Synchronic linguistics

In the 20th century several linguistic movements operated. They were historicism, structuralism, functionalism, generativism and others. Lets mention at least the most important ones. The following extracts have been taken from BUSSMANN, H.: *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. Routledge 2004

Structuralism:

It builds its theories on the idea that „the language is a set of signs". The signs are then organized in structures.

structuralism

Collective term for a number of linguistic approaches in the first half of the twentieth century, all based on the work of F. de Saussure, but strongly divergent from one another. Depending on theoretical preconceptions, the term 'structuralism' is used in several ways. In its narrower sense, it refers to the pre-generative phase of linguistics before N. Chomsky's *Syntactic structures*; in its broader sense, to all linguistic theories which focus on an isolated investigation of the language system, which would include generative **transformational grammar**. The most important centers of 'classical' structuralism are (a) the **Geneva School**, concerned primarily with the work of de Saussure, (b) **American structuralism**, following the work of L. Bloomfield, (c) the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle with L. Hjelmslev's **glossematics**, (d) contextualism (⇒ **Firthian linguistics**), centered in London, and (e) the **Prague School**, represented chiefly by N. Trubetzkoy, A. Martinet, and R. Jakobson.

All variations of structuralism have certain theoretical premises in common, which result in part from the influence of **empiricism** and in part from a common reaction against the nineteenth century positivistic atomism of the **Neogrammarians**.

Even though de Saussure did not use the term 'structure' in his posthumously published *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916, based on lecture notes from the years 1906–11), but rather the terms *système* and *mécanisme*, he is none the less recognized as the 'father' and pioneer of structuralism, and his *Cours* is seen as a summary of the fundamental principles of structuralist linguistic description. De Saussure assumes that language is a relational system of formal, not substantial, elements, which can be precisely recorded and exactly represented. He sees research into the internal relations of language as the central task of linguistics and linguistics as an autonomous science that has no need to resort to psychology or the social sciences for aid in explanation. The following basic assumptions found in de Saussure's work are viewed as fundamental for structuralist linguistic analysis. (a) 'Language' can be regarded from three aspects as *langue* (⇒ **langue vs parole**) (a particular language stored in the minds of all of its speakers), as *parole* (actual instances of speech in concrete situations), and as *faculté de langage* (⇒ **langage**) (general competence for the acquisition and use of language). In this view, *langue* and *parole* condition each other. The object of linguistic investigation is *langue*, which can only be described through an analysis of the expressions of *parole*. (b) Language (in the sense of *langue*) is regarded as a system of **signs**. Each sign consists of two (mutually conditioning) aspects, the acoustic image, and the concept. The connection of these aspects to one another is arbitrary (⇒ **arbitrariness**), i.e. language-specific and dependent on convention. (c) These linguistic signs form a system of values which stand in **opposition** to one another. Each

regularities are defined by way of two steps. **segmentation** and **classification**, segmentation taking place on the syntagmatic level, classification on the paradigmatic ($\Rightarrow$ *also* **distribution**).

The central level of investigation in structuralism, especially in the Prague School, is **phonology**. Methods of analysis were tested on its inventory of elements and possible combinations. These methods, when applied to the analysis **of syntax**, led to **phrase structure grammar**; the limits of these procedures are shown most clearly in the area of **semantics** ($\Rightarrow$ **componential analysis, lexical field theory**).

While 'structuralism' in its narrower sense refers to de Saussure's linguistic theories, in its broader sense it is an umbrella term for approaches in anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism, which – in analogy to linguistic structuralism – concentrate on synchronic analysis rather than on genetic/historical preconditions, in order to expose the universal structures at work under the surface of social relations (see especially R. Barthes, C. Lévi-Strauss).

Functionalism:
It is based on the idea that the form in any language follows the function not vice versa.

Prague School (*also* functional grammar, functional linguistics, functionalism)

Branch of European **structuralism** arising from the Prague Linguistic Circle, which was founded in 1926 by V. Mathesius, B. Trnka, J. Vachek and others. The theses of this school were first presented at a Slavicist conference in The Hague (1928), and it has referred to itself as the 'Prague School' since the Amsterdam Phonetics Conference of 1932. In contrast to other branches of structuralism, especially **glossematics**, with its emphasis on form, the Prague School regarded language primarily as a functional means of communication whose structural **sign** system can be described through observation of concrete linguistic material in particular moments of use. The Prague School, therefore, abandons De Saussure's strict separation of *langue* and *parole* ($\Rightarrow$ **langue vs parole**), and also the primacy of **synchrony vs diachrony**, as it attempts to explain **language change** with structural principles.

Premises common to the Prague School and the structuralist schools are (a) the decisive break from the positivistic atomism of the **Neogrammarians**, and (b) the representation of language as system and of linguistics as an autonomous science (independent of psychology, philosophy and other disciplines). Characteristic of the Prague School's scientific procedure and also of its most decisive influence on the development of linguistics is its orientation towards the concept of 'functionalism.' The starting point of analysis is the intention of the speaker expressed through linguistic utterances; the analysis, then, begins with the 'function' of the utterance in order to describe its 'form.' The concept of function appears in various guises in all important areas of Prague School research, e.g. in the applications of **functional sentence perspective**, which sees the **theme–rheme** structure of a text as a structural principle, and especially in the **phonology** as conceived by Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) and further developed by Jakobson.

The theoretical foundations and practical representations of this approach, such as **binary opposition, distinctive feature, opposition** and the **phoneme**, were summarized in Trubetzkoy's posthumously published *Grundzüge der Phonologie* ('Principles of Phonology') and supplemented by Jakobson, who postulated a universal inventory of phonetic/phonological features for all languages. Of lasting influence on generative **transformational grammar** is the level of **morphophonemics**, introduced by Trubetzkoy, within which the alternating phonological form of morphological units is described. Since the 1950s, Prague School linguists, such as J. Vachek (b. 1909) and J. Firbas (b. 1921), have been primarily concerned with the syntactic, semantic and stylistic problems of English and the Slavic languages.

Generativism:
It studies the human ability to create (generate) sentences and understand them.

generate [Lat. *generare* 'to create']

A term coined by N. Chomsky in response to Humboldt's (1836) linguistic theory. Whereas Humboldt's term 'generate' refers to the historical development of language, Chomsky uses the term in a strictly mathematical-logical way for the listing of sentences on the basis of a recursive rule mechanism. (⇒ *also* **generative grammar, recursiveness**)

generative capacity

The output of a grammar. If attention is restricted to strings, then one speaks of a *weak* generative capacity. If trees (or other structures) are included, then of a *strong* generative capacity. Grammars with the same generative capacity are thus weakly or (strongly) *equivalent*. (⇒ *also* **formal language theory**)

generative grammar

1 A blanket term for a grammar model that is based on **algorithm** and generates sentences.

2 A synonym for Chomsky's **transformational grammar**. All sentences of formal and natural languages can be produced by the application of the rules of generative grammar.