

Noam Chomsky and Ferdinand de Saussure: A Comparative Analysis of the Paternity of  
Modern Linguistics

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Received: 30-01-2026

Revised: 16-02-2026

Accepted: 02-03-2026

Published: 17-03-2026

## ABSTRACT

*Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky are also considered by many to be the most influential linguists of all time and most recent of the contenders for the most correct claim to be considered the father of modern linguistics. Each of them brought about a major turn in the history of the science of linguistics. Saussure was the first to outline a methodology for the study of linguistics as a specific and independent branch of science. The first of his many important contributions was the birth of the structural school of linguistics which defined language as a structured and relational system. Many years later, Chomsky introduced revolutionary generative grammar and a new psychological theory of language which changed the goals and methods of study in a revolutionary way for all time. The purpose of this article is to submit a detailed and comprehensive study examining the difference, similarities, and contrast of the Intellectual Heritage, Historical Context, Theoretical Frame, Methodological Orientation, Philosophical Basis, Positively and Negatively Critical Reception, and Legacy of the two scholars of modern linguistics. This study is a recognition of Saussure's contributions as a modern linguist of the first, foundational component, and generative and cognitive linguist Chomsky of the second contemporary component. They are not rival linguists, but rather they are integral components of other linguists and other disciplines in the evolution of the science of linguistics.*

**Keywords:** Modern Linguistics, Ferdinand De Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Structuralism, Generative Grammar, Universal Grammar, Linguistic Theory

## INTRODUCTION

Linguistics is a relatively modern scientific discipline, which attempts to answer questions about the faculty of human language, how it functions, how it is structured, how it develops, how it is utilised, and how it is put to use. Even though language is as old as humanity, the rational, consistent and methodologically controlled study of language is a much newer phenomenon. The establishment of linguistics as a discipline separate and distinct from other fields of study is owed largely to Saussure and, a little later, Noam Chomsky.

Owing to his structuralism, which was a radical departure from the past, Saussure introduced new analytical and methodological perspectives, the lasting impact of which continue to be felt in modern linguistics. A little later than Saussure, and in the middle of the twentieth century, Chomsky introduced changes to the discipline of linguistics that were as far-reaching as those of Saussure. He redefined linguistics, describing it as a discipline that examines a mental organ, language, which is universally the same in all humans, and which is governed by a finite set of rules. This is what is known as the Chomskyan Revolution.

The key research questions posed in this article include the following:

1. What intellectual and historical contexts influenced the formation of linguistic theories of Saussure and Chomsky?
2. In which of these theories, if any, do the implicit theories of the three differ in terms of assumptions, methodologies, and purposes?
3. What significant criticisms have been made against each of the theorists in question?
4. According to scholars, who is the definitive father of modern linguistics?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Classical and Medieval Studies of Language**

The first organized thoughts on language surfaced in the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean, particularly in the Greek, Indian and Arabic traditions. The reasoning of Plato and Aristotle revolved around the issues of meaning, reference, and the relation of language to the world. In the Indian subcontinent, the Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini, who is believed to have lived in the 4th century BCE, achieved an astonishing level of descriptive accuracy in his writings that is still a source of wonder to contemporary linguists (Robins, 1997). The early studies, however, were still primarily philosophical and prescriptive instead of scientific.

In the Middle Ages, the study of language and theology and logic melded. Scholastics saw language as a tool for the study and critique of the sacred, not as a system with value for further study. The study of language was for what it pointed to as aspects of God, the truth and reality, not for its own sake.

### **Comparative and Historical Linguistics**

The 19th century marked the beginning of what we would now call 'historical linguistics', with the first formal treatment of one of the branches of the Indo-European family of languages. Branched out of Indo-European studies, Jones, Bopp, Rask, and Grimm made significant contributions to the description of language (Pedersen, 1931). Jones's 1786 description of the structural similarities of Greek, Latin and Sanskrit started the systematic comparative linguistics studies.

