THE STRUCTURALIST MOVEMENT: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Structuralism was a remarkable movement in the mid twentieth century which had a very far reaching influence on literature and philosophy. Ferdinand de Saussure rendered a substantial and weighty contribution to this movement and is regarded as the founder of the movement and his book Course in General Linguistics is appreciated as the hallmark of the Structuralist Movement. Saussure regarded language as a structure whose parts can only be understood in relation to each other. That is why he coined the two terms, langue and parole, to point to two essentially different notions of language: parole or speech is the individual utterance and the language used in performance, and langue or language system consists of the structure, internal rules and those principles that enable a language to function. The influence of Structuralism on contemporary philosophy was so deep that it became a distinct and independent branch of philosophical discourse.

Key words: Structuralism, Langue, Parole, Structure, Language.

Structuralism was a continental European and North American movement in the human sciences that had a deep influence on literary theory, philosophy and man's attitude towards the world in the middle part of the twentieth century. It was factually an approach that ultimately became one of the most frequently applied of analyzing literature, philosophy and it culture. Moreover, it was highly influential in the other fields of study such as criticism, anthropology, historiography and psychology. The intellectual backgrounds of Structuralism the works of the members of the Prague School on one hand and the revolutionary theories of Ferdinand de Saussure on the other hand. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure is generally considered as the starting point of Structuralism, which was promoted in the works of the members of the Prague School. Hence. although Roman Jakobson was a key figure in Structuralism, Saussure is regarded as the inspirational founder of this movement.

Ferdinand de Saussure was the Professor of Linguistics in Geneva where, between 1907 and 1911, he delivered three influential courses of lectures. These lectures were published

posthumously by his students in 1915 under the title of Course in General Linguistics. This book has been ever considered as the basis of Structuralism and most of the contemporary approaches to literature, philosophy and culture. Language in Saussure's view, is nothing but a system of signs that is governed by its internal rules. While the earlier linguists had been working only on the history and the characteristics of different languages, Saussure regarded language as a structure whose parts can only be understood in relation to each other. That is why he coined the two terms, langue and parole, to point to two essentially different notions of language: parole or speech is the individual utterance and the language used in performance, and langue or language system consists of the structure, internal rules and those principles that enable a language to function.

Concluding this part, one can say that while the earlier philologists focused on parole, Saussure, instead, put his emphasis mostly on langue. The other difference between him and the earlier philologists was that whereas they studied language through a diachronic approach, concerned with the historical study of language, Saussure focused on how the elements of language are related to each other in the present. Moreover, he did not work on the use of language, and was mostly concerned with the underlying structure of language. Therefore, any particular kind of parole is the an expression of langue.

The last significant idea of Saussure in this regard is his especial attitude towards the 'words'. While the earlier philologists believed that the words are symbols for things in the world, Saussure argued that the words are only 'signs' that are made up of two parts: a written or spoken mark that is called signifier and the concept of and the thought behind the mark in the mind that is called signified. Whereas for the philologists the 'symbol' was equal to the 'thing', Saussure believed that the sign was noting but a signifier that has a signified in the mind. These new theories by Saussure met their climax when he asserted that the relation between the signifier and signified was arbitrary and conventional. Consequently, Saussure came to this revolutionary conclusion that meaning is relational and based on the difference between the signifiers. If the human relation between the word and the meaning of the word is arbitrary and conventional, the relation between the language an the reality becomes arbitrary and conventional too. Therefore, one of the philosophical implications of such an attitude is that there has always been a hidden wall between the language and the reality.

On the other hand, 'meaning', in its general sense, is neglected in Structuralism because it is believed that 'meaning' is produced by the means of the difference between and among the words. As it is known, the words are phonetically and phonemically different. Terence Hawkes, in his Structuralism and Semiotics, points to this example:

> It is clear that what makes any single item 'meaningful' is not its own particular individual quality, but the difference between this quality and that of other sounds. In

fact, the differences are systematized into 'oppositions' which are linked in crucial relationships. Thus, in English, such an established difference between the initial sound of tin and the initial sound of kin is what enables a different meaning to be given to each word. (Hawkes 22)

Thus in English the word 'pat' and 'bat' are different because the /p/ and /p/ sounds are in contrast with each other. The difference between them is that the vocal chords vibrate when saying a /b/ sound while they do not when saying a /p/ sound. Although this approach is now a days standards in linguistics, it was revolutionary at the beginning of the twentieth century. Such an example acts a basis for the structure analysis of literary and philosophical issues regarding our perception of the world, the objects and the relation between them. Accordingly, instead of focusing on the meanings of the words, the attention is here paid to the difference and relation between them. Hence two of the most important key words in Structuralist thought are 'difference' and 'relation', which can provide a new and startling understanding of the world and reality around us. Such a perception is indeed the description of the structures, differences and relationships:

> *The new perception involved the realization that despite appearances to the contrary the world does not consist of independently existing objects, whose concrete features can be perceived clearly and individually, and whose nature can be classified accordingly ... In consequence, the true nature of things may be said to lie not in things themselves, but in the relationships which we construct, and then perceive, between them. (Hawkes 17)*

> *As it seems from the above mentioned discussion, Structuralism might first be taken as a valid, but dull and technical attitude towards the world and the objects around us. Structuralism does not focus on the life beyond or the backgrounds of different cultural units and productions. It, rather, prefers to consider each one of them as a structure that works by its own internal rules. Subsequently, "Structuralism adopts a position of not seeing