



traveling. The point of intersection X indicates that neither excludes the other completely. If CD represents evolution over a period (say 100 years from 1850 to 1950), X1, X2, X3...represent the successive state of language 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890 and so on.

The difference between descriptive or synchronic and historical or diachronic linguistics can be illustrated by the diagram of Saussure himself, who was the first person to point out the necessity of distinguishing between the two approaches. We may think this is fairly obvious distinction if it had not been the case that some quite eminent 19th century scholars had failed to draw it. And it needs to be drawn. Neither excludes the other completely, of course, there must be a point of intersection in terms of the above mentioned diagram. But being aware of, the distinction allows us to focus attention more answeringly on language from a given consistent angle. Moreover, due emphasis on the synchronic (which had been neglected dimension before Saussure) helps to clarify the important point that a diachronic investigation always pre-supposes, to some extent a synchronic study. It is impossible to consider the way a language has changed from one state to another without first knowing something about the two states to be compared. This need not to be a pair of complete synchronic descriptions, of course, to complain that it would be a distortion of what linguists actually do in practice but some non-historical analysis is essential as a preliminary. Saussure rounds off his discussion with various analogies, of which his analogy with a game of chess is perhaps the most famous. If we walk into a room while a chess game is being played, it is possible to assess the state of the game by simply studying the position of the pieces on the board (as long as we know the rules): we do not normally need to know the previous moves from the beginning of the game. And likewise the state of board at every move is implicit in any pattern of play we may wish to study. The synchronic/diachronic distinction, Saussure claims, is very much like this. And, without wanting to push the analogy too far, we can agree with him.

Throughout the 19th century linguistic research was very strongly historical in character. One of the principal aims of the subject was to group language families on the basis of independent development from a common source, or to study language change. The description of a particular language was made subsidiary to this general aim, and there was little interest in the study of a language of a given community without reference to historical consideration. Saussure's distinction between diachronic and synchronic investigation of the language is a distinction between two opposing view points. Nevertheless, valid diachronic work has to be based on good synchronic work because no valid statement about linguistic change can be made unless good description of a language does exist. Similarly a synchronic statement may well reflect certain historical developments. For example, two vowels of 'reel' and 'real' are described as being basically different because the historical facts show different sources for the 'ee' and the 'ea'.

On the other hand, we find statements like 'ought' is the past tense of 'owe' and 'dice' is the plural of 'die'. One can point out that these statements are diachronically, but not synchronically, true. A synchronic approach is enough to gain mastery over a contemporary language, but it is necessary to have a diachronic description to understand the evolution of that language.