Significant as they were, the contributions of the 19th century were mainly focused on language as a problem of history. Like the study of a biological species or a period of history or a movement in art, language was seen as something that undergoes change over time. Language was seen as a thing that changed, and not a system that was functioning at a particular moment (Sampson, 1980).

### **Limitations of Pre-Saussurean Linguistics**

Nineteenth-century linguistics possessed a significant bibliography that attempted to study language, but lacked three crucial components needed for a more clear scientific understanding of the field: a definition of language as an object of study, a cohesive framework, and an understanding of language from a synchronic perspective. Languages were explained historically, but not described structurally. This created the opportunity for the precursors of the revolutionary reconfiguration of linguistic study by Ferdinand de Saussure (Culler, 1976).

## **Ferdinand de Saussure: Father of Structural Linguistics**

### **Intellectual Biography and Context**

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist and an Indo-European philologist who published very little during his lifetime, but is highly influential due to the *Cours de linguistique générale* (Course in General Linguistics). This book was published posthumously in 1916 by his students, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, who edited and organized the notes from the three courses Saussure gave at the University of Geneva from 1906 to 1911 (Saussure, 1916/1959).

Although this book is less than 200 pages, and is primarily compiled from student notes, it is one of the most influential works in modern history. This book not only redefined the field of linguistics, but also had a significant impact on other fields like anthropology, literary criticism, philosophy, and cultural studies (Culler, 1976).

### **Language as a Structured System**

Saussure was the first to realize that language is a system of interrelated elements, rather than an arbitrary system of words or sounds. This systemic point of view was a radical break from the atomistic, historically driven methods of nineteenth-century philology.

### **The Linguistic Sign**

Saussure regards language as a collection of signs that are composed of two inseparable parts:

- **Signifier (signifiant):** The sound or written form that is associated with a particular concept.
- **Signified (signifié):** The concept or the meaning of the sign.

The connection between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. There is nothing natural or necessary about the combination of sounds that form the word tree and refer to the concept of a woody perennial plant. By saying this, he pointed out that meaning in language is derived from the collective agreement of people rather than a natural bond or connection (Saussure, 1916/1959).

Saussure also insisted that the identity of signs in this system is not derived positively, but negatively, from the other signs surrounding it. There are only differences without positive terms (Saussure, 1916/1959, p 120). The identity or value of a particular element is always determined in relation to the other elements.

### **Langue and Parole**

A distinction made by Saussure has been foundational for all subsequent studies in linguistics:

- **Langue:** an abstract social system of a language developed and shared by a community of speakers, including the grammatical systems, vocabulary, and the syntactic structures that allow for communication.
- **Parole:** personal instances of speech— the specific, variable speech acts made by an individual in a specific context.

This distinction has allowed a linguist to concentrate their efforts on the system (langue) rather than on the chaotic individual acts of speech (parole). By focusing on Langue, Saussure legitimized the study of linguistics as the study of an abstract system which can be obtained through some form of analysis (Harris, 1987).

### **Synchronic and Diachronic Linguistics**

Saussure has also made an important distinction with respect to the study of language in time.

- **Synchronic linguistics:** the study of language as a system that is complete, in abstract, and, as such, requires no change for the study of the system, at a particular point in time.

### **Diachronic linguistics: the study of language through time and its changes.**

Although he recognized the legitimacy of diachronic analysis, Saussure emphasized the importance of synchronic analysis. While the changes in history influence the individual elements of a language system, at every point in time, the language system retains its structure. To grasp the language system at a point in time, one has to analyze the elements of the system and their relationships, and this can be done without reference to the history of the relationships (Koerner, 1973).

### **Structuralism and Interdisciplinary Impact**

Structuralism, a prominent intellectual movement in the humanities and social sciences, emerged from Saussure's theoretical model. His impact can be seen in:

- Contributions to linguistics, particularly American structuralism by Leonard Bloomfield and the functionalism of the Prague School by Roman Jakobson
- Culture and culture studies by the application of the theory of signs to social/cultural structures
- Consumerism and modernism in anthropology through the structural analysis of kinship and myth by Claude Lévi-Strauss
- Narrative theory and poetics by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, respectively

Saussure's accomplishment was to change the perception of linguistics as a humanistic discipline focused on particular historical details and instead view it as a science of systematic structures and their relationships (Dosse, 1997).

