

Saussurean Structuralism: Unveiling Linguistic and Literary Paradigms

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Abstract :

Numerous researchers in the realms of linguistics and literature have delved into the complexities of Structuralism. This theory, amalgamating both fields, marked the inception of a sustained effort to grapple with and delineate concepts like language, speech, and signs. Ferdinand de Saussure's Semiology, functioning as an analytical tool, transcended disciplinary boundaries, leaving an indelible mark on fields ranging from philosophy and anthropology to psychology and literary theory. This article centers on Ferdinand de Saussure's dichotomies and their profound impact on the works of narratologists, post-structuralists, and new historicists. The discussions sparked by structuralism were notably rich and creative, reshaping perspectives on language, text, authorship, history, and significant figures within these contexts. Consequently, deconstruction, post-modernism, and post-structuralism emerge as nuanced iterations, refining the foundational principles of structuralism.

Keywords:

Structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure, Linguistics, Semiology, Significant figures, Literature, Jakobson, Foucault, dichotomy, authorship, text, deconstruction, post-modernism, new historicism, post-structuralism, narratology, literary theory, philosophy, psychology, disciplinary boundaries, language, dichotomies, history

1. Introduction

Since the inception of abstract thinking, whether marked by the advent of writing in 3500 BC or earlier religious contemplation, humans have engaged in categorization, classification, and the pursuit of connections among seemingly disparate elements. The semiological perspective represents one abstracted approach intellectuals have employed to understand language. Concepts like the arbitrariness between the signified and the signifier, the interplay of volitional and psychological aspects in sound-image, and the distinctions between language and speech have all been developed and credited to Saussure.

Interestingly, despite being a reactionary response, deconstruction can be viewed as an extension of structuralism. Moreover, intellectuals across various fields have, in the ongoing evolution of knowledge and thought, shaped their ideas and frameworks by either reacting to or applying structuralism within the specific contexts of their disciplines. This diverse range includes figures like Jack Lacan in psychology, Levis-Strauss in social anthropology, Michel Foucault in philosophy, Roland Barthes in literature, and Paul Ricoeur in hermeneutics, among others.

2. Ferdinand De Saussure's Structuralism

The origin of the study of signs dates back to “Augustine (c.397AD) and Poinot, then followed by John Locke, in 1690, and Charles Sanders Peirce, who discovered the categories of semiotics, realism and idealism (1867-1914)”(Syafri,2020). Ferdinand de Saussure himself mentioned the names of previous scholars who contributed to his fully-fledged theory of language such as the American scholar Whitney, the author of *Life and Growth of Language* (1875), the German scholars K. Brugmann, H. Osthoff, W. Braune, E. Sievers, H. Paul and the Slavic scholar Leskien. For him these scholars' role in discussions about languages was that “thanks to them, language is no longer looked upon as an organism that develops independently but as a product of collective mind of a linguistic group” (Saussure, 1959, p.5).

For de Saussure, Semiology (or semiotics) is “a science that studies the life of signs within society” (Saussure, 1959, p. 10). It is also “the study of existing conventional communicative systems”, which can be called languages. But languages aren’t only the oral communication humans have with each other; for the gestures, semaphores, stop light (red, green, yellow) are semiotic systems as well, the intelligibility of which allows us to negotiate the worlds around us (Fry, 2009).

For Saussure the signifier is the sound-image, and the signified is the concept that it represents. The relationship between these two is up to the volition of the speakers who form one community. Speaking, another word for language here, “is the sum of what people say and includes: (a) individual combinations that depend on the will of speakers, and (b) equally wilful phonational acts” (Saussure, 1959, p. 37). The linguistic sign (or simply a sign), which doesn’t unite “a thing and a name” but is rather a combination of a concept (or meaning) and the sound-image. This combination is a “two-sided psychological entity”. Why psychological one might ask? It is so, Saussure explains, because:

1. The meaning and the sound-image are “united in the brain by an associative bond.”
2. The sound-image itself is of a psychological nature, and this becomes clear when we watch our talking. “Without moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse.”
3. “The letter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory” (or material) as opposed to “the concept, which is generally more abstract” (Saussure,1959,pp.66-7).

