# Ferdinand De Saussure and the Development of Structuralism

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## Abstract

Structuralism in literary criticism is, to some extent, a response to modern literature, which had intentionally investigated the limits of meaning and looked for stylistic effects in the deviations from all types of conventions of language, literature, and social practices in the process of 'defamiliarisation'. In its focus on codes and structures, structuralism rejects the notion of literature as simulation of the world and, as an alternative, analyses its experimentation with the language and codes of a culture. Literature for structuralist critics is appreciated for its analysis of the structuring procedures by which we organize and realize the conventional nature of our social world.

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Structuralism is an intellectual movement that began in France in the 1950s and 1960s. Before that we had 'Formalism'[1] where linguistics was applied in the study and criticism of literature. Formalists used 'devices' like sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, meters and their 'Defamiliarising' effects[2]. Although they were interested in analyzing literature structurally, they were particularly not concerned with meaning as differential and analyzing text into basic deep structures, and hence 'Formalism' is not exactly modern-day 'Structuralism'. Unlike the Formalists, who were interested in finding the uniqueness of a literary text, 'Structuralist critics are primarily interested not in what makes an individual literary work unique, but in what it has common with other literary works' (Morner and Rausch, 1998: 23)[3]. Structuralist literary critics, try to analyze texts as product of a system with a specific 'grammar' that controls its form and meaning. A reader, who has mastered the grammar that governs the production of a text and operates within it, can understand the text.

Structuralism in fact has its roots in the thinking of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). His 'Course in General Linguistics', published after his death, influenced Russian formalists[4] to try

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[1] Formalism is a branch of literary theory that sought to foreground the literariness of literature. It developed largely in reaction to the habit of interpreting texts by referring to extrinsic issues. Formalists prefer to concentrate their analysis on the relationship between the text's verbal elements, the various literary devices employed in the work and the patterns developed.

[2] Defamiliarising is seeing the 'familiar' in a different and strikingly unfamiliar way.

[3] NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms (1st South Asian Edition), Chicago, NTC publ. Group, Morner K and R. Raush (1998) p. 23.

[4] Russian Formalism is a school of literary criticism that foucused on form rather than content, and was quite popular in the former Soviet Union of the 1920s. Russian formalists viewed literary language as essentially different from everyday language.

to isolate the underlying set of laws by which different elements are universally structured in any text. Saussure's approach to language differs significantly from that which 19th century philologists offered us. In opposition to a 'historical' – diachronic linguistics which looks at the changes which take place over time in specific languages, Saussure pursed a synchronic linguistics[6]. According to Saussure,

'The term synchronic is really not precise enough; it should be replaced by another—rather long to be sure—idiosynchoronic.'[7]

His course focussed on the nature of linguistic sign[8].

Before we start looking at the principles, Saussure thought, we should clarify what 'SIGN' (<Greek Semion) actually means.

Actually anything that tells us about something other than itself is a 'SIGN'. There are many terms that mean one thing in everyday usage and something quite different when they are used as technical terms by Saussure and by other linguists—like the word 'SIGN'.

We have said sign tells us about something other than itself. Now comes the question, what is meant by 'other than itself'? Because the red light at an intersection of a few roads does not make us think about its redness; its there to make us stop.

When we write something on the pages they are not just ink-marks - they are there to bring ideas to our minds. Umberto Eco hence says, a sign is anything that can be used to lie[9].

We are actually interested here about specifically defined linguistic signs - we will call them 'sign' in short. Now our point of concern is how Saussure broke with earlier ways of analysing language and why? When Saussure prepared his lectures for 'Course in General Linguistics', he did not take a high and wide survey of linguistic thinking from ancient times.

Saussure raised a valid question that had been astonishingly overlooked by earlier linguists— i.e.

'what is the nature of the subject-matter under study in linguistics?'

The earlier linguists actually confined their interests to the historical study and the origin of language. Saussure, instead of written texts, stressed on spoken words as a starting point of understanding of expressive act.

Saussure raised a valid question :

"Psychologically, what are our ideas, apart from our language? They probably do not exist. Or in a form that may be described as amorphous. We should probably be unable according to philosophers and linguists to distinguish two ideas clearly without the help of a language (internal language naturally)"[10]

— from Saussure's lectures (class note on 4 July, 1911)

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[5] Diachronic : The term, coined by Ferdinand de Saussure, refers to the examination of languages (or a language) with reference to their origin and changes accross time.

[6] Synchronic : A term coined by Ferdinand de Saussure that refers to the study of a linguistic system without attaching any importance to its origin, history and developemt. According to Saussure, a language must be understood keeping in mind that each sign aquires its meaning in relation to the other signs that are not only related to it but also define it within its synchronic system.