### **Noam Chomsky: The Revolutionary of Linguistic Theory**

#### **Intellectual Context and Development**

Noam Chomsky (1928–present) emerged in an American linguistic tradition that was dominated by descriptive structuralism of Leonard Bloomfield and the behaviorist psychology of B.F. Skinner. The dominant view saw language as a learned behavior, a set of habits formed by stimulus-response conditioning and determined entirely by the environment (Bloomfield, 1933).

Zellig Harris's student, Noam Chomsky, became dissatisfied with these methodologies. Chomsky contends that behaviorist and structuralist frameworks cannot sufficiently explain three core aspects of human

language: language's creativity (the ability to produce and comprehend original sentences), complexity (the overwhelming most difficult grammatical structures which cannot be acquired through simple conditioning), and the rapid, uniform acquisition of language (children master intricate grammatical structures quickly, despite limited linguistic input) (Chomsky, 1959).

### **The Linguistic Theory**

To explain language acquisition, Chomsky proposed that humans have an inbuilt, evolutionary advanced component of the mind specific to language—Universal Grammar (UG). Children have the ability to acquire language even with limited exposure to the language, which Chomsky calls the "poverty of stimulus." UG consists of a collection of principles shared across human languages and a limited number of parameters that vary across languages (Chomsky, 1965).

Chomsky (1986, p. 3) defined UG as the “system of principles, conditions, and rules that underlie the construction of possible grammars of all human languages.” This assertion represents a departure from the structuralism of structuralism and the behaviorism of Bloomfield.

### **Competence and Performance**

Chomsky describes the differences between the two systems of language in a way that is comparable to Saussure, but with differences that are significant.

- **Competence:** An idealized, unconscious event of a language system that is representative of a native speaker.
- **Performance:** The actual usage of language in a specific instance, constrained by memory, other distractions, and errors, among other performance issues.

Chomsky viewed performance as something other than language and the social practices that come with it, while Saussure viewed desempenho as something other than language and society. Chomsky's competence, then, foregrounds the psychological and cognitive elements language as a form of mental representation (Chomsky, 1965). This mentalist view of language aligned itself with the developing cognitive sciences.

### **Generative Grammar**

Generative grammar outlines the formal system with the most distinctive methodology of Chomsky's contributions. It is a formal system that describes a finite set of rules with the ability to produce an infinite number of grammatical sentences. Chomsky stated that "A grammar of the language L is essentially a theory of L. Any scientific theory is based on a finite number of observations, and it seeks to relate the observed phenomena and to predict new phenomena by constructing general laws in terms of hypothetical constructs".

This approach shifted the study of language from an empirical to a more formal, deductive system, and definitely more than just a theory. While definitely less than empirical, it probably required a bit of description of rules, and probably less than the actual grammar system of the language, but the theory of the grammar systems is probably very large, and probably more than sufficient to explain the mental competency of the speakers of the language in the sense of Radford, 2004.

### **The Cognitive Revolution**

The 1959 review by Chomsky of Skinner's Verbal Behavior and the critique of Behaviorism by Chomsky, was one of the most important contributors to the broader Cognitive Revolution, which included changes in psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience. Chomsky, argued that language cannot be explained in terms of environmental conditioning, and that theory required mental constructs to explain the process. This reestablished the scientific study of mental processes and states, which is a process Gardner, 1985 states, was often ignored.

Chomsky (1980) viewed language as a biological endowment, a 'mental organ' like the visual system or other organs of cognition. This view shifted the focus of linguistics from the behavioral sciences and structuralist humanities to the realm of cognitive science.

