the Taoist³ symbol (see above), represents harmony, achieved through the balance of contradictions in the world around us. It is one circle, made up of two teardrop-like halves fitting snugly together; one is white, the other – black, and each has an ‘eye’ of the opposite color in its ‘head.’ These ‘eyes’ of the opposite color, nested within each half, represent the interconnected and interdependent nature of the two ‘opposites’; they remind us that everything is in constant flux and change, and that ‘opposites’ always contain the ‘other’ (as night contains day, as daylight contains rainbows, as a mother contains the yet unborn child, etc.).

Yin-Yang symbolizes the dialectical view of the world, where existence and non-existence are united in constant struggle; the boundaries between them are always blurred, as the ‘opposites’ change and morph into others... When does human life begin – at birth or at conception? Or, perhaps, when we become conscious of our own existence? All things are in constant motion, emerging and dissolving in continuous birth-and-death cycles. Yin represents the birth of things, and Yang – their dissolution back into their more subtle (“no-thing”) components. Complex wholes are created through the contradiction / differences between their component parts. Dialectics views everything in the world on multiple levels, trying to understand how the ‘ripples of change’ spread, and affect the rest of existence. Global warming effect on individuals, human society as a whole, climates, geography, wildlife, etc., is just one example.

² <http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/phil/philosophy/heraclitus.html> (2010/01/21)

³ **Taoism** (or Daoism) is an Asian philosophy/ religion, which some regard it simply as an aspect of Chinese wisdom. Taoism has *Tao* [= *Way*] as its basis, meaning both “the way of the universe” and the “way of life.” Source: <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Taoism> (2010/02/04)

To sum up, then: Dialectical reasoning views everything as a process; the universe is in flux, and dialectics seeks to discover the internal connections that make a continuous whole of all the different and constantly changing parts. Since the forms of things are always changing, the main focus of dialectical enquiry shifts from describing these forms to discovering the complex whole they make up in their union (synthesis).

Metaphysical reasoning, on the other hand, focuses on the ‘permanent’ things that make up the world – how else can you describe something that is changing as you speak? In order to describe and classify things, we must ‘freeze’ them in time and describe them, focusing on their perceived individual essence, rather than on their inconstancy and interconnectedness. Therefore, this mode of thinking focuses on details of the whole – it attempts to break the world into its parts and then to describe them (analysis).

Therefore, the dialectical and the metaphysical ways of thinking represent two extremes in the way we view the world: the dialectical view is more like the wide-angle view of the whole picture, whereas the metaphysical view is the zoom/ close-up view of parts of the whole, provided by the telephoto lens.

Synthesis	= <i>combining</i> of separate elements to form a coherent complex whole
Analysis	= <i>breaking up</i> of a complex whole into its parts for individual study

Just as breathing consists of both inhalation and exhalation, so thinking (generalization) involves both dialectical and metaphysical reasoning (synthesis & analysis). Getting to know something (or somebody) always begins with a superficial impression of the ‘complex whole’ (synthesis). To get to know them better, we must focus on various aspects of their physical appearance and behavior, etc. – in other words, do some analysis! Analysis provides us with the basis for a new synthesis, leading to a deeper understanding of the complex whole. This is how our collective knowledge of the world has evolved over time to where we are today.

1.1.3 The Spiral of Evolution

At the birth of human consciousness, people saw the world as a *complex whole*, in all its puzzling inconstancy, interconnectedness and motion. They could not understand then why natural disasters like floods, droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes, etc. happened, because we had no knowledge of the *parts* of the world’s complex whole. Our knowledge grew in the process of *analysis* – we divided the complex world around us into categories, focusing on *parts* of it, and studied them in isolation from each other. This is how Philosophy gave birth to all the modern sciences (i.e., biology, physics, etc.).

