

Lecture 16

Structuralism: Ferdinand de Saussure

Hello and welcome to another lecture on literary theory, and the topic we are going to take up today is structuralism. The first quarter of the twentieth century is an exceptionally significant time as far as this lecture series is concerned because it was during this period that a number of theoretical schools either emerged or their philosophical basis was laid down. We have already seen this before with New Criticism, Russian Formalism, and Reader-response theory, and we will see it again today with Structuralism when we take up for discussion the works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. But before we start discussing Saussure, let us first consider the term “structure” from which this particular theoretical category derives its name.

Structure

Now rather than starting with a definition here, let us start with an example. One of the most common form of structure that we encounter everyday visually are the various buildings that we see around us. So why is it that we would regard those buildings as structures? And why at the same time will we not consider as structure a pile of bricks and rubble randomly dumped next to it? Well in case of the pile, each of its component has a separate and independent existence that is above and beyond its existence as part of that pile. Thus, the haphazardly dumped pile of bricks is at best an aggregate but never a structure. On the other hand, a building is regarded as a structure because each of its component parts is subservient to the whole in that they do not have a genuinely independent existence outside of that wholeness provided by the building. Think of a window or a door which basically frames blank spaces within a building. Now imagine if you

were to take them out of the building and place them in an open field. They would immediately cease to make sense. Doors and windows are meaningful only within the specific context of a building. That is to say that they become relevant only in relation to the other components of the building. For instance, we identify a window as a window because we recognize that it is not the wall. So it is this oppositional relationship between the window and the wall around it that gives the window its meaning and relevance.

So here we have already encountered two very important aspects of a structure. The first aspect is that in a structure the constituent parts are always subservient to the whole, and the second aspect is that each of the constituent parts gains meaning and relevance only through its relation to other constituent parts of that structure. That is to say, none of the constituent parts make sense outside the structure in the same way that they do within the structure.

These characteristic features inform not just architectural structures like buildings but also other kinds of structures. Take for example a raga that is integral to both North Indian as well as Carnatic classical music. Each raga is a structure on its own in which the musical notes act as component parts. Not only are these component parts subservient to the whole but they also do not have a meaningful existence outside the structure of the raga. Thus, if you take out any single musical note on its own from a raga and try to play it or sing it in isolation, it will sound simply like monotonous noise which has nothing musical about it. This is because each musical note gains its musicality as it were only through its relationship to other notes.

And here I would like to point out another important feature of a structure, which is that the relationships of the constituent parts within a structure that gives them their relevance are completely arbitrary. This means that these rules are unique to the structure itself and one cannot seek either to justify or invalidate these rules with reference to anything outside the structure. To

understand this let us go back to the example of a raga. Every raga has certain rules about how specific notes within it can be arranged in a sequence. Now one cannot answer the question as to why certain note sequences are allowed and certain note sequences are not allowed in a particular raga with reference to anything outside the structure of the raga. For instance, you cannot make arguments like some sequences are allowed because they are more “natural” and some are not allowed because they are “unnatural”. Rules that operate within a structure have nothing natural or unnatural about them. This will become even clearer when we revisit these characteristic features of a structure with reference to language.

So to reiterate the major points that we have so far touched upon, a structure has at the very least these four important features:

1. It is made of constituent parts which are subservient to the structure as a whole.
2. The constituent parts do not have a meaningful existence outside the structure in the same way that it has within it.
3. The constituent parts derive their relevance within the structure not because of any inherent quality but because of the way they relate to each other.
4. Structures are self-regulated and the relations between the constituent parts are guided by rules that are arbitrary because they are unique to the structure itself and do not require any external validation.

With these four points in mind let us now proceed to explore the works of Ferdinand de Saussure which laid the groundwork for structuralism as a theoretical school.

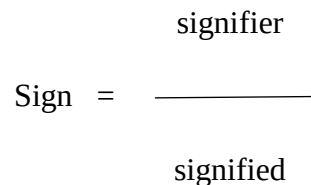
Ferdinand de Saussure

As mentioned before, Saussure was a Swiss linguist and he is primarily known today for the book *Cours de Linguistique Générale* which is basically a collection of his lecture notes made by his students between 1906 and 1911 and published in 1915 after Saussure's death. The main contribution of Saussure was to establish the fact that language operated as a structure, which means the language is marked by the characteristic features of a structure that I have just mentioned. And since language is the medium of literary expression, this theorization of language as a structure had a tremendous influence on twentieth-century literary criticism. So why does Saussure refer to the language as a structure? And even more importantly, how does this identification of language as a structure influence our understanding of specific language uses? Well, one way of understanding language is to look at it as an aggregate – something like the pile of bricks that I had mentioned a few minutes back. This understanding is pivoted on the fact that language is constituted of independently meaningful words that are put together for communication. So a study of language would basically mean a study of these words as independent entities and how they emerge and change during the course of history. This historical study of language is what is referred to as a diachronic approach. But what Saussure suggested in place of this diachronic approach was a synchronic approach. To understand this, let us look at language more closely.

Signifier/Signified

As you will all agree, a language in its essence is fundamentally a system of signifying. Words, which are the constituent parts of a language are basically signs that refer us to something or the

other. Thus, words like “dog” or “pen” act as signs which refer us to things like a barking four-legged animal or a writing instrument. So if we look at these words or signs which constitute a language, we will see that they have two different aspects. The first aspect is the sound of the word “dog” or the word “pen”. This aspect of the sign is referred to by Saussure as the “signifier”. But the sign also has a second aspect which is the concept that the signifier refers us to. So if the signifier is the sound “dog” then it refers us to the concept of the four-legged barking animal. Alternatively, if the signifier is the sound “pen” then it refers us to the concept of a writing instrument. This second aspect of the sign which is the concept that it refers to is termed by Saussure as the “signified”. So a sign has two overlapping aspects, a signifier and a signified, and they can be graphically represented as follows:



Now at this point, Saussure makes a very important and interesting argument which on the face of it might appear to be counter-intuitive. Saussure argues that there is no natural or inherent relation between the signifier and the signified. Take the example of the word "tree". As a sound image, “tree” is a signifier and whenever we say tree we are inevitably directed to a signified which has a wooden trunk and wooden appendages with green leaves growing on them. According to Saussure, there is no inherent connection between the word tree and this concept of a thing made of wood and leaves. The fact that there is no inherent relationship between the two is however easily gathered from the fact that the same thing that we refer to in English by the

signifier tree is referred to in other languages by radically different sounding signifiers like “baum” in German or “gaach” in Bangla. If the signifier was something rooted in the signified, then in each of these languages a particular concept or signified would have the same signifier to refer to it. Or at the very least the signifiers would be similar to each other. But since this is clearly not the case, the only conclusion that we can draw is that signifiers do not derive their existence or their ability to make sense from the signified.

So how is the signifier able to signify if there is no umbilical cord connecting it to one particular signified? According to Saussure, a signifier is able to signify not through its attachment to particular concepts or signifieds but through its relationship with other signifiers within a particular language system. In other words, language functions just like a structure where its constituent parts derive meaning not with reference to the world outside the structure but solely with reference to their relation to each other. So just like in the example of an architectural structure where I said that a window gets its meaning through its oppositional relationship to the walls around it, a word-sound within a language structure gets its meaning through its oppositional relationship with the other word-sounds around it. That is to say, the word-sound “tree” signifies what it does because it is different from other word-sounds like “bird”, “fruit”, “dog”, “pen”, “window”, “door” and so on and so forth. So the meaning-making ability of a signifier does not depend on its being positively related to something or the other outside a particular language system but rather on its being negatively or oppositionally related to other signifiers within that language system.

Each signifier occupies the space that other signifiers do not and each word-sound signifies what other word-sounds do not. So the signifier “red” does not signify any particular colour but rather

it signifies those colours which are not signified by other word-sounds within the language system like “green”, “yellow”, “white”, “black” etc.

Now let us say that in a particular language system the signifier “magenta” is not there. So in that language, the word-sound “red” will be used to signify both what we understand as the colour red when speaking in English as well as the colour magenta. But the moment the word-sound “magenta” is introduced in that language, the meaning of the signifier “red” would become more specific and narrower as it will cease to signify the colour that is now referred to by the new word-sound “magenta”. This might sound a bit confusing but I am sure if you spend some time thinking through this concept you will understand what Saussure means when he says that signifiers gain meaning through their oppositional relation with other signifiers. So according to Saussure, language like a structure is always complete and self-contained at any given point of time and therefore linguists should study language in terms of its internal relations that exist at any given moment in time rather than merely in terms of its history. This is why Saussure’s approach to language is referred to as synchronic as opposed to diachronic.

Arbitrary Relationships

Now when we talk about the relationship of difference or opposition that connect the word-sounds as meaningful entities within a language structure then we need to remember that, like any rule guiding a structure, it is completely arbitrary. This means, as I mentioned before, that the rules are unique to the structure itself and cannot be either justified or invalidated with reference to anything outside that particular structure. So what exactly will count as phonetic difference separating one word-sound from another within a particular language depends upon

the unique rules followed by that specific language structure. Let us take an example here.

Consider these two sentences:

1. I *thread* the needle
2. I *tread* the unknown road

Now, look at the italicized words in these sentences. The first one is "thread" and the second one is "tread" and they are both oppositionally related in the English language because the English language speakers register a difference between the sounds /th/ and /t/. But on the contrary if we take a word like "coat" for instance. And let us say we pronounce it in two different ways. In the first way we pronounce it as "/k/oat" without aspirating the initial /k/ sound, and in the second way, we pronounce the word as "/kh/oat" by aspirating the initial /k/ sound. If you are communicating in English, then the structure of that language would not allow the listener to notice between these two sounds any meaningful difference and both the pronunciations will still be registered as the same signifier. Yet for someone located outside English language structure, a Hindi speaker for instance, /k/ and /kh/ are phonetically distinct and different. This goes on to show that the rule of difference that regulates a particular language structure is peculiar to itself and completely arbitrary. Within the English language, a hard "t" and an aspirated soft "th" will count as different but an aspirated /kh/ sound will not be considered as different from an unaspirated /k/ sound. And such kind of peculiar arbitrariness can be noticed throughout any given language structure.

Langue and Parole

Before we end our discussion on Saussure, I would like to discuss another important aspect of his work on language which revolves around the distinction between “langue” and “parole”. To understand this distinction let us first ask ourselves this question: When we speak of language as a structure, what exactly do we mean? Do we mean the sentences that I am uttering here in front of you? If that is the case, then the answer is slightly problematic because these sentences are the utterances of an individual, yet a language system exists as a structure of communication *between* several individuals. Which means that my individual utterances can be part of a bigger structure but cannot be the entire structure in itself. So what is that structure and how do we know of its existence if not through concrete acts of language use? Saussure answers this by referring to the game of chess. Now any particular game of chess involves a set of specific moves made by individual players. Needless to say, these sequences of moves differ from one game to another but nevertheless, there is a common stratum of rules and conventions that guide all of these moves. So for instance in all individual games of chess, the bishop will move in one particular way and the knight in another. These deep sets of rules are above and beyond individual games and indeed all of the rules cannot be guessed by observing a single game of chess. So when we refer to the game of chess we refer to it with a kind of double consciousness which takes in both the deep-lying and invisible set of rules and regulations that govern the game and the individual performance of that game at any given point in time. When we speak of language as a structure we employ a similar kind of duality. Language too like chess has a deep-lying and invisible layer of rules and regulations which govern its structurality and makes specific uses of language possible. This underlying set of rules and conventions is what Saussure refers to as “langue”. “Parole” on the other hand is any concrete language performance at a given

point in time which parallels the sequence of chess moves made by a player during a particular game. So the sentences that I am uttering now are examples of parole whereas the set of regulations inherent to the structure of the English language which is guiding my utterances form the langue. And this langue is not limited only to me as the speaker but is shared by others including you, who is listening to me. And it is this shared quality of the langue that makes individual paroles understandable.

With this, we come to the end of our discussion on Ferdinand de Saussure and his unique intervention in the study of language. What was missing from this discussion was, however, literary theory. And till now I have not explained how all of this language theory can be made applicable to a study of literature. In our next lecture, we will take up this question of applicability of Saussure and see how his interventions within the field of language study have opened up a whole new way of looking at literature. Thank you.