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European structuralism

paradigm for the study of language developed by prominent European linguists during the inter-war period and the first decades after World War II that radically rejected the prevailing atomism of 19th century (particularly neo-grammarians) linguistics and language psychology.

europäischer Strukturalismus: linguistisches Paradigma, das in der Zwischenkriegszeit und den ersten Jahrzehnten nach dem 2. Weltkrieg von prominenten europäischen Linguisten entwickelt wurde und eine radikale Absage an den Atomismus der (insbesondere junggrammatischen) Sprachwissenschaft und Sprachpsychologie im 19. Jh. darstellte.

F. de Saussure is generally acknowledged to have been the originator of the structuralist approach, although he never used the term *structuralism* and several aspects of the paradigm differ considerably from Saussurean thought. It was *R. Jakobson* who coined the term in 1929, referring to an emerging method in linguistics, literary studies, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Moreover, although the European structuralists were deeply influenced by the theory of language in *Saussure's Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), it cannot be said that they all agreed on a well-delimited set of common principles or a single framework. There were several, partly differing structuralist movements, of which the Prague (*Mathesius, Havránek, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson*) and Copenhagen Circle (*Hjelmslev, Uldall, Brøndal, Togeby, Fischer-Jørgensen*), the Suisse (*Bally, Sechehaye*), British (*Jones, Firth, Lyons, Halliday*), and Russian (*Šaumjan, Mel'čuk, Apresjan*) 'Schools', and several linguists of different nationalities (*Kuryłowicz, Malmberg, Coseriu, Benveniste, Martinet*,

Fourquet, Tesnière, Guillaume, Alarcos Llorach) are the best-known representatives. In general terms, European structuralist linguists share the following core beliefs: 1) languages should be studied as systems of linguistic signs for which the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between the units constitute the basis; 2) languages should first be studied from a synchronic point of view, not a diachronic one, since the latter is dependent on the former; 3) many structuralists (but not, for example, *Martinet*) stress the autonomy of the language system vis-à-vis sociological, psychological and pragmatic factors, which are considered to be ‘external’; 4) meaning is considered to be an inherent aspect of the language system, not reducible to external factors such as reference and psychology; moreover, meaning can be analysed with the methodology developed for phonology; 5) from the vantage point of linguistics, language is not a substance but rather a ‘form’, and it should therefore not be studied with the methodology of the natural sciences but by means of new methods appropriate to the requirements of the structuralist object of study.

With respect to points 4 and 5, in particular, European structuralism differs radically from American structuralism. It should be noted, however, that many European structuralists have tried to overcome the limitations of an overly rigidly defined structuralist programme after World War II. Thus structuralism gradually became an implicit framework even in more recent generative, pragmatic, typological and cognitive linguistic research, in which structural concepts are progressively being reinterpreted and occasionally redefined. The impact of European structuralism on modern linguistics and research in the humanities, in general, has been profound. Many structuralist concepts have become part of the basic vocabulary of modern linguistics, including the twofold nature of linguistic signs, the importance of structural relations and oppositions on the levels of expression and content, the variation of expression and meaning units in context, the methodological distinctions between synchrony and diachrony, system and discourse, arbitrariness and motivation.

Literature

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