Quantity, however, changes the Quality: too much focus on *parts* of a complex whole (*analysis*) can prevent us from seeing ‘the forest for the trees’ (*synthesis*). In its evolution, our thinking alternated between the predominantly dialectical and the predominantly metaphysical views of the world. We haven’t gone around in circles, however; each new synthesis between these opposing forces raised us to a higher level in the *spiral* of our understanding:



This *spiral* image illustrates all development (including that of human knowledge): a tall tree grows from a tiny seed; a big man grows from two microscopic cells. Our knowledge of the world has expanded, like this spiral, through the *analysis* of the different parts of Nature and *synthesis* of our observations (putting 2 + 2 together), which takes us to a higher level of understanding.

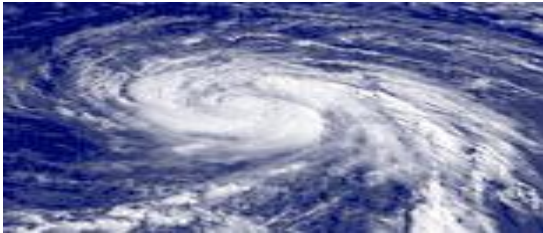
The world is powered by contradictions and imbalances. In every development, there is always a **conflict between opposing forces** (called '*thesis*' and '*antithesis*' in philosophy), which eventually resolves in a new 'balance' in their union; the ancient oriental symbol of harmony (the union of Yin and Yang) illustrates this unity of 'opposites' in the **Complex Whole**:



Thesis + Antithesis → New Synthesis



In Nature, the Spiral of Evolution stares us in the face everywhere we look, for example:



Hurricane



Nautilus

Our knowledge of the world has also evolved in a spiral fashion: it sprouted, like a seed of consciousness, and has grown, changed, and developed through the endless conflict of opposites, gradually morphing into new syntheses⁴ in an ever-widening spiral of evolution. Back in the 1500s, just over 500 years ago, there were very few universities; those that existed, taught religion, philosophy, Latin, Greek, history, and mathematics – no economics, physics, chemistry, or any other of the modern sciences.

Then, in 1700s, came the **Enlightenment** in which Reasoning replaced God as the explanation of why things were the way they were. Pre-Enlightenment thinkers attributed everything that happened to the Will of God; Enlightenment scholars looked for *scientific* explanations. Such reasoned explanations required more knowledge of the way things actually *were*. **Analysis** (the metaphysical study of things in isolation from the totality of things) provided us with in-depth understanding of concrete phenomena. Our knowledge grew, and expanded so rapidly that it had to be divided or categorized. Philosophy was at first subdivided into science and philosophy, and then the sciences were split into *natural* and *social* sciences. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, social sciences split further into yet more specialized areas of economics, political science, history, geography, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, etc. Here, again, we see that spiral of evolution: as man grows out of a cluster of undifferentiated cells which evolve to form all the organs of the human body (the brain, stomach, liver, kidneys, bone, etc.), so our perception of the world has matured from a whirlpool of vague consciousness into a body of structured specialized knowledge.

Analysis has provided us with in-depth knowledge in many specialized areas; currently, we often reach new heights of understanding through discovering correlations between different sciences – and these discoveries form the basis for new synthesis of ideas! Many new sciences have emerged through the synthesis of specialized fields – biochemistry, biophysics, molecular biology, etc., just to name a few. Linguistics, like all specialized sciences, has a long history; let us now briefly trace its past, for it is only then that we can understand its present.

⁴ **Quantity changes the Quality** – one of the fundamental laws of dialectics

1.2 The Evolution of Linguistics in the Past 4000 years

1.2.1. Introduction & Timeline: 2000 BC to 2010 AD

Our brief survey will span almost 4 000 years⁵. In the course of our evolution, we became conscious of ourselves, and of our separateness from the world. At that point in time, there was no science or any systematic knowledge, and the world was a mysterious and often frightening place (we always fear the unknown).

1.2.2. Predominance of Dialectical Reasoning

Because we did not know much about the world, dialectical reasoning predominated in the Ancient World. Engels, a German philosopher, traced the evolution of our understanding through the growth of sciences in vivid terms (*Engels – Socialism: Utopian & Scientific*):

“When we consider and reflect upon Nature at large, or the history of mankind, or our own intellectual activity, at first we see the picture of an endless entanglement of relations and reactions, permutations and combinations, in which nothing remains what, where and as it was, but everything moves, changes, comes into being and passes away. We see, therefore, at first the picture as a whole, with its individual parts still more or less kept in the background; we observe the movements, transitions, connections, rather than the things that move, combine, and are connected. This primitive, naive but intrinsically correct conception of the world is that of ancient Greek philosophy, and was first clearly formulated by Heraclitus: everything is and is not, for everything is fluid, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away.