The relationship between the two sides of the linguistic sign is so close and undivided that Saussure likens it to the two sides of a sheet of paper:

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound; the division could be accomplished only abstractedly, and the result would be either pure psychology or pure phonology (Saussure,1959,pp.113).

Now another characteristic of the relationship between the sound-image and the concept or between the signifier and the signified, or simply of the linguistic sign, according to Saussure is that it is arbitrary for the following reasons:

1. For instance, the idea/ concept of ““sister” is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French;”also, another sequence could have represented the idea in a different language.
2. The mere existence of different languages itself
3. People find it difficult to find any basis to discuss language, because of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign; and it is this very feature that protects language from being changed at the individual level (Saussure, 1959, pp.73). Therefore, the community is necessary to create a linguistic system where values “owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance” (Saussure,1959,p.113).

However, not all relationships between sound-images and concepts can be characterized as arbitrary.

Onomatopoeia, for instance, proves the selection of the signifier is not arbitrary. De Saussure brought examples where the words and their “phonic evolution” are suggestive of their meaning.

Words like French fouet ‘whip’ or glas ‘knell’ may strike certain ears with suggestive sonority, but to see that they have not always had this property we need only examine their Latin forms (fouet is derived from fāgus ‘beech-tree,’ glas from classicum ‘sound of a trumpet’. Moreover, there is also what Saussure called “authentic onomatopoeic

words” where, although they lose some of their authenticity through time, sound and concept are closed attached because the sound resembles the action it expresses like tick tock, the cat meows and the cow mows ...etc. Interjections are also “spontaneous expressions of reality dictated” (Saussure, 1959, p.69).

Saussure’s next important dichotomy is langue/language and parole/speech. For him the norm is not speech that comes in the form of articulation and straddles and involves different individual levels; rather, language is the abstract faculty to which we must refer if we want to be accurate as regards speech. Therefore, as Saussure argues, “from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language and use language as the norm of all other manifestations of speech.” The characteristics of language according to Saussure can be summarized as follows:

1. It is an essential and definite part of langue/ human speech
2. It is a societal creation of the “faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body” to allow each member of the community to practice it.
3. It is a self-contained entity that serves as a fundamental ground for categorization; once we prioritize language as the primary element within the realm of communication, a logical structure within a complex body of information is established, making it amenable to various forms of organization that doesn't readily fit into any other categorization system (Saussure, 1959, p.9).
4. It is not something controlled by the speaker; instead, it is something that individuals absorb passively. It doesn't demand deliberate planning, and contemplation comes into effect only when categorization is required.
5. Unlike speech, language is a subject which can be explored independently. Even though extinct languages are no longer in active use, we can readily understand their linguistic structures.
6. Language is concrete because it has a location in the brain where sound-images overlap with their corresponding concepts

and ideas; the ability to represent language-related concepts visually through graphics enables dictionaries and grammars to portray it with precision. Language is a repository of sound-images, and writing serves as the tangible manifestation of these mental images.

7. It is a system of signs where the fundamental aspect is the combination of meanings and mental representations of sounds, and both aspects of these symbols are rooted in the realm of psychology (Saussure, 1959, pp.14-5).

However, according to Saussure, speech is different from language in the following points:

1. Speech is heterogeneous; in other words, there could be different varied speeches within one community, region or country.
2. It could be studied at the individual level, involves phonation and thus it is psychophysical.
3. Speaking is not a collaborative means; its expressions are personal and brief. When we speak, we are basically combining individual actions, much like the components in a formula: 1+1+1+1... (Saussure, 1959, p.19).
4. It is neither possible to reduce parole to a written convention of symbols nor is it possible to “provide detailed photographs of acts of speaking” (Saussure, 1959, p.15).
5. Speech is the executive side of language

The Swiss linguist did also come up with other dichotomies: the synchronic study of language versus the diachronic approach to it; the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Diachronic linguistics deals with the evolution of language, while synchronic linguistics has to do with the static form of it. Syntagmatic relation is a relation between words that occur together in the same sentence or text; whereas, a paradigmatic relation is a relation between words that can be replaced by another word in the same categories.

