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STRUCTURALISM: THE SAUSSUREAN HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

New ideas often ignite confused and anti-intellectual reactions and it was true of the reaction which was shown to the theory of structuralism. Structuralism is best thought of as an approach or method rather than as a clearly defined discipline. It is the name that is given to a wide range of discourses that study underlying structures of signification. Signification occurs wherever there is a meaningful event or in the practice of some meaningful action. It looks at the relationships between the various elements within the self-contained, well-organized structure of a text in order to the ways by which the text produces meaning. Since it believes that meaning is the effect of the coming together of elements.

KEYWORDS: New Criticism, Signified, Signifier, Semiology, Post Structuralism, Deconstruction

INTRODUCTION

Structuralism's emphasis on the language of their texts, their structures and frames is an extension of the kind of work New Criticism practiced. New Criticism plays an important role and will help us to understand how structuralism originated and developed. New Criticism is basically associated with the work of Cleanth Brookes, William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley and I. A. Richards. New Criticism deals with the scientific understanding of literary texts and criticism. New Critics argued that the author's intention behind a work is far less important than the meaning generated by the language of the text. According to them, there is no need to relate author's biography or history to understand the text. We only need the words on the page and can understand the meaning of the text from those words on the page. They made the contexts of an author's class, gender, race, historical backgrounds and economic conditions irrelevant. They only paid attention to the language of the literary text and considers nothing outside it. New critics concentrate on the form, style, paradox, ambiguity, images and metaphors, metre, rhythm etc. William Empson's taxonomy of ambiguity moved from simple ambiguity like double meaning to outright contradictions. I. A. Richards, on the other hand, paid attention on the form and language of the text completely and ignored all biographical and contextual details. He used to handover the text to the reader after removing all information about the author or the context in order to make them understand the literary responses of the text without any interference from outside. We see the parallels in the Structuralism with New Criticism in terms of their attention to language and form.

Structuralism believes that the world is arranged in a system of structures. Structures are those units which are organized in a specific order. Structuralism is less concerned with what texts are about, and more with how they work. The origins of structuralism go back to the 'linguistic turn' brought about by the publications of a series of lectures on general linguistics that had been delivered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He is called the father of modern linguistics. He developed a totally new outlook to the study of language and laid the foundation of structuralism in linguistics. In his ***Course in General Linguistics***, Saussure sought to examine the process by which language makes sense

to us. He argued that in order to understand the workings and use of language, it is useless to look for the historical or natural roots of particular words. But, words should be looked at as interrelated elements within language as a whole.

Saussure's main aim was to give substance to what he called the new 'science' of linguistics. He rejected completely the idea that language is a word-heap gradually accumulated over time and that its primary function is to refer to things in the words. What Saussure was putting forward was a rational and logical rethinking of the nature of language. According to Saussure's idea, it is not enough to see how words acquire meaning over time but we also need to see how words mean with a period and at part of a general system of language. He called such study as diachronic and synchronic study respectively. A diachronic study is a historical study of words whereas a synchronic study is to understand the word within the current state of the language. Saussure underlined the systematic nature of language and divides language into two main components, that is, langue and parole. He makes a fundamental distinction between langue and parole. Langue is the social aspect of language; it is the set of rules by which we combine words into sentences, use certain words in particular ways and rules. On the other hand, parole is the individual realization of the system in actual instances of language; it is everyday speech where we use words in particular context. If langue is the system of rules and conventions that guide us how to use words and meaning, then, parole is language in context. For Saussure, langue is something that is at once social and constraining whereas parole is the realm of freedom.

Saussure suggested that words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather are 'signs'. That is to say, social life is characterized by the circulation and exchange of forms to which convention has given meaning. A sign for Saussure is simply any device through which humans communicate to each other. The sign is, for Saussure, the basic element of language. He divides the sign into its two aspects. The linguistic sign is an arbitrary linkage between a signifier and a signified. The former is a sound-image whereas the latter is a concept. Saussure believed that there is no natural connection between sound-images and concepts. It is purely arbitrary or conventional and there is nothing particularly cat-like about the word 'cat' or sense of continuity about the verb ending '-ing'.