But this conception, correctly as it expresses the general character of the picture of appearances as a whole, does not suffice to explain the details of which this picture is made up, and so long as we do not understand these, we have not a clear idea of the whole picture. In order to understand these details, we must detach them from their natural, special causes, effects, etc. This is, primarily, the task of natural science and historical research ... A certain amount of natural and historical material must be collected before there can be any critical analysis, comparison, and arrangement in classes, orders, and species. The foundations of the exact natural sciences were, therefore, first worked out by the Greeks and later on, in the Middle Ages, by the Arabs. Real natural science dates from the second half of the 15th century, and thence onward it had advanced with constantly increasing rapidity. The analysis of Nature into its individual parts, the grouping of the different natural processes and objects in definite classes, the study of the internal anatomy of organized bodies in their manifold forms — these were the fundamental conditions of the gigantic strides in our knowledge of Nature that have been made during the last 400 years. But this method of work has also left us as legacy the habit of observing natural objects and processes in isolation, apart from their connection with the vast whole; of observing them in repose, not in motion; as constraints, not as essentially variables; in their death, not in their life.”

1.2.2.1. Pre-History: Myths & Legends

The roots of linguistics go back into the mists of Time, when nobody knew how to write down their thoughts. Myths and legends, passed from generation to generation, captured people’s thoughts about human language and thinking ability. For example, Maya folklore tells us that cosmic forces (Gods) created man by trial and error. Man turned out to have the ability to think and feel, just as they (Gods) did. This made the gods uncomfortable, so they “breathed a cloud over the mortals’ eyes, just to keep them humble. Later, when men had become extremely powerful and numerous, the gods deprived them of their original language and gave each group a language of its own. This effectively curtailed their ability to work together.”⁶

⁵ Please refer to the Timeline at the end of these notes – it may help you put the events we discuss into perspective.

⁶ Retrieved February 9, 2008 from: http://w2.byuh.edu/academics/domckay/Speeches/Mckay/W_Allison.htm

Invention of the Alphabet in Egypt approx. 2,000 BC

About 4000 years ago now, ancient Egyptians invented these little shapes you are looking at right now: the letters of the alphabet (they did look different then, and they may look different in many modern languages, but the *principle* of using *written symbols* to represent individual sounds that combine to make a word is the same). In contrast to other, non-alphabetic systems (cuneiform /syllabic writing, pictograms, hieroglyphs, etc.), the alphabet proved to be the most ‘user-friendly’ and efficient way of writing, enabling us to record an infinity of concepts through combinations of a few symbols (we can write down any word of English, using just a few of the 26 letters of the English alphabet). This was one of the most important inventions of all time! The Alphabet transformed the ancient world: it enabled people to communicate their thoughts /ideas over great distances, and through Time! Through *writing*, our ancestors speak to us directly, communicating to us their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Book of Genesis tells us that man was created in God’s image, and with the power of speech:

“And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (Genesis 2:19).

St. John’s Gospel gives us an even more beautiful (from the philosophical point of view) account of how life began:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”

St. John’s 1:1

1.2.2.2 Linguistics Developed Independently in Several Societies

Speculations about Creation and human nature gradually focused on Language, which sets us apart from all other living things. We now know that linguistic thought developed independently in several societies, such as Mesopotamia (present-day Iran and Iraq), Ancient Greece, India, China, and Arabia. How can we be sure of that? Our knowledge comes from the surviving written records – we can only know what has been, if we have evidence of it! And if you are wondering, why linguistic thought had developed independently in different societies, just imagine what life was like in those days: there was little contact between isolated communities, most people never traveled far from their villages, and, as there were no telephones or Internet that now ‘connect’ the world, people were unaware of what was going on in far away places – they did not even know they existed!