[7] Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, tr. Wade Baskin, Suffolk, 1981. p. 90.

[8] A sign is a meaningful unit which is interpreted as 'standing for something other than itself'—The basics of Semiotics, Daniel Chandler, 2nd Edition, 2006.

[9] Eco Umberto (1976) : A Theory of Semiotics, Bloomington Indian a University Press, 1977.

[10] Saussure's Lectures (Classnote 4th July, 1911), Course in General Linguistics, tr. Wade Baskin, Suffolk, 1981.

Saussure said, when we utter words, sounds are made from vibrations and this sound image creates in the brain of the listener a mental concept of the corresponding object; e.g. if one utters 'TREE'—the sound image forms a mental imprint of the concept of a tree.

Here Saussure argues:

"... beside this entirely indistinct realm of ideas, the realm of sound offers in advance quite distinct ideas (taken in itself apart from the idea."[11]

— Lectures, 4 July, 1911.

If we take the word 'dog' in English (made up of signifiers /d/, /o/, and /g/) what is engendered for the hearer is not the 'real' dog but a mental concept of 'dogness'. the real dog might be a spaniel or gray hound etc. rather than a general dog.

The signs which make up the code of the circuit between the two individual 'unlock' the contents of the brain of each. Signifier and signified are body and soul, or they are recto and verso of a leaf of a paper. Its two sides are ultimately inseperable— one side does not exist without the other. Thus a linguistic sign does not link a name and a thing, but a concept (signified) and an acoustic image (signifier).

Saussure, in accordance with the view of Plato, decided that the nomenclature view of language is inadequate, because it is an oversimplification of the process of interaction between mind, world and words at the time that language came into being. It assumes that humans already had ideas and that they simply put words to these ideas as Adam is said to have named the animals.

Here Saussure made two propositions:

"There are no:

(a)     Ideas already established and quite distinct from one another.
(b)     Signs for these ideas" [12]– Lecture on 4 July, 1911.

It is like the linguistic equivalent of the fallacy— whether the chicken or the egg came first.

Saussure's intuition was that just as the chicken might have been the egg's idea for getting more eggs, the emergence of ideas and words must have occurred under a process of mutual influence. The nomenclature view is also vague, it gives no indication whether the name linked to a thing is basically a psychic entity or a vocal entity. For Saussure, it is only oversimplification of the processes involved in the birth of language that needed to be avoided. Central to Saussure's understanding of the linguistic sign is the arbitrary nature[15] of the bond between signifier and signified.

The mental concept of a dog need not necessarily be engendered by the signifier which consists of the sounds /d/, /o/, and /g/.

In fact, for German people the concept is provoked by the signifier 'hund', while for French, the signifier 'chien' does the same job. That is to say, there is no neutral reason why the signifier 'dog' should engender the signified. The connection between the two is arbitrary[13]. If it were not so, there would be only one language in the world. For Saussure, this arbitrariness involves not the link between the sign and its referent, but that between the signifier and the signified in the interior of the sign.

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[11] *Ibid* p. 61.

[12] Saussure's Lectures (Classnote 4 July, 1911), Course in General Linguistics, tr. Wade Baskin, Suffolk, 1981.

[13] "Because the sign is arbitrary it follows no law other than that of tradition and because it is based on tradition if is arbitrary." Sausssure's Lectures (Classnote 4 July, 1911) 1981, p. 74.

Further issue is onomatopoeia. Saussure recognized that his opponents could argue that with onomatopoeia, there is a direct link between word and meaning, signifier and signified. However, Saussure argues that, on closer etymological investigation, onomatopoeic origins.

The example he uses is the French and English Onomatopoeic words for a dog's bark that is 'Ouaf Ouaf' and 'Bow Wow'— respectively.

Finally Saussure concludes that interjections as well have arbitrary signifier-signified links and thus sign/signifier link is less natural that it initially appears. He asks the readers to note the contrast in pain-interjection in French (aie) and English (ouch).

But even though the sign is arbitrary as far as connection between its signifier and signified goes, it is not arbitrary for language users. If it were, everybody would come up with whether signs they wanted and thus communication would breakdown.

The only reason that the signifier does entail the signified is because, there is a conventional relationship at play. Agreed rules govern the relationship (and these are in action in any speech community). But if the sign does not contain a 'neutral' relationship with signifiers, then how is it that signs function?

