3.4 THE STRUCTURE/SYSTEM DISTINCTION, SYNTAGMATIC AND PARADIGMATIC RELATIONSHIPS

We say that language is **structured** and that it is a **system of systems**. This means that it is structured in such a way that its elements are inter-related to form a system at each level of its structure. Thus, sounds are inter-related to form the phonological system, words are inter-related to form the morphological system, and word-classes are inter-related to form the syntactic system.

To give an example of this, Robins compares the structure of language to that of an orchestra. The members of an orchestra are all related to each other by their specific roles as orchestra players in the orchestra as a whole, and as smaller groups within the orchestra (e.g. group of violinists, group of bass players). Each performs his function by virtue of his place in relation to the others and players cannot be added to or taken away from an orchestra without changing its quality. This is what we mean by structure: an ordered composition of many parts, each part being related to the whole, and also related to other elements within it. Each part, by inter-relationship of elements in it, constitutes a system.
Within each system, elements are selected and combined in building up the structure. For example, if we wish to build up a word such as 'take', we will select some sounds—out of several sounds possible, we select /t/, /ei/ and /k/, and then we combine them in a particular order, i.e. we decide which one is to occur first, and which later. In the process of selection, certain rules operate: we can select one element at a time from among a class of similar elements, e.g. a particular consonant from a class of similar consonants; a noun from a class of nouns. With reference to the above example, we chose the consonant /l/ instead of /k/ or /bl/, and so on, which we could have chosen because they are all similar, i.e. they are all plosives. They belong to the same category of sounds. The relationship between those elements which are similar because they belong to the same class or category is called a paradigmatic relationship which holds between several elements that belong to the same class within a system, e.g. the relationship between plosive consonants in the phonological system, or the relationship between nouns in the syntactic system.

In the process of combination of these elements we combine the chosen elements in a particular order or sequence. Here, too, there are certain rules. For instance, we can combine /l/ + /ei/ + /k/ in this order, but not in the order: /ei/ + /l/ + /k/. It is obvious that there is a particular order or sequence which must be followed. The three elements that follow one another in a particular sequence are related in what can be called a syntagmatic relationship. One follows the other in a linear order, and it is by following this order that the structure of a word or sentence is built up. Thus,

Paradigmatic relationship = between elements in a class or system, only one can operate at a time.

Syntagmatic relationship = between elements in a linear sequence, structural

Or to illustrate with an example:

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  | t | e | k | Syntagmatic
  | b | e | k |
  | t | u | k |
  | b | e | t |
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Paradigmatic (vertical)

In the paradigmatic relationship, /t/ can be replaced by /b/, /ei/ can be replaced by /u/, /k/ can be replaced by /l/. Each can be replaced by another element from within the same system and class. So, in the above example, we cannot put a consonant in place of the vowel but we can replace one vowel by another. In the syntagmatic relationship, the elements have to be combined in the proper sequence. We cannot violate the sequential order. On the basis of these paradigmatic and
systagmatic relationships, rules of selection and combination operate, and taken
together, these constitute the structure of a language. They are like the two
intersecting threads that build up the fabric of language. Because of these
relationships we say that language has duality of structure. At one level, we select
particular elements out of many, at another level, we combine these elements to
form a structural unit. With a limited number of elements we can construct a large
number of combinations. In the example given below, we see how both selection
(paradigmatic) and combination (syntagmatic) processes enable us to construct
different sentences:

| The boy | went | to school |
| A boy | went | to school |
| The boy | went | home |
| The boy | ran | home |
| The girl | went | to school |
| A girl | ran | home |

Other variations are also possible, depending on what elements are chosen from
each category at the paradigmatic level. Each category has elements which are
discrete and separable from elements in another category and, therefore, elements
in each category are able to operate independently as representatives, as it were,
of that whole category. This gives us a lot of flexibility, or choice of the elements
which we wish to combine. At the syntagmatic level too, variations are possible,
but there are rules which allow for only certain kinds of variation. For example
in the above sentence, the rules of sequentiality (syntagmatic) allow us to substitute
‘home’ for ‘to school’ because both these can function in the adjunct position at
the end of the sentence; but we cannot have ‘To school the boy went’ or ‘Went
home the girl’, because these violate the syntagmatic relationship between the
elements (Sometimes poets violate this relationship, e.g. ‘Home is the sailor,
Home from the sea/And the hunter Home from the hill’—this is done for the sake
of emphasis and to create a particular rhythm).

To sum up, system is the set of paradigmatic relationships between elements,
and structure is the set of syntagmatic relationships between elements at each
level in the language. At the level of sounds, there is a phonological system
(consisting, for instance, of vowels and consonants) and a phonological structure
(determining the combination of these vowels and consonants). At the level of
sentence-formation, there is a syntactic system (consisting of word-classes such
as noun, verb, adjective, adverb) and a syntactic structure (determining the
combination of these word-classes) to enable the formation of sentences.