Ancient India: In some societies, as in ancient **India**, people also sought to preserve the language of the sacred **Vedas**⁷ - **Sanskrit** (which means *perfect*, or *complete*). Panini, the Indian grammarian who lived over 2,500 years ago, described the entire grammar of Sanskrit in just 4,000 *sutras* (= ‘strings’ or sentences). Panini’s Grammar, translated in the West only in 1891, is one of the world’s earliest works of *descriptive (derivational) linguistics*.⁸

China also developed its own grammatical traditions before the 4th century BC. Chinese scholars focused largely on phonetics, writing, and lexicography; their study of grammar was largely in the context of logic (Encyclopedia Britannica 2004 Deluxe Edition CD).

Mesopotamia: Arabic linguistic tradition blossomed after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. and the subsequent expansion of Islamic influence. It was driven largely by the desire to safeguard against any distortion of the sacred teachings (the Qur’an), and the need to transmit them to non-Arabic

⁷ Sanskrit for *Divine Knowledge*

⁸ descriptive linguistics - a description (at a given point in time) of a language with respect to its phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics without value judgments.

speakers. In the 9th -10th centuries A.D., Arabic thinkers also had recorded remarkable insights into the relationship between language, grammar and logic. Look, for example, at some real ‘gems’ from **Al-Farabi** (870–950 AD):

Text 1. This art [of logic] is similar to the art of grammar, in that the relation of the art of logic to the intellect and the intelligibles is like the relation of the art of grammar to language and expressions (*al-alfâz*). That is, to every rule for expressions which the science of grammar provides us, there is an analogous [rule] for intelligibles which the science of logic provides us.

Text 2. The subject matters (*mawdû‘ât*) of logic are the things for which [logic] provides the rules, namely, intelligibles in so far as they are signified by expressions, and expressions in so far as they signify intelligibles.

...

[Logic] shares something with grammar in that it provides rules for expressions, yet it differs in that grammar only provides rules specific to the expressions of a given community, whereas the science of logic provides common rules that are general for the expressions of every community.

[Alfarabi (1931) 17.5-7, 18.4-7]

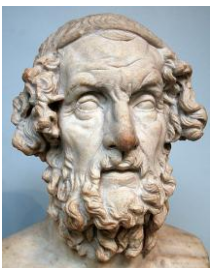
While Indian and Chinese scholarship were relatively unknown in the West until almost the nineteenth century AD, there have been a lot of cultural contacts and intellectual interdependencies between Europe and North Africa/ the Near East. Ancient Greek thought greatly influenced the development of linguistic speculation in various cultures of the Middle East (Mesopotamia), such as Akkadian (present day Iraq), Old Egyptian, Syriac, and Hebrew. Islamic scholars, in particular, played a great role in preserving and translating the works of Classical Greek philosophers and later ‘transmitting’ them back to medieval Europe.

1.2.2.3. Western Linguistics: Phase 1

As we have seen, both India and China had produced native schools of linguistic thought, foreshadowing equivalent Western ideas by more than a thousand years. However, because Europeans knew nothing about it, modern linguistics is based on European intellectual tradition, which originated in Ancient Greece. We can distinguish roughly **three major phases** in the development of linguistics, each characterized by the predominance of one of the two approaches (dialectical or metaphysical way of reasoning):

Phase 1: Philosophy → Prescriptive Grammar & Logic [predominantly dialectic approach]

In **Ancient Greece**, linguistic study was rooted in the epic poems of Homer,⁹ which “held a special place in Greek education; they were publicly recited, and regarded and quoted in sources of moral precepts” (Robins: 1995). ‘Homeric scholarship,’ which goes back to the sixth century B.C., had set the ‘acceptable’ standards of Greek poetry and literary expression generally. These studies were the ‘seeds’ of philosophy in Ancient Greece, which germinated and grew into a multifaceted body of knowledge, with *logic* and *rhetoric* being particularly relevant to linguistics.