3. Implications of Saussure's thought

It is worth noting that the Swiss linguist's thought vis-à-vis religion wasn't much different from the predominant thought of the time in which he lived. Marx, Freud and Nietzsche broke away at last from the western constant search for an origin, source of things or a 'logos'. Marx argued that the matter is prior to the idea; in other words, for him it is not God or any other deity that is responsible for human acts, choices and the historical progress of humanity. Rather it is economy or matter. The base structure which is matter thus decides the superstructure which comprises all intangible things such as politics, religion and so on. Freud, on the other hand, brought his attention to the human inner psychological life or what he called the unconscious; for him it is responsible for and explains plenty of human choices, words, dreams and personality traits. Yet, by far Nietzsche was the most radical amongst all. He declared the death of god- the obvious and uncontestable source of things or the logos for most western intellectuals and communities. Ferdinand de Saussure was not different from the above mentioned elites. He also downplayed and even ridiculed the prevalent theological thought that the origins of language was Adam who was taught the names of things by God.

No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such. That is why the question of the origin of speech is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking; the only real object of linguistics is the normal, regular life of an existing idiom (Saussure, 1959, pp.71-2).

Trying thus to find a logos of things including language is not important at all for him and it is not worth searching for. Moreover, words become meaningful only when they are compared to other words; in other words, the signifier is recognized and identified because it is not another signifier or other signifiers "as each linguistic

term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms” (Saussure, 1959, p. 88).

4. Structuralism and Literature

Structuralism found its way to literature through the narratologists Roland Barthes who wrote a long essay entitled *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* where he reads a James Bond novel as a binary system of pairs, Tzvetan Todorov, who coined the term narratology in his *The Grammar of the Decameron* (1969), Gérard Genette whose chief work is *Figures*, of which *Narrative Discourse* is a section. These figures are highly indebted to structuralism in its first form as initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure.

The intersections between formalism and semiotics have also contributed in the application of structuralism on literary texts. This crystallized in the works of Claude Levis Strauss and Roman Jakobson. Structuralism, as did narratology as well, took from formalism the idea of function. The relationship between syn-function and auto-function is similar to the relationship between synchrony and diachrony. The idea of differential value of the sign and the idea of logos, mentioned above, are taken up by Levis-strauss and he applies them to his interpretation of the Oedipus myth where he declared that there is no such a thing as a true version of myth; rather myths derive their meaning and value only as they are differentiated from other things we know. (Fry, 2009). According to Paul Fry (2009) the essential difference between structuralism and formalism is that the prior has an ambition as regards the nature of the object which could be anything from character, to idea or concept. This is best exemplified by an aphorism by Roland Barthes in his *The Structuralist Activity* where he argues that:

Structuralism is essentially an activity, i.e., the controlled succession of a certain number of mental operations.... The goal of all structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic,

is to reconstruct on 'object' in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the 'functions') of this object.... Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it

... between the two objects, or the two tenses, of structuralist activity, there occurs something new, and what is new is nothing less than the generally Intelligible: the simulacrum is intellect added to object, and this addition has an anthropological value, in that it is man himself, his history, his situation, his freedom, and the very resistance which nature offers to his mind. We see, then, why we must speak -of-a- structuralist activity: creation or reflection are not, here, an original 'impression' of the world, but a veritable fabrication of a world which resembles the primary one, not in order to copy it but to render it intelligible (Barthes, 1967, pp. 214-215).

However, the functionalists' view of the object is different. They look at the relationship between objects as a dynamic interaction and then classify them as part of a system of subordination and dominance. But for the structuralist the virtual new objects can be clustered under data and then detected reoccurring in patterns.

Roman Jakobson also combines formalism and structuralism. In his work *Linguistics and Poetics* (where he explained his theory of the 'poetic function' which the formalists would call literariness) he argues that the poetic function "projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Kratins, 1982, p. 358). The principle of equivalence is metaphor where signs could be either similar to each other or dissimilar to each other. The axis of combination here is extrapolated from the diachronic axis where we can put speech/parole and metonymy as well, and that of selection is taken from synchrony where substitution/ selection can take place and where we can put langue/ language besides metaphor.

Hence the poetic function is the metaphorisation of what is otherwise metonymic (Fry, 2009).