### **Comparative Analysis: Structuralism Versus Generativism**

#### **Theoretical Assumptions and Differences**

| <b>Dimension</b>             | <b>Saussure</b>                         | <b>Chomsky</b>                           |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Nature of Language</b>    | Social system, conventional institution | Biological faculty, mental organ         |
| <b>Primary Focus</b>         | Structure and relationships among signs | Mental grammar and rule systems          |
| <b>Methodology</b>           | Descriptive, taxonomic                  | Formal, explanatory, deductive           |
| <b>Object of Study</b>       | Langue (social system)                  | Competence (individual knowledge)        |
| <b>Disciplinary Location</b> | Humanities, semiology                   | Cognitive science, psychology            |
| <b>Explanation Type</b>      | Structural (relations within system)    | Generative (rules generating structures) |
| <b>View of Universals</b>    | Implicit in structural relations        | Explicit in Universal Grammar            |
| <b>Linguistic Creativity</b> | Acknowledged but not explained          | Central phenomenon requiring explanation |

#### **Convergence and Divergence**

Chomsky and Saussure also have several differences. Both have worked to create a framework to establish linguistics as a discipline with a unique focus. Both also separate the system that underlies a language (Saussure's terms 'langue' and Chomsky's 'competence') and the system's use (Saussure's 'parole' and Chomsky's 'performance'). Both also contributed to the prominence of synchronic analysis, although it is still a valid focus of research.

Still, their primary focuses differ. Saussure views linguistics as social, relational, and taxonomic. He focuses on describing the system of conventions that enable a community to communicate. In contrast, Chomsky views linguistics as cognitive, mathematical, and explanatory. He focuses on describing the mental structures and processes that support the ability of individual language users to generate and comprehend language (Newmeyer, 1986).

### **Complementarity Instead of Opposition**

Attachment of many linguists to the analysis of social and psychological language leads to a view of Saussurean and Chomskyan linguistics as competing. In fact, they address complementary aspects of the multifaceted construct that is human language. Saussure accounts for language as a social fact and Chomsky accounts for language as a psychological fact. Saussure's social fact refers to the system which exists outside of any individual speaker. Chomsky's psychological fact refers to the speaker's internal system, which allows him to operate within the social system described by Saussure.

As Koerner (2000) points out, these views should be seen as additive rather than as competing explanations. Fully grasping what it means to know a language involves understanding not only the structural description of social systems, but also the cognitive description of knowledge at the individual level. Since Chomsky, the history of linguistics has been largely an attempt to incorporate these tensions, though numerous conflicts remain.

### **Critiques of Saussurean Linguistics**

Critics of Saussure have pointed to several shortcomings within his model:

1. Language use is ignored: Saussure's privileging of langue over parole has the effect of sidelining the study of social context, speaker variation, discourse, and pragmatics (Harris, 1987).
2. Imbalance of focus on structure, neglecting meaning: Saussure's focus on structural relations tended to ignore the role of language and how it operates within the realms of thinking and communicating (Vološinov, 1973).
3. Psychological explanations are scarce: Saussure's model is silent on the nature and means of linguistic knowledge, how it is represented in the mind, or how it is acquired by children. This leaves a critical aspect of the model unaddressed.
4. Synchronic preference: Saussure's focus on synchronic analysis tends to be less attentive to how the structures in the present are a reflection of underlying historical processes.

### **Chomskyan theory also appears to merit more refutation.**

1. The Empirical Standing of Universal Grammar: Critics highlight that without a direct explanation, innate linguistic knowledge, if true, would be explained by other, more general learning processes (Tomasello, 2003; Evans & Levinson, 2009).
2. Social and Cultural Dimensions are Ignored: The focus on individual competence sidelines the social, interactive and cultural dimensions of language (Hymes, 1972; Labov, 1972).
3. The Problem of Idealization: Chomsky's idealization to an 'ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community' (1965, p. 3) may be idealizing away some of the critical features of language that must be understood.
4. Use-based alternatives: These approaches emphasize the linguistic structure is a product of the language used, as opposed to having an innate value (Bybee, 2010; Goldberg, 2006).