Signs in different languages divide up the world differently. To explain this, Saussure uses the word 'boeuf' as an example. He cites the fact that while, in English, we have different words for the animal and the meat product: ox and beef, in French, 'boeuf' is used to refer to both concepts.

A perception of difference between the two concepts is absent from French vocabulary. In Saussure's view, particular words are born out of a particular society's needs, rather than out of a need to label a preexisting set of concepts. For Saussure, the sign signifies by virtue of its 'difference' from other signs and it is this difference which gives rise to the possibility of a speech community[14].

A sign's form differs from that of other signs as form: a sign's concept differs from that of other signs' concept. When we utter words, we hear some sounds during that utterance,—its form creates a sound image in our brain. It has obviously two inseparable parts— signifier and signified as we have proved earlier. But how do we recognize them?

'CAT' and 'MAT' are different signifiers – before recognising them collectively we have to make distinction between 'C' and 'M'. 'C' is not 'M' or 'P' or 'S'. Thus sign acts by different minimal pairs (rat/ hat) show us how linguistic forms function to give meaning by difference.

Language is therefore a system of interdependent entities. But not only does it delimit a sign's range of use, for which it is necessary, because an isolated sign could be used for absolutely anything or nothing without first being distinguished from another sign, but it is also what makes meaning possible.

Saussure focuses on what he calls language, i.e. 'a system of signs that expresses ideas' describes the way in which the general phenomenon of language (in French, language) is made up of two factors— 'Parole'[15] is the individual acts of speech and putting into practice of languages and 'Langue'[16]—is a system of differences between signs. It refers to the absract system of language that is internalized by a given speech community.

Saussure defines 'speaking' (or utterance) as a wilful and intellectual individual act. 'Speech' is a natural phenomenon: human beings have 'the faculty to construct a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas'[17].

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[14] Saussure's Lectures (Classnote 4 July, 1911), Course in General Linguistics, tr. Wade Baskin, Suffolk, 1981, p. 120.

[15] Parole is the way an individual uses the resources of a language.

[16] Langue refers to language as a whole, that is shared by the 'collective consciousness'.

[17] Ferdinand de Saussure, Cours de Linguistique générale (Geveva, 1916), ed. Charles Bally and Albert Secherhaye in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger; ed. and trans. as Course in General Linguistics by Wade Baskin (London, Peter Owen, 1959) p. 9.

By contrast, 'language' is 'both the social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.' Saussure argued against the popular orgainicist view of language as the natural organism, which without being determined by the will of man, grows and evolves in accordance with fixed laws.

Instead, Saussure defined language as a social product that is beyond the control of the speaker. Saussure is of the opinion that language is not a function of the speaker, but is passively assimilated. Speaking is a premeditated act, as Saussure concludes.

While parole is haterogeneous—composed of unrelated or differing parts of elements and 'sound images' in which both parts are psychological. Concepts of signifier and signified can be compared to the Freudian concepts of latest and manifest meaning. Freud was also inclined to make an assumption that signifiers and signifieds are inseparably bound.

One further structure of language existing within Saussure's conception of langue concerns the restrictions on combination and substitution of linguistic elements.

Langue works through relations of difference, then which place signs in opposition to one another? Saussure asserted that there are only two types of relations: syntagmatic and paradigmatic.

Thus by analysing language synchronically, Saussure frames a linguistic structure and finds a system, mechanism or structure in which a language works. Hence his approach to linguistics for which he laid the ground work came to be known as structuralism.

Jakobson and others attempted to offer a linguistic description of literary structures and thus encouraged the development of 'narratology' or a science of narrative, which would recognize the different constituents of narrative and illustrate the basic structures and their rules of combination. Structuralist critics examine of the various codes, produced by prior literary works and by various conventional systems of a culture, that allows literary works to have meaning, analyse of the role of the reader in bringing into the meaning of a literary work, and of the ways in which the corresponding literary text comply with the expectations of generally accomplished readers. Structuralism in literary criticism is partially a reaction to modern literature, which had deliberately explored the limits of meaning and searched for stylistic effects in the deviations from all sorts of conventions of language, literature, and social practices in the process of defamiliarisation. In its focus on codes and structures, structuralism rejects the concept of literature as imitation of the world and instead analyses its experimentation with the language and codes of a culture. Literature for structuralist critics is valued for its inquiry of the structuring procedures by which we organize and realize the conventional nature of our social world.

The fundamental ideology of structuralism is that the phenomena of human life, whether language or media, are not comprehensible except through their association of relationships, producing the sign and the system (or structure) in which the sign is embedded. A sign — for instance, a word — finds its meaning only in relation to or in contrast with other signs in a system of signs.

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