Homer (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Homer_British_Museum.jpg)

⁹ the legendary Ancient Greek epic poet, believed to have written the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

The earliest records of Western linguistic thought go back over 2,500 years ago, when philosophy, the ‘*Mother of All Sciences*,’¹⁰ first flowered in Ancient Greece. Ancient Greek thinkers started questioning the mystical belief that language was a gift from the gods, and saw the origins of speech in human imitation of natural sounds. Here are some of their insights, observations and thoughts about the nature of language that have survived through Time:

On Social Role & Power of Language: Gorgias (~ 485-380 BC): *Praise of Helen*

"The power of speech has the same relation to the order of the soul as drugs have to the nature of bodies. For as different drugs expel different humors from the body, and some put an end to sickness, and others – to life, so some words cause grief, others joy, some fear, others render their hearers bold, and still others drug and bewitch the soul through an evil persuasion . . ."

On Language Change: Socrates (469–399 B.C.): *Cratylus*

By the dog of Egypt! I have not a bad notion which came into my head only this moment: I believe that the primeval givers of names were undoubtedly like too many of our modern philosophers, who . . . think that there is nothing stable or permanent, but only flux and motion, and that the world is always full of every sort of motion and change. The consideration of the names which I mentioned has led me into making this reflection.

On the Symbolic nature of Language: Aristotle (384-323 BC):

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the **symbols** of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images.

A **verb** is that which, in addition to its proper meaning, **carries with it the notion of time** . . . It is a sign of something said of something else. (*On Interpretation*)

Ancient Greeks also speculated about the relationship between Language and Thinking, and so ‘invented’ (as Saussure put it) both *Grammar* and *Logic*, laying down the rules for effective use of both language and reason.

Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Grammar

By laying down the rules of ‘correct’ usage, prescriptive grammar of the Ancient Greeks (still ‘alive and kicking’ as ‘*school* grammar’) promotes uniformity and, therefore, **effectiveness** of language use in society (imagine, if we all used language differently – communication would have been impossible!). Prescriptive Grammar is useful that way – but it is not based on the Scientific Method; it does not attempt to *discover* facts about Language, it *creates* them. In that sense, it is more like the Arts – it represents the grammarians’ subjective preferences with regard to correct / incorrect usage.

Prescriptive Grammar of Latin and Greek was taught in the monasteries of medieval Europe for centuries. Technological advancement led to a re-awakening of interest in Greek and Roman Classical writing and the emergence of prescriptive grammars for vernaculars (the printing press made education more accessible to the common man). The invention of gunpowder started a new Exploration Age, marked by European expansion (→ increased cross-cultural contacts!) and the development of science.

¹⁰ Up until just over a hundred years ago, ‘science’ was even called ‘natural philosophy’; in ancient times, philosophers studied the natural, as well as human world.

1.2.3. Predominance of Metaphysical Reasoning

1.2.3.1. Phase 2: Philology¹¹ → Comparative/ Historical Linguistics

Just over 200 years ago, all the new knowledge thus acquired led to the sensational discovery that languages were in many ways alike, and could be compared with one another. Comparative studies identified remarkable *structural* similarities between Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit; these could only be due to a common source (parent language, no longer spoken).

In the mid-1850s, Darwin's Theory of Evolution turned our understanding of the world upside down. Scholars then realized that languages were also constantly changing, just like all living species. This realization prompted, by analogy, attempts to map out the evolution of Language through the reconstruction of 'parent' or *proto*-languages. **Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)**, known as the 'Father' of modern linguistics, noted in his lectures that work in comparative and historical linguistics had proved that



“A bond or relationship existed between languages often separated geographically by great distances” and that “there were also great language families, in particular the one which came to be called the Indo-European family”

(Saussure: Lectures on General Linguistics, 1910-1911 Retrieved 02/17/08, from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm>)

To detect changes in a language/ between related languages, *philologists* examined and compared **written records** (manuscripts and documents) from different times – that is why their method of investigation is called *diachronic*.¹² Because comparative and historical study was mostly concerned with the *forms* of words and not with how the words were used, it was around that time that the word *linguistics* came into use, to distinguish this research from *philology*.