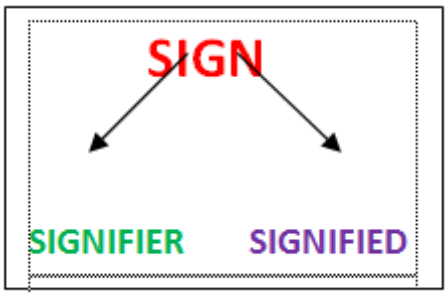

Figure 1

We can consider an example of a word 'tree' which is a sign. The letters in the word't-r-e-e' represents the signifier which explains the sound or phonetic component of a word and the category 'tree' represents signified which has a concept behind the word. Saussure considers words as signs that enable us to understand the concept or the object. Words are like a form of ray of light which takes you straight forwardly to the object or concept. They help us to build the concept in our mind. Saussure argued that verbal and written language offered the best model of how signs made meaning through a system of arbitrary social conventions. Structuralism says that language has a system of rules of combination. These rules permit a large number of different words to be created, but only within the limits of the twenty six letters of alphabet. The

structure of language ensures that when we use words, however arbitrary their meaning might be, we register certain differences and make sure of them. This makes us understand that words in a language do not refer to a reality but to the other words from which they are different. Language, therefore, is a system that constantly refers only to itself. Arbitrariness of signs doesn't suggest that we can provide any meaning to signs according to our convenience. One can never invent signs in any way they please. Individual is never at liberty to create any personal reference of things.

According to Saussure, language is a system of interrelated units and the value of the units is determined by their places in the system at a given time and in a given state. The stress laid on the synchronic study and analysis of language as systematic structures in terms of binary contrasts of signifiers laid the foundations of modern structural linguistics. Linguistics could therefore provide a strong basis for a scientific study of the life of signs in society. Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified and his emphasis on the form and function of the linguistic sign transform linguistics into the science of structures. His definition of language as a self-regulating and arbitrary sign system opens up the possibility of developing a new science of signs in general or semiology. This proposed science of signs is called semiology or semiotics. Although structuralism and semiology are not identical in meaning but they are closely interrelated. It can be said that semiology deals with the social and political aspects of signs whereas structuralism has a more abstract concern with overall system and underlying structures. Saussure takes a semiological view of linguistic structure. In his opinion, language has a place in human affairs. Language is a social institution like political or other institutions. It is its structural features that provide it a special character. Our thoughts, ideas, emotions and feelings are symbolized in signs of various types everywhere. Therefore, we can view language from the point of view of semiology. Saussure visualizes semiology as a potential field of studies providing new insights into the understanding of language. Saussure's ideas triggered new sociological or anthropological theories and were adopted by the anthropologist Claud Levi-Strauss to analyze rituals, myths and kinships. Strauss sought to locate a framework of signs in community life and looked at mythology in terms of structural units. This created the field of structural anthropology. Saussure's ideas also revolutionized the literary interpretations of works as can be seen in Roland Barthes's explanations in which whole critical theories came to be built on semilogical principles in which the language of narrative achieves a self reflexivity. The signs of the narrator are embedded in the narrative, hence perfectly detectable by semilogical analysis. It has been rightly pointed out that Claud Levi-Strauss and Barthes are largely following the Saussurean linguistics to understand language.

CONCLUSIONS

Structuralism was an attempt to establish a certain rigour and objectivity the delicate realm of literature and depend upon the given rather than authorial intentionality or historical-social assumptions. The structuralist argued that the structure of language produces 'reality' instead of an author's language reflects reality. It was partly a reaction to the earlier romantic modes of critical inquiry and partly to free literature from its dependence on the humanistic knowledge for meaning. The source of meaning is no longer the writer's or the reader's experience but the operations and oppositions which govern language. Meaning is understood not by the individual but by the system which governs or guides the individual. Structuralism gave us a model of reading texts and cultural artifacts. The attempt in structuralism was to seek an order and a structure of the text. It showed us the path and the patterns that guide us that the text would get its meaning as we reach to its core elements. By the 1980's, post-structuralism had started questioning the assumptions of structuralism. Structuralism had already done away with the author, author's language and author's intentions. It tried to explain that

meaning is determined by the underlying system of conventions and is never related to the conditions that produce the text. But Foucault focused on the historical construction of knowledge. According to him, the rational and scholarly is determined not by absolute standards of reason but by unspoken rules, institutional constraints and the power of particular discursive practices. On the other hand, Lacan started questioning the security of the connection between the signifier and signified. Some of the practitioners of Deconstruction like Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man and Hillis Miller pointed out that 'all words are metaphors--- that all differentiated, differed and deferred each leading to something of which it is the displacement in and movement without origin or end.' Post-structuralism is often seen as synonymous with deconstruction as both assert the unstable relationship between signifier and signified. Deconstruction "arises out of the structure of Roland Barthes as a reaction against the certainties of structure." If structure was an extension of Formalism, Post-Structuralism can be considered a reaction to both. Post-Structuralism and other theories create a chaos in our thinking of theoretical certainty and we move from a state of certainty to uncertainty. A lot of questions have been raised regarding the author's intention, the text, the role of the reader, the nature of the language and the source of the meaning but we have reached to no perfect answers. The theory of Post-Structuralism gives us an idea that we have not achieved anything. The destination is still away and an effort to achieve that goal is still going on.

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