Jakobson distinguishes between six functions of language that can be summarised as follows:

The referential function primarily relates to the context, making it the dominant aspect in messages like 'Water boils at 100 degrees'; (2) The emotive function stresses the sender, as seen in expressions like 'Bah!' and 'Oh!'; (3) The conative function is directed at the receiver, typically involving imperatives and apostrophes; (4) The phatic function is used to initiate, prolong, or terminate communication, or to confirm if the connection is still active, as in 'Hello?'; (5) The metalingual function is employed to establish a common understanding of the language or code, often through definitions; (6) The poetic function, exemplified by terms like 'Smurf,' emphasises the message itself, appreciating it for its own sake (Hébert, 2019).

5. Post-structuralism and the new paradigm of truth

On the 21st of October 1966 the French philosopher Jacques Derrida gave a lecture at Johns Hopkins University in the USA entitled *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* which is considered the birth of deconstruction/ post-structuralism/ post-modernism which are used interchangeably according to Louis Markos. Derrida claimed that western philosophers had always been in search for a logos including those who seemed to break away from it such as an endeavour such as Marx. Moreover, modernists broke away from metaphysics but they still think in terms of the binaries – one privileged over the other. He excludes though three important figures: Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

1. Nietzsche did away from being and truth showing them to be arbitrary. Truth is constantly changing.
2. Freud argues that 'ourselves' cannot function as logos. He demystifies the 'inner' or ego which functioned as the centre of all meaning; instead, for him we are the product of unconscious forces
3. Heidegger did away with the metaphysical concept of being as presence, for even 'ourselves' aren't present. We don't carry an essence, we create this essence instead.

Derrida asserts our inability to refer back to any pure transcendental signified and if we do go we cannot return. He introduced the term 'différance' by which he means that meaning comes from difference but he doesn't share their faith in structure, because it will point to another centre or signifier pointing somewhere else to another signifier, thus meaning is perpetually differed or postponed; we cannot get to a source. Whenever we try to get to the centre we get trapped ultimately in *aporia* a Greek word, which means weigh-less –a state of suspension where meaning is already differed.

Michel Foucault, a significant figure in post-structuralism, draws upon Roland Barthes' synchronic approach to analyse and express all forms of thought within a comprehensive structure, while also incorporating Karl Marx's diachronic perspective on history as a class struggle and his materialist conception of structure and superstructure. Foucault adheres to dialectical materialism, which posits that the economic system is in constant change, leading to corresponding changes in art and other aspects of society. Additionally, he adopts Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of a genealogy of morals, highlighting the idea that moral values are constructed by humans. Foucault's approach involves a deep inspection of history, exploring it from the perspective of power structures rather than focusing on meaning (Markos, 2021). He recognizes that this power network is in a constant state of evolution and shapes a discursive framework that dictates what we can say and think. Truth, according to him, emerges as a byproduct of these discourses. As the discourse shifts, so does the concept of truth. Consequently, views on topics like punishment, sexuality, and

insanity transform in accordance with the prevailing discourse, which is not inherently negative but rather can be force for creativity and positivity. Influenced by Roland Barthes' declaration of 'the death of the author', Foucault also asserts the end of the "great man" theory of history in his essay titled *Truth and Power*. This means that figures like Napoleon are defined by the historical discourse that surrounds them, and this concept extends to the most esteemed poets and writers as well. They cannot achieve an unadulterated, transcendent perspective that allows them to create purely untainted poems or writings, free from the socio-political realities of their time. This perspective is echoed in New Historicism, which draws heavily from the ideas of Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault. In this view, a poet, novelist or playwright often provides the least insightful commentary on their own work because they are just as much a product of their discursive context as their literary creations (Louis Markos, 2021).

6. Conclusion

Structuralism owes its existence to its founding father Ferdinand de Saussure who was also a path finder when he introduced to the field of linguistics and literature his dichotomies and the new way of looking at language and speech. Levis-strauss, Roland Barthes, Jakobson, Foucault, Derrida and other intellectuals and literary critics took structuralism a step further by coining words and extrapolating ideas and concepts from the work of Saussure despite the fact that some of them criticised the earlier view of language. Structuralism reflects the western tendency of the time of breaking away from what they saw as shackles of theology and simplistic ideas that stood between them and objective truth. The author ultimately is no longer seen as the producer of his aesthetic work, rather it is the discursive structure and history that produce him and his work by extension. Meaning is no longer looked at as a readily attained purpose; instead, its components like the signifier can lead on perpetually to other signifiers, making the mere attempt to produce or attain truth a worthwhile constant positive struggle.

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