5. Theoretical Instability: Chomsky's numerous revisions to his theoretical framework (Standard Theory, Government-Binding, Minimalism, etc.) raises issues regarding the theoretical framework's empirical underpinnings.

Regardless of the critiques, Chomskyan and Saussurean frameworks are still the foundation of most linguistic research. These frameworks are used to develop theories and to conduct research in order to find evidence in the field.

### **Modern Linguistics and Their Lasting Influence**

**The building blocks of modern theory view linguistics as a combination of many theories, including:**

- **Structuralism** - Analyses influence descriptions, analyses, and typologies of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels.
- **Generative Grammar** - Dominates the syntactic and phonological levels and is strong in formal, theoretical linguistics.
- **Functionalism** - Focuses on the communicative roles that influence the structural linguistic hierarchies.
- **Cognitive Linguistics** - Inherently Chomskyan in a mentalist orientation, but usage-based models are preferred over formal rule models.
- **Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology** - Explain and describe language in social and cultural contexts.

Contemporary linguistics contains both Saussure and Chomsky, Saussure in the founding of principles of systemic linguistics that view language as a system of differences, and Chomsky in the cognitive and explanatory focus of current research. In the words of Crystal (2008, p. 421) "No two individuals have had a greater impact on the development of linguistic theory than Saussure and Chomsky."

Who is the 'father of modern linguistics' is a question that doesn't have a straightforward answer, and relies heavily on how one interprets the question of 'modern linguistics'.

Should modern linguistics be defined as the scientific study of language as an autonomous system, with its own guiding methods and objects of study, then Saussure undoubtedly deserves the recognition.

He laid the conceptual groundwork for linguistics to be separated from the disciplines of philology, psychology, and philosophy. His distinctions (langue/parole, synchronic/diachronic, signifier/signified) are engrained in the alterations and rejections of the field, as every linguist possesses those distinctions.

If defining the scope of linguistics as the study of language as a mental faculty, cognitive science of language, then Chomsky is, without a doubt, the ultimate modern figure. He refocused linguistic scholarship pertaining to explanatory adequacy and psychological realism, unifying linguistics with the cognitive sciences and formulating questions pivotal for research in this domain.

Chomsky should be credited as the founder of modern generative and cognitive linguistics. All the same, Saussure should be recognized as the founder of modern linguistics in a disciplinary sense. Chomsky and Saussure are not rivals for a certain title. They each represent the two fundamental and successive phases

in the history of linguistic science: establishing the discipline and then transforming it through a revolutionary theory.

## CONCLUSION

Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky are the two most important scholars in the field of modern linguistics. The foundations of modern linguistics are based on Saussure's conceptualization of language as a set of structural relations around a system of signs. His bifurcations of the field into structuralist paradigms of *langue* and *parole*, synchronic and diachronic, or signifier and signified, most notably, provided the boundaries of the field of study for new linguistic scholars.

Chomsky's critique of precedent theories of the discipline caused a paradigmatic shift of the field within linguistic philosophy, theories, and models of formalism and the generative theory of New grammar, with a focus on the cognitive, among others, bringing in and orienting the discipline toward cognitive science. He left a legacy of research programs that are still being developed.

It is not constructive to describe these scholars as rivals for the title of first "father of modern linguistics." Their contributions to the discipline should be viewed as essential and complementary components of a multi-faceted whole. Structuralism of Saussure's type established the autonomy of linguistics as a discipline with a well-defined object of study. Generativism of Chomskyan type turned that science into an explanatory one that interlocks with the study of the mind. Without the foundational vision of Saussure modern linguistics would be bereft of its disciplinary identity. Without the foundational program of Chomsky it would be bereft of its explanatory identity.

The story of the modern linguistics is not of breaks and conflicts between opposing paradigms but of cumulative growth and development through successive theoretical transformations. Saussure and Chomsky are not present in linguistics as relics of the past; they continue to be active and vital sources of insights that shape the contemporary theory of language.

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