1.2.3.2. Phase 3: Structuralism of the XXth century

About a hundred years ago, the Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure made a huge 'splash' in the then rather exclusive area of linguistic research, causing a major shift in its future development, for which many call him the 'Father' of modern linguistics:

**Ferdinand de Saussure
(1857-1913)**

Saussure criticized the up until then common method of linguistic investigation, i.e., comparing old texts or manuscripts, and argued that written words were merely dead *representations* of Language, and not its living substance:

“...the written word is confused with the spoken word; two superimposed systems of signs which have nothing to do with each other, the written and the spoken, are conflated” (Ibid.).

Saussure thought that linguistics should aim to describe Language **as it is at any one time** (*synchronically*). Instead of mulling over old texts, trying to figure out how selected bits and pieces of language changed over time, linguistics for the first time in history attempted to understand the mechanism of Language by looking at the **WHOLE** of linguistic structure. This explains why Saussure's approach is referred to as *Structuralism*.

¹¹ *philology* means *love of words*: *phil* Gk = love; *logos* → *log* word / reason

¹² *diachronic* means *across time/ of two times*: Gk. *dia* – across, through, apart; *khronos* – time; compare Latin *bi*-: "two, twice," etc., from L. *bi*-, from Old L. *dvi*- (cognate of Gk. *di*-, O.E. *twi*-)

Saussure believed that, despite all their achievements, linguists up until then ‘could not see the forest for the trees’: analysis of selected parts of language cannot help us understand the WHOLE. To be truly scientific in their approach, he felt, linguists had to understand precisely WHAT they studied, and WHY. For the first time in the history of linguistic thought, he attempted to define the WHOLE of Language, and to discover the Language Mechanism that we use to create complex meanings. Let us drop in on Saussure at one of his lecture halls, and listen in to some of what he told his students a hundred years ago – in October 1910¹³:

“The linguistics which gradually developed in this way is ... ‘the scientific study of languages’; ... it is this word *scientific* that distinguishes it from all earlier studies.

What does it take

- (1) As its subject matter?
- (2) As its object, or task?

(1) A scientific study will take as its subject matter every kind of variety of human language: it will not select one period or another for its literary brilliance ... It will pay attention to any tongue, whether obscure or famous, and likewise to any period, giving no preference ... but according equal interest to so-called decadent or archaic periods. Similarly, for any given period, it will refrain from selecting the most educated language, but will concern itself at the same time with popular forms more or less in contrast with the so-called educated or literary language... Thus, **linguistics deals with language of every period and in all the guises it assumes.**

Necessarily, in order to have documentation for all periods ... linguistics will have to deal with the written language, but it will always distinguish between the written text and what lies underneath; treating the former as being only the envelope or external mode of presentation of **its true object**, which is solely **the spoken language.**

(2) Aim of Linguistics: The business, task or object of the scientific study of languages will be

- 1) to trace the history of all known languages and language families. Naturally, this is possible only to a very limited extent and for very few languages...
- 2) to derive from this history of all the languages laws of the greatest generality. Linguistics will have to recognise laws operating universally in language.

There are more special tasks to add; concerning the relations between linguistics and various sciences. Some are related by reason of the information and data they borrow, while others supply it and assist its work. It often happens that the respective domains of two sciences are not obvious... **the relations between linguistics and psychology are often difficult to demarcate.**

It is one of the aims of linguistics to define itself, to recognise what belongs within its domain. In those cases where it relies upon psychology, it will do so indirectly, remaining independent.¹⁴

¹³ These are excerpts from actual students’ notes, published online (Saussure: Lectures on General Linguistics, 1910-1911; Retrieved 02/17/08, from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm>)

¹⁴ Elsewhere, he was even more categorical about the division between linguistics and psychology:

... However we approach the question, no one object of linguistic study emerges of its own accord. Whichever way we turn, the same dilemma confronts us. Either we tackle each problem on one front only, and risk failing to take into account the dualities ...; or else we seem committed to trying to study language in several ways simultaneously, in which case the object of study becomes a muddle of disparate, unconnected things. By proceeding thus, one opens the door to various sciences – psychology, anthropology, prescriptive grammar, philology, and so on – which are to be distinguished from linguistics. These sciences could lay claim to language as falling into their domain; but their methods are not the ones that are needed (Saussure: 1910).

