

Structuralist and Poststructuralist in Language

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Many fundamental assumptions of linguistic theories have been questioned and pondered over. Among them, one assumption, which continues to hold good, concerns the function of language in the communication of meaning. Different approaches deal with differently in this regard. Traditionalists say that in a language the meaning of an utterance/text is what speaker/writer means by it that is, the intention of the speaker/writer determines the meaning structuralists say that the meaning is in the text as if it is the product of the language itself. Poststructuralists point out the view that it is the context that determines the meaning. A corollary to this assumption states that we have to look at the circumstances or the Social and Cultural situation in which the utterance/text is constructed or produced.

Just try to examine what structuralists and poststructuralists say about meaning of a language? One may ask here a question what is structure? It is said that no word can be judged in isolation. It's true meaning can be determined when it is used in a sentence where it acts upon by other words. Structures are the basic underlying on which sentences and sequences of sentences are built. It is generally found that the Indian teachers and the students of English language do not take proper care of the basic structures, as if they were teaching and learning the native language. We cannot master the language unless we are not acquainted with central framework upon which hang the countless variations of usage. In fact, these structures are the moulds into which the sentences of the language are cast for the communication of meaning. The patterns of arrangement of words into sentences and the patterns of arrangement of parts of words into words are its grammatical structure. The smallest language unit that produces a complete communicative utterance is the sentence. We speak and write in sentences, not in words. Sentences are made up of patterns of arrangement of word groups, words, stress, intention, etc.

However, Ferninand de Saussure describes structure in the same sense as we say a building is a structure. If we take away one brick from a building, the whole building will not collapse. We have undoubtedly made a structural alternation. Consequently, cracks will begin to appear. For bricks need other bricks to support the structure. It may be noted that the structural alternation to one building affects just that building and no other. To him, this is the case with the structure of a language which he termed as langue. It seems to be misleading because we normally think of a structure made of pre-existing bricks, planks and cement etc. But Saussurean structuralism has a different idea about structure. The crucial feature of his structure is that it itself creates the units and their relation to one another. In support of his nation, he used to give an analogy of chess game. If we enter a room where a chess game is being played it is possible to understand the play simply observing the position of the pieces on the board. We need not to require knowing the previous move of the pawns, bishops and knights. Chess is a game, complete in itself. This completeness does confer on the individual pieces, their separate but independent roles. No doubt without pawns or without bishops, or without any other pieces, chess would be a different game. But move notably, without the game a pawn or a bishop cannot be identified as constituent elements (chessmen) of the chess game. Chessmen do not exist outside the context of the game. Similarly, there is no linguistic sign outside the context of its structure. This concept of structure is a holistic concept. The constituent parts do not exist independently on the whole.

Language is always organised in a specific way. It is a system or a structure, where any individual elements are meaningless separately. The language that exists at a particular time is described as a system. Saussure calls it *langue*. *Langue* does not exist apart from any particular manifestation in speech. It is an underlying system on the basis of which speakers are able to produce and understand speech. Saussure concept of *Parole* is the actual and concrete act of speaking by an individual. It is a personal and social activity, which exists at a particular time and place. David Birch argues that “*Langue* is a Saussure’s virtual world and *parole* his real world”.¹

Structuralism, thus, seems to be based on the assumption that if human actions have a meaning there must be an underlying system of distinctions and conventions which makes this meaning of language possible. The actions and events are meaningful only with respect to a set of institutional conventions. Various social conventions make it possible to marry, to write a poem, to produce a meaningful utterance. It is argued that such a network of social and cultural structure is composed of a set of symbolic systems. And this system consists of a signifier/word/sign signified/concept meaning. They are not two things but two aspects of the same thing. Of the relation between the two, however, Saussure argues that “The relation between the signifier and the signified is a matter of convention: in English language we conventionally associate the word tree with the concept ‘tree’”.²

Both the signifier/word and the signified /meaning are described themselves as conventional divisions of the plane of sound and the plane of thought respectively. Language seems to divide up the plane of sound and plane of meaning differently. Saussure says, “Each language cuts up the world differently, constructing different meaningful categories and concept.”³

English language, for example, distinguishes book, pen, pencil, pan, pain and pun on the plane of sound, as separate signs with different meanings. But Saussure argues that if words stood for pre-existing meaning/concept, they might have same equivalents in meaning from one language to the other: which is not found at all. Rather he says that “the structure of language affect and influence our perceptions of reality.”⁴ Each language is, therefore, a system of concepts as well as forms that organises the world.

It is noted that any structure/sentence is a sequence of signs. Each sign contributes something to the value meaning of the whole sentence. At the same time, each sign contrasts with all other sign/words in the language. Linguistic unit generates concept/meaning not because it refers to the object but because it differs from other objects of the system. For example, a word ‘book’ gets its concept not because it merely refers to an object but because it differs from other units such as pen, pencil, pan, pain etc. Saussure argues that “concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relation with other terms of the system.”⁵

Let us try to understand it by analogy given by Saussure himself. He says that “a train say the 8.30 p.m. London to Oxford express – depends for its identity on the system of trains, as described in the railway timetable. So, the 8.30 London to Oxford express is distinguished from the 9.30 London to Cambridge express and the 8.45 Oxford local. What counts are not only the physical features of a particular train: the engine, the carriages, the exact route, the personnel and so many all vary, as may the times of departure and arrival; the train may leave and arrive late. What gives the train its identity is its place in the system of trains: it is the train, as opposed to the others.”⁶ Structuralism, thus, seems to have been concerned (as the analogy shows) with the analysis and understanding of an action under a particular system of systems within a culture. And language is seemingly taken as the ideal model for explanatory purposes. “This structuralism aims to do for literature – or myth, or food or fashion – what grammar does for language: to understand and explain how these systems work, what are the rules and constraints within which and by virtue of which, meaning is generated and communicated.”⁷

Poststructuralists take the basic assumption of Structuralists that meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by it. Individual signs/words do not have intrinsic meaning but acquire meaning in the system of the language. For example, if we took the example of a sign 'sex' or the qualities identified as 'sexy,' it is not fixed by a natural world and reflected in the terms 'sex' and 'sexy' but socially produced within the language system. But it doesn't account for why the signifiers 'sex' and 'sexy' can have paradoxical meanings which change from time to time, from place to place and from culture to culture. This extreme view that is a fixed meaning in the system of language does not accommodate heterogeneous voices of human beings.

Noam Chomsky, therefore, criticized structuralism and its psychological basis as not merely inadequate but as misconceived. Chomsky states: "Linguistics have had their share in perpetuating the myth that linguistic behaviour is 'habitual' and that a fixed stock of 'patterns' is acquired through practice and used as the basis for 'analogy.' These could be maintained only as long as grammatical description was vague and imprecise. As soon as an attempt is made to give a careful and precise account of the rules of the sentence formation, the rules of phonetic organization, or the rules of sound-meaning correspondence in a language, the inadequacy of such an approach becomes apparent. What is more, the fundamental concepts of linguistic description have been subjected to serious critique."⁸

To achieve this aim, Chomsky drew a fundamental distinction between a person's knowledge of the rules of a language and actual use of that language in real situation. The First he referred to as competence; and the second as performance. Linguistics, he argued should be concerned with the study of competence, and not restrict itself to performance—something that was characteristic of previous linguistic studies in their reliance on samples (or 'corpora') Such samples were inadequate because they could provide a tiny fraction of the sentences of a language. They are records of human behaviour and called performance. But actual behaviour is not the direct reflection of competence for various reasons. The English Language is not exhausted by its manifestations. It contains potential sentences, which have never been uttered, but it would assign meaning to those structures. A scholar of English language, for example, possesses capacity to decode the meaning of sentence that he will never encounter. It is his performance.

Structures, according to Chomsky, are of two kinds, namely surface structure and deep structure. Surface structure usually has one meaning, whereas the number of meanings of a deep structure depends upon the number of surface structure it contains. Further, the structural meaning of a sentences is shaped by many factors, such as, structure words, inflectional forms, types of word-order etc. The structure words do, generally, complicate the meaning of a sentence, hence one must be very conscious about their use. He developed the concept of a generative grammar. Which departed radically from structuralism and behaviourism of the previous decades. Earlier analysis of sentences were shown too inadequate in various respects, mainly because they failed to take into account of difference between surface and 'deep' levels of grammatical structure. At a surface level such sentence as John is eager to please and John is easy to please can be analysed in an identical way. But from the point of view of their underlying meaning the two sentences diverge in the first, John wants to please someone else; in the second, someone else is involved in pleasing John. A major aim of generative grammar was to provide a means of analysing sentences that took account of this underlying level of structure.

Poststructuralists say that a language evolves in response in the specific demands of the society in which it is used. Its use is entirely context dependent. An utterance/text and situation are so mixed up with each other that the context of situation is indispensable to understand meanings. Actually, speech act creates and maintains bonds of sentiment between the language users. Hence, social and cultural contexts determine meaning. Meanings context bound and context is endless; always prone to change. When we read and comprehend a passage, we get ambiguity. On the surface

level of the structure, the meaning does not appear clearly. In such a condition, we should translate the surface structure into its underline deep structure. The deep structure enables us to clarify its meaning in language.

Discussion about meaning is always possible and, in that sense, meaning is an undecided subjected: always in process to be decided; and such decisions are never final. But one thing is clear that the meaning of and utterance/text is not merely what the producer keeps in mind at the moment when he/she produces his/her utterance/text: it shifts in response to social, cultural, psychological and historical factors and considerations. For and individual chooses when to speak and what to speak according to the situations he encounters. And the process, it appears, is determined by other systems that the speaker does not control. Under such conditions, we should distinguish the immediate context of speaker from a general context of situation. The study of the meaning of words should be based on the analysis of the functions of the language in the culture concerned because meaning is not 'in anything' it is always in the process of construction of the language.

NOTES

1. David Birch, *Language. Literature and Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1989,) p. 48
2. Phillip Rice and Patricia Waugh, ed. *Ferdinand de Saussure. From Course in General Linguistics (1915) Modern Literary Theory* (Great Britain: Routledge. 1989), p. 6.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Richard Bradford, *Stylistics* (London, 1997), p. 74
5. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), p.67.
6. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 57.
7. David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism* (London, Routledge, 1991), p. ix.
8. Noam Chomsky, "Linguistic Theory," in Robert G. Mead, Jr., ed., *Language Teaching: Broader Contexts* (Middlebury: Vt.: North-east Conference Reports, 1966), pp. 43-44.