

Structuralism: Off-Shoots and Major Contributors

Kanchan

*Assistant Professor
Communication Skills, Basic & Applied Sciences
Punjabi University Patiala*

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to understand the structuralist approach in philosophy of science. Saussure introduces the following notion in linguistics viz. synchrony and diachrony, langue and parole, linguistics sign, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation and substance and form. At the second level, this paper deals with its, growth, development and contributors.

Keywords: Structuralism, Post- Structuralism, Concepts of Synchronic, Diachronic and Binary Opposition.

Paper

Structuralism is a wide-spread intellectual movement of thought in Europe, which has affected number of disciplines of knowledge and inquiry –especially philosophy, history, sociology and literary criticism. It is the study of a wide range of discourses that underlying structures of signification. Signification occurs wherever there is a meaningful event or in the practice of some meaningful action. A meaningful event involves either a document or an exchange that can be documented. It also explores the inter-relationships between fundamental elements of some kind, upon which some higher mental, linguistic, social, cultural etc "structures" are built, through which then meaning is produced within a particular person, system, culture. Structuralism has certain kind of scientific objectivity. It is possible to achieve it by subordinating "parole" to "langue;" actual usage is abandoned in favor of studying the structure of a system in the abstract. Structuralist readings ignore the specificity of actual texts and treat them as if they were like the patterns produced by some impersonal force or power, not the result of human effort.

Structuralism which emerged as a trend in the 1950s challenged New Criticism and rejected Sartre's existentialism and its notion of radical human freedom. It focused on how human behaviour is determined by cultural, social and psychological structures. It tended to offer a single unified approach to human life that would embrace all disciplines. Structuralism represented a major challenge to the "liberal humanist" tradition in literary criticism by erasing the author, the individual text, the reader, and history. This tradition presupposed that there is a real world out there that one can understand with ones rational minds; that language is capable of (more or less) accurately depicting that real world; that language is a product of the individual writer's mind or free will, meaning that one determine what one say, and what one mean when one say it; that language thus expresses the essence of our individual beings (and that there is such a thing as an essential unique individual "self"). Further the Self also known as the "subject," since that's how one represent the idea of a self in language, by saying I, which is the subject of a sentence—or the individual (or the mind or the free will) is the center of all meaning and truth; words mean what I say they mean, and truth is what I perceive as truth. On the other hand the Structuralists argues that the structure of language itself produces "reality"—that one can think only through language, and therefore ones perceptions of reality are all framed by and determined by the structure of language. That language speaks us; that the source of meaning is not an individual's experience or being, but the sets of oppositions and operations, the signs and grammars that govern language. Meaning doesn't come from individuals, but from the system that governs what any individual can do within it. Rather than seeing the individual as the center of meaning, structuralism places 'the structure' at the center—it's the structure that originates or produces meaning, not the individual self. Language in particular is the center of self and meaning; I can only say "I" because I inhabit a system of language in which the position of subject is marked by the first personal pronoun, hence my identity is the product of the linguistic system I occupy.

As far as literature and literary criticism are concerned, structuralism challenges the long standing belief that a work of literature reflects a given reality; a literary text is, rather, constituted of other conventions and texts. In its attempt to develop a science of literature and in many of its salient concepts, structuralism departs radically from the assumptions and ruling ideas of traditional humanistic criticism. Like in the structuralist view, what had been called a literary 'work' becomes simply a 'text' that is, a mode of writing constituted by a play of component elements according to specifically literary conventions and codes. These factors may generate an illusion of reality, but have no truth-value, nor even any reference to a reality existing outside the literary system itself. Structuralism also replaces the author by the reader as the central agency in criticism; but the traditional reader, as a conscious, purposeful and feeling individual is dissolved into the

impersonal activity of 'reading' and what is read is not a text imbued with meanings, but such writing which makes literary sense of the sequence of words, phrases and sentences that constitute a text.

Structuralism began in the science of linguistics and, more particularly, in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), whose most influential text is *cours de linguistique generale* (1915), a treatise which forms the basis of 20th century linguistics and influenced much literary criticism. Few French authors (Claude Levi –Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michael Foucault, Jaques Lacan, etc), and their counterparts on the continent and America also support this movement. Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida explored the possibilities of applying structuralist principles to literature. Jacques Lacan studied psychology in the light of structuralism, blending Freud and Saussure.

Ferdinand de Saussure is the originator of the 20th century reappearance of structuralism, specifically in his (1916) book *Course in General Linguistics*, where he focused not on the use of language (parole, or talk), but rather on the underlying system of language (langue) and called his theory semiotics. Saussure introduces the following notion in linguistics:

- Synchrony and Diachrony
- Langue and Parole
- Linguistic Sign
- Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations
- Substance and Form

Saussure's description of language and its elements as well as the terminology he used to describe language provided the basis for signifier and signified. He argued that linguistic signs were composed of two parts, a signifier (the sound pattern of a word, either in mental projection - as when we silently recite lines from a poem to ourselves - or in actual, physical realization as part of a speech act) and a signified (the concept or meaning of the word). He also analyzed the sign into its two components: a sound or acoustic component which he called the signifier, and a mental or conceptual component which he called the signified. He also introduced two other pairs of contrast terms which are important in the understanding of structuralism. In the study of language he distinguished first of all between what he called *langue* and *parole*, or 'language, and 'speech'. *Language* is the theoretical system or structure of a language, the corpus of linguistic rules which speakers of that language must obey if they are to communicate; *speech* is the actual day –to –day use made of that system by individual speakers. Structurally, literature is a whole; it functions as a system of meaning and reference no matter how many works there are, two or two thousand. Thus any work becomes the *parole*, the individual articulation, of a cultural *langue*, or system of signification. As literature is a system, no work of literature is an autonomous whole; similarly, literature itself is not autonomous but is part of the larger structures of signification of the culture.

This approach further focused on examining how the elements of language related to each other in the present that is, 'synchronically' rather than 'diachronically'. Saussure brings about a distinction between the *synchronic* and the *diachronic* axes of investigation. It is possible to study language along two radically time, as a system functioning at a given moment in Saussure or as an institution which has evolved through time. Since he himself advocated the synchronic study of language, the structuralism as a whole is necessarily synchronic; it is concerned to study particular systems or structures under artificial and historical conditions neglecting the systems or structures out of which they have emerged in the hope of explaining their present functioning. Saussure lays down yet another distinction: *syntagmatic and paradigmatic*, distinguishing the one from the other. The 'value' of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations. Paradigmatic relationships can operate on the level of the signifier, the signified or both. Substance is the matter which forms the basis for giving some form or structure. For example a black stone is the substance to which a sculpture gives a shape or form. Similarly sounds and thoughts are the two kinds of substances to which the imposition of complex form or structure in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics results in languages. In other words the form is the structure imposed by the language – system on the continuum of sound and thought.

Structuralism does not put forth fancifully new or astounding interpretations; nor does it move towards a definite meaning. It is not a new way of interpreting works but only an attempt to understand how works have meaning for us. Structuralism refutes the Aristotelian 'mimetic' criticism which views literature as the expression of the feelings of a creative artist. Above all Structuralism undermines, and radically departs from the assumptions of traditional criticism, and the traditional ways of perceiving the world, the word, and the text.

The concept of language as a sign system was developed in the science of semiotics and especially by the American founder of semiotics, C.S.Pierce (1839-1914). Saussure's ideas were further developed by Charles Bally (1865-1947), by the Geneva school of Phenomenology and by the Prague Linguistic circle. The theories of Russian Formalism are also associated with structuralist theory.

Claude Levi- Strauss (1908,-2009) developed a structural theory in a consideration of myth, ritual and kinship, especially in his classic work *Anthropologie structurale* (1958), and in his earlier *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). He sees social structure as a kind of model and is at pains to show that the behaviour patterns of kinship and the existence of institutions depend on methods of communication that are all characteristic of how the human mind works. Thus, he analyses modes of thought as well as modes of action, looking for the system of differences which underlie practice, rather than their origins and causes. His theories about myths had considerable influence in the development of the theory of narratology, a further aspect of structuralism.

The concept of 'binary opposition' is another important feature of structuralism into the operations of human language and thought. 'Binary' means two or pairs, therefore, 'binary opposition' refers to a pair in which two ideas directly opposed and we understand each by means of its opposition. The contradiction always acts as a hierarchy for status or concern with power. Structuralism thus agrees that anything including human language and discourse are structured in terms of binary oppositions. According to structuralism, human mind perceives things in a state of oppositions. For example, when we study the ideology of feminism, it can be seen as structured within the binary opposition male/female. This opposition acts as a hierarchy and finds the male arbitrarily superior to female.

Roland Barthes also applies the method of structuralism to analyse culture. Barthes in his early career defined 'structuralism as a mode of analysis of cultural artifacts, which originates in the method of contemporary linguistics. The structuralist theories of Roland Barthes (1915-80), expressed in, for example, *Mythologies* (1957) and *System de la mode* (1967), reveal a very general interpretation of the term 'language' as social practice. Early Barthes is Marxist and he had a rather different view of myth and kinship—perhaps more as bourgeois ideology. He is also concerned with, for instance, *haute cuisine and clothes*. His quest is for a kind of 'grammar' and 'syntax' of such modes of communication. He interprets social practices involving food and clothes as sign systems which function on the same model as language. Thus he elaborates the idea that there is a 'garment system' which works like a language. Roland Barthes, the critic who supposedly first proclaimed the death of the author is considered a structuralist at first and a poststructuralist at last. However, when he says, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author," he is a reader-oriented critic, too, besides being a structuralist negating the originality of the author and a poststructuralist asserting the multiplicity of reading.

Structuralism and post structuralism have a great deal in common. Post structuralism retains structuralism's emphasis on language; furthermore, they retain the structuralist belief that all cultural systems can be represented as "coded systems of meaning rather than direct transactions with reality." Moreover, many of the individuals commonly associated with post structuralism—Foucault, Baudrillard, even Barthes—began as structuralists and moved in the course of their thought in a poststructuralist direction. However, there are some key differences that help to define the terms, even though one should understand them not as strict categories but as positions along a spectrum.

Post structuralism evolved alongside Jacques Derrida's theory of "deconstruction," which emphasized this concept of unstable, unfixing meaning as it functioned in language. According to Derrida, language is made up of units that do not contain inherent meaning and relate to other units (or signifiers) through their difference. Meaning, in deconstructionist theory, is therefore constantly deferred, never landing in one place or becoming stable. Post structuralism emerges in this context, recognizing this lack of fixed or inherent meaning and yet also acknowledging the need for language to acquire meaning.

Jacques Derrida, the successor to structuralism has developed a unique and path breaking theory, Deconstruction. Derrida, the central figure of post structuralism, sets out a deep study on structuralism, where he finds some inherent shortcomings in it. Derrida first questions on the way how structures are made. Structuralist's viewed that various references are needed in understanding a work of art. On the other hand, Derrida argues there is no such reference because nothing is fixed, exact, and finite in the true structuralist sense. Derrida adopts notion of Saussure's 'difference' into *differance* which Derrida asserts a combination of difference and deferral. Meaning is deferred endlessly to anything within language and constantly postponed.

Understanding the meaning of any text is impossible because of the variations in meaning. Hence, one cannot assign fix meaning to a particular text. Saussure sets up binary opposition between speech and writing and favours speech to writing. For Saussure speech is common and not artificial. Speech is an absolute and directly implies the presence of the speaker. While, writing conceals language and it is used in the absence of the speaker. Derrida reverses the hierarchy and expresses both speech and writing is just play of differences.

Noam Chomsky made a distinction between 'surfaces' and 'deep structures'. A surface structure consists of the collection of words and sounds that we articulate and hear in a sentence; a deep structure is the abstract and underlying structures in language. A single sentence may have a different surface forms and features and yet have the same meaning. The underlying or deep structure regulates the meaning. These are central theoretical distinctions in generative grammar.

The work of Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), especially his two essays *Linguistics and Poetics*(1960) and *Two Aspects of Language* (1956), provide other forms of Structuralists theory. He developed a theory based on the concept of concept of binary oppositions in the structure of language. He was particularly concerned with the metaphor and metonymy oppositions and its implications in the analysis of realism and symbolism. Michel Foucault in his book *The Order of Things* examined the history of science to study how structures of epistemology, or episteme shaped, how people imagined knowledge and knowing but later on Foucault deny his affiliation with the structuralist movement. Blending Marx and structuralism another French theorist Louis Althusser also introduced his own concept of structural social analysis. Other authors in France and abroad have since extended structural analysis to practically every discipline. As this its popularity as a movement increased, some authors considered themselves 'structuralists' only to later eschew the label.

The structure of language that Saussure has described encourages the literary critic to make such a revolutionary innovations in the study of literature. But an innovation is not imitation. The literary structuralist has a challenging task to perform. Linguistics can be of use only as a centre of inspiration. Linguistics has demonstrated that language, which appeared to us very natural, is not natural. Every model becomes insufficient in explaining the literary system and structuralist is in eternal discontent. However its value as a mode of thought that reorients the mind of the critic and that urges him to understand the very possibility of understanding is unquestionable. Structuralism gives tremendous insight into the basis and process of understanding, but it confronting literature; it fails to provide convincing answers. The intention of structuralist criticism is not to apply the linguistic mode on any literary work and discover its meaning. The structuralist examines a work to discover how meaning is shaped or how meaning is made possible and thereby discovers the basic structures of literature. The discovery of the basic structures of literature will lead to the structuring of human mind.

Thus, structuralism makes a scientific attempt to analyse a text in terms of its structures, i.e., the overall network of relations between units within a text. Structure accounts for the relation between parts and whole. Structuralism tends to think of meaning in a text as fixed which allows it to classify and identify formal structures. The purpose of structuralism is to give a stable meaning. The meaning of structure is the structure of language and language is a constantly changing phenomenon. Even though, the rules of language cannot be changed, the meaning can be changed. Therefore, the meaning which comes from the relations to other words is changed. In order to find the structurality of structure, one has to examine the centrality of the center. Without the center, there cannot be a structure. When these relationships between structures are changing, the centers are also changing simultaneously. Therefore centrality of the center depends upon the structure. Further, there is no possibility of having innumerable or uncountable number of centers. The idea of structuralism which has originated on the centers normally collapses itself. Thus, structuralism becomes something unrealistic and a short-lived phenomenon. These issues were discussed later in post- structuralism by offering alternative modes of inquiry, explanation and interpretation.

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