Once linguistics is conceived as concerned with language in all its manifestations, an object of the broadest possible scope, we can understand what perhaps was not always clear: *the utility of linguistics*, or its claim of being relevant to ‘general culture’.

As long as the activity of linguists was limited to comparing one language with another, this general utility cannot have been apparent to most of the general public, and indeed the study was so specialised that there was no real reason to suppose it of possible interest to a wider audience. It is only since linguistics has become more aware of its object of study, i.e. perceives the whole extent of it, that it is evident that this science can make a contribution to a range of studies that will be of interest to almost anyone.

...Language plays such a considerable role in human societies, and is a factor of such importance both for the individual human being and human society, that we cannot suppose that the study of such a substantial part of human nature should remain simply and solely the business of a few specialists; everyone, it would seem, is called upon to form as correct an idea as possible of what this particular aspect of human behaviour amounts to in general.”

However, because Language, the object of our study, ‘cannot be put squarely in front of us,’ Saussure warned his students that

There is no sphere in which more fantastic and absurd ideas have arisen than in the study of languages. Language is an object which gives rise to *all kinds of mirage*. Most interesting of all, from a psychological point of view, are the errors language produces. Everyone, left to his own devices, forms an idea about what goes on in language which is very far from the truth.

* Source: *Saussure's Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1910-1911)* publ. Pergamon Press, 1993.
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm>

Saussure’s theory (*structuralism*, because it looks at the *structure* of a complex whole) marked the third phase in the development of linguistics, usually referred to as “Modern Linguistics.” His approach to Language as a *living interconnected system* marked a qualitative shift from the *metaphysical*¹⁵ to the *dialectic* view of Language. Instead of focusing on disconnected bits and pieces of Language, linguists now glimpsed the first view of its complex, interconnected, and forever changing WHOLE.

Structuralism vs. Dialectical Approach to Language

Language, as we will see in our next discussion, is a very complex organic *whole* of contradictions. Ferdinand de Saussure, who was one of the first minds to approach it scientifically as an *organic interconnected system*, told his students a hundred years ago that language was too complex for purely linguistic analysis:

There is no way out of the circle. ... However we approach the question, no one object of linguistic study emerges of its own accord. Whichever way we turn, the same dilemma confronts us. Either we tackle each problem on one front only, and risk failing to take into account the dualities mentioned above, or else we seem committed to trying to study language in several ways simultaneously, in which case the object of study becomes a muddle of disparate, unconnected things (Saussure: 1983).

¹⁵ **Metaphysics** - *Philosophy* The branch of philosophy that examines the nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, substance and attribute, fact and value.

Source: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/metaphysics>

Saussure believed we could loosen this intractable knot of contradictions and dualities by focusing on linguistic **structure** which alone is ‘*independently definable*,’ concrete, ‘something our minds can satisfactorily grasp’:

The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern and relate all other manifestations of language to it (Ibid.).

Since Language, in Saussure’s view, has no ‘discernible unity,’ his way out of the ‘**circle of contradictions**’ was to focus narrowly on linguistic structures, leaving its other complexities to other sciences:

A science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate (Ibid.).

This narrow focus on **structure** has limited our understanding of Language; **descriptions**, however accurate, are never enough to really understand a *living* thing. Just think about it – can you get to know somebody just by examining the person’s photos, even if they are in colour, and well-focused? Descriptive linguistics has provided us with clear still images of Language, but failed to give us a three-dimensional motion picture that would capture its living energy. Still pictures, be they of a person or of Language, can give rise to speculation, various interpretations and perceptions of the images, but they cannot help us know the person (or the essence of Language). And so, descriptive linguistic theory often presents us with ‘**all kinds of mirage**’ that Saussure so wanted to see through:

There is no sphere in which more fantastic and absurd ideas have arisen than in the study of languages. Language is an object which gives rise to all kinds of mirage. Most interesting of all, from a psychological point of view, are the errors language produces. Everyone, left to his own devices, forms an idea about what goes on in language which is very far from the truth.¹⁶

1.4. New Synthesis – Dialectical Linguistics ‘connecting the dots’

The descriptive approach, despite all the detailed structural analysis of speech production and perception, the physical sounds and structures of language, has shown that the living energy of language cannot be understood through the study of its physical forms alone.

In this course, we will use dialectical reasoning to try and capture Language *live* – in all its interconnectedness, complexity, motion, development and change. This dialectical approach is perfectly suited for the study of living structures (complex wholes), because it uses both **analysis** and **synthesis** to understand their multifaceted, interrelated, and constantly changing nature.

Re-cap:

To conclude, let us revise the most important points we have covered today:

1. Modern **Linguistics** is the scientific study of Language.
2. Descriptive linguistics uses the **Scientific Method** to observe and describe human Language

¹⁶ Source: *Saussure's Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1910-1911)* publ. Pergamon Press, 1993.
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm> (27/06/2008)

3. **Science** seeks to discover facts the way they *are* in the world around us; the **Arts**, by contrast, reflect the artists' perceptions and feelings about the world.
4. **Spiral of Evolution**: All development in Nature, as well as in human knowledge, is spiral – it does not go around in circles; it expands, like a spiral, powered by the conflict of contradictions. Each new balance (union) between opposite forces marks a new level in the spiral of evolution.
5. **The evolution of linguistic thought** also follows this spiral pattern of development: from the germinating consciousness of the ancients, which perceived the world in its unity, interrelatedness and motion, it rose to new heights of understanding through the analysis of different aspects of language.
6. **Dialectics vs. Metaphysics: Dialectical method of reasoning** which aims to understand things in their essential interconnectedness, complexity, motion, development and change – in their origin, evolution, and ending. **Metaphysical reasoning** examines parts of the world; in order to do that, we have to 'freeze' them in time and look at them in isolation from the whole – as independent fixed entities.
7. **Synthesis** – The combining of separate elements (or substances) to form a coherent complex whole; the combination of thesis and antithesis in the Hegelian dialectical process whereby a new and higher level of truth is produced.
8. **Analysis** - The separation of a **complex whole** into its constituent parts for individual study.
9. **Dialectical Linguistics**: It is time now for a new synthesis of all that we have learnt about language through analysis; this new synthesis will help us rise to a higher level of understanding Language.

Reading Guide & Revision Questions

1. Why is Linguistics a science? How is it different from Natural Sciences? Art?
2. What is the difference between synthesis and analysis? How are they related in the process of evolution?
3. Discuss dialectics in Nature. Give examples.
4. Explain the meaning of this statement:
Dialectics comprehends things in their essential connection, motion, origin and ending. ... Nature works dialectically and not metaphysically; she does not move in the eternal oneness of a perpetually recurring circle, but goes through a real historical evolution.
5. "**Quantity Changes the Quality**" is one of the basic laws of Dialectics. Give practical examples of when accumulation of the quantity of something would change its quality.
6. How did the invention of the Alphabet affect human history? Why, do you think?
7. Why do many people think that the invention of the Alphabet was our greatest invention of all time?
8. Why did linguistic thought develop independently in several societies?
9. Describe the achievements of linguistic thought in Ancient
 - a. China
 - b. India
 - c. Mesopotamia
 - d. Greece
10. Distinguish between the three phases in the development of Western linguistics, characterizing each, and stating whether dialectical or metaphysical reasoning predominated in each of the historical periods.
11. Briefly summarize Saussure's thoughts on
 - a. The Subject Matter of Linguistics
 - b. Aims of linguistics
 - c. Relationship between linguistics and other sciences

d. Relevance (utility) of linguistics

12. Ferdinand de Saussure said that “Language is an object which gives rise to all kinds of *mirage*.”
Why do you think he said that?

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2010 AD	Dialectal Linguistics?	
2000 AD	Descriptive Linguistics &	
1950 AD	Structuralism	Bloomfield (1887-1949)
1900 AD	Saussure	Saussure (1857-1913)
1850 AD	Historical linguistics	
1800 AD	Comparative linguistics	
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