3.5 SUBSTANCE AND FORM

Sounds and symbols such as letters of the alphabet that represent sounds in
writing are the raw material of a language. They are the phonic (sound) and
graphic (written) substance of the language. In themselves, they have no meaning.
It is only when they are given a particular shape or order that they become
meaningful. That is, it is only when they have some form that they have meaning.
All distinct sounds produced by human speech organs and written scripts are the substance of human language. A cluster of sounds such as /h/, /l/, /el/ etc. is only noise, it has no meaning; it must be suitably arranged into some form to make it meaningful. It is only when the sounds are arranged in a certain way, i.e. /hn/ + /el/ + /l/ that we can see some meaning in them. It is just as if there is a log of wood which has no particular shape, and the carpenter makes a chair or table out of it—he has changed the substance into form.

Substance and form are two parts of the quality of language. Substance, which is the mere sound or word is only the ‘signifier’ in Saussure’s terms, and in order to make sense it has to be linked with the ‘signified’ that is, the meaning, or the concept. Sounds when arranged in a particular order, signify something meaningful; words when arranged in a particular order express some meaningful idea or action; this means that the arrangement itself gives form to the substance of the language. This is why Saussure emphasises the syntagmatic or associative arrangement in language.

There is a further distinction to be made between levels of ‘expression’ and ‘content’ in form. At one level, the level of expression, linguistics deals with the form or shape of linguistic elements, without necessarily taking into account their meaning. By arranging elements with regard to this level alone, we can get sentences like: ‘The bachelor gave birth to a baby’ which does not make any sense. So we have to consider the level of content as well, that is, the level of meaning, or semantics. In other words, form includes both grammar (the arrangement of words in the sentence) and semantics (the meaningful relationships between the words).

To sum up, we can say that substance is the elements or ‘raw materials’ of language such as phonemes, morphemes, or graphemes, and form is the associative order in which these are brought together in a meaningful way. Linguists therefore emphasise that form is the concern of linguistic study, not substance; and it is form that makes it possible to study substance.

**3.6 DIACHRONIC AND SYNCHRONIC APPROACHES**

This distinction is made in linguistics between two approaches to the study of language. The synchronic (‘Chronos’ stands for ‘time’) approach sees language as a living whole, existing as a ‘state’ at one particular time. This ‘state’ of language is an accumulation of all the linguistic activities that a language community engages in during a specific period. To study language, therefore, linguistics can collect samples of this language as it exists, describing them regardless of any historical considerations which may have influenced the language at any previous time. Once linguists have isolated a focal point for synchronic description, the time factor becomes irrelevant. Whatever changes are taking place in the material as they study it, are considered irrelevant to the main focus of study—which is the system of the language as it exists, that is, the system of inter-relationships that bind together co-existing items in the collective mind of the community.

The diachronic approach, on the other hand ‘traces the historical development of the language and records the changes that have taken place in it between
successive points in time; 'diachronic' is therefore equivalent to 'historical' (Lyons, 1983, p. 35). It investigates language changes as they have occurred from time to time, and the evolution of languages.

Saussure (1916), who made this distinction, gives priority in linguistics to the synchronic approach, and observes that the two approaches must be kept separate. This is because, as he states, what strikes us first when we study the facts of language is that their succession in time does not exist as far as the speaker is concerned. For instance, a speaker of English is not concerned with the language as it existed in the middle ages. The speaker is confronted with a state of being that is the language as it exists for him at a given time.

Saussure has given the inter-relationship of diachrony and synchrony in this way:

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   C
  /|
 / |
A x B
 / |
 /  |
D
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In the diagram, AB is the synchronic axis of simultaneities, i.e. all the facts of language as they co-exist at a particular time. It is the static axis. CD is the diachronic axis of successions. That is, CD is an imaginary line moving through time, the historical path through which language has travelled and will continue travelling. AB can intersect CD at any point because at any given time, there will be a number of simultaneous facts about the language co-existing. X is the point on CD where the particular point in time can be isolated and the language as it exists at that point can be described.

The priority of synchronic over diachronic study is explained by Saussure by analogy with the game of chess. The chessboard is constantly changing during the game, as each player makes his move. But if someone walks into the room at any moment during the game, he can understand the state of the game by looking at the positions occupied by the pieces. It does not matter how many moves or what kind of moves have been made before arriving at that stage in the game, the game can be described without reference to the earlier moves. In the same way, Saussure says, as the respective value of the pieces depends on their position on the chessboard, each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms. The rules that are agreed upon before the game begins continue to operate with each move. Similar rules exist in language too. To pass from one stage to the next, only one piece needs to be moved at a time. Thus in language, change effects only isolated elements, not the whole language. Of course, these changes ultimately do result in changing the language, just as a succession of moves can change the outcome of the game. However, at each point in the game all the pieces exist relative to each other and we cannot say what their ultimate fate will be at that point.