

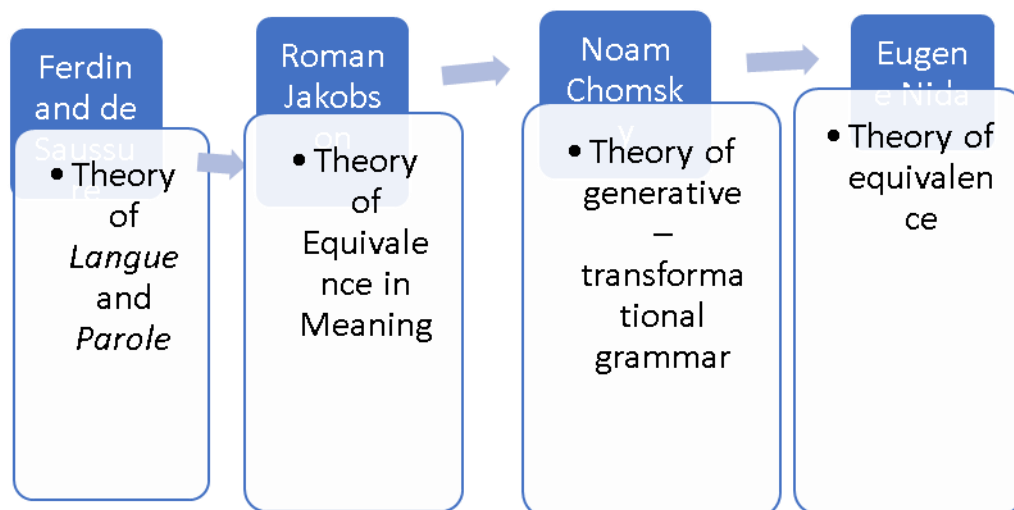
## ROOTS OF EQUIVALENCE THEORY IN TRANSLATION: FROM SAUSSURE TO NIDA

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**Abstract:** *This article analyses the historical development of equivalence theory in translation, accenting the main turning points in the theory development. Four important works and approaches in linguistics and translation (Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Noam Chomsky and Eugene Nida) which have formed the equivalence theory is discussed from the point of their relationship and influence diachronically.*

This article discusses the theoretical formation of one of the main translation theories – the equivalence theory from the historical perspective. Three leading theories in linguistics and translation, 1) *Theory of Langue and Parole*, 2) *Theory of Equivalence in Meaning*, and 3) *Theory of universal generative–transformational grammar* served as a ground for today’s leading and most influential theory in translation. Although this the equivalence theory has been heavily discussed and criticized, systematic approach of the theory has considerably influenced the development of translation theory and practice.

Eugene Nida’s theory of translation has been formed in his major works in the 1960s: *Toward a Science of Translating* (Nida 1964a) and the co-authored *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Nida and Taber 1969). His more systematic approach borrows theoretical concepts and terminology both from semantics and pragmatics (Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Theory of Langue and Parole Course in General Linguistics* (1916), Roman Jakobson’s *Theory of Equivalence in Meaning (On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* (1959)) and from Noam Chomsky’s work on syntactic structure which formed the theory of a universal generative–transformational grammar (Chomsky 1957, 1965).



In order to investigate the relationship and influence of these four theories to each other, let us examine the historical development and main features of these theories.

### FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE’S THEORY OF *LANGUE* AND *PAROLE*

Ferdinand de Saussure, often considered the father of modern linguistics, made several groundbreaking contributions to the field in his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). One of his key distinctions was between **langue** (language system) and **parole** (speech or actual language use). This distinction laid the foundation for the development of structuralism in linguistics, a theory that emphasizes the relationships between elements in a system rather than focusing on individual items in isolation. **Langue** refers to the abstract, collective system of rules and conventions that governs a particular language. It is a social phenomenon, shared by a community of speakers, and represents the structure of a language that allows individuals to communicate with each other. *Langue* is shared by all members of a linguistic community. It is not tied to any individual speaker but exists as a social construct. It includes the grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics of a language. Saussure emphasized that *langue* is a structured system of signs, where the meaning of each sign (word) is determined by its relationship with other signs in the system. It consists of the underlying rules that enable communication, such as how words combine to form sentences and the meanings associated with particular sounds or symbols. Speakers of a language know *langue* intuitively, without needing explicit instruction, which allows them to produce and interpret sentences. Saussure saw *langue* as a social institution. It exists independently of individual speakers, much like laws or customs. While individuals use the language, they do not control or shape its underlying structure. Instead, they conform to the rules that are agreed upon by the community. This makes *langue* an essential tool for communication, as it ensures mutual understanding.

**Parole** refers to the individual, concrete instances of language use. It is the actual act of speaking, writing, or any form of expressing language in real-life situations. Unlike *langue*, which is collective and abstract, *parole* is personal, individual, and dynamic. *Parole* is the way individuals apply the rules of *langue* in actual speech or writing. It includes both spoken and written language, as well as the individual choices people make when using language. *Parole* is highly variable. Each speaker may use language differently depending on the context, audience, mood, or other factors. It encompasses both the grammatical and ungrammatical, the formal and informal uses of language. *Parole* reflects the speaker’s ability to use the language system (their competence), but it can also include mistakes, hesitations, slips of the tongue, or other

errors that occur in real communication. Unlike *langue*, which is abstract and cannot be observed directly, *parole* is observable and concrete. It includes the specific words spoken, the tone of voice, the pauses, and all other elements of an actual act of communication.

Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole* was revolutionary because it shifted the focus of linguistics from the study of language as a mere collection of words or sentences to the analysis of the underlying structures that make communication possible. He believed that in order to understand how language works, linguists should focus on *langue*, the stable, systemic aspects of language, rather than on *parole*, the individual and variable acts of communication. By focusing on *langue*, Saussure emphasized the need to study the system that governs language, rather than the chaotic and unpredictable nature of *parole*. This shift in focus helped linguists to approach language scientifically, seeking to uncover the rules that structure linguistic systems. This distinction laid the foundation for structuralism in linguistics. Structuralists, like Saussure, argue that meaning in language arises from the relationships between elements in the system (*langue*), rather than from the individual utterances themselves (*parole*). Saussure also distinguished between *synchronic* (studying language at a particular point in time) and *diachronic* (studying the historical development of language) approaches to linguistics. His focus on *langue* was part of a synchronic approach, where linguists study the system of language as it exists at a specific moment, rather than tracking its changes over time.

At the heart of Saussure’s linguistic theory is the concept of the **linguistic sign**, which consists of two components:

- *The signifier*: The form of a word or expression, such as the sound pattern or written symbol (e.g., the word “tree” as it is spoken or written).
- *The signified*: The concept or meaning that the signifier represents (e.g., the mental image or concept of a tree).

Saussure argued that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. There is no inherent connection between the sound pattern of a word and its meaning; rather, this relationship is determined by the conventions of *langue*. This arbitrary nature of the sign is a key aspect of how language operates as a system of differences — meaning arises not from individual words, but from their relationships to one another within the system.

To summarize Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction between **langue** and **parole**, we may note that it is one of the cornerstones of modern linguistic theory. *Langue* represents the structured, collective system of rules that makes communication possible, while *parole* refers to the individual, variable use of language in real-world situations. Saussure’s focus on *langue* and his structural approach to language shifted the

study of linguistics from historical and comparative methods to a focus on understanding the underlying structures of language systems, paving the way for future developments in structuralism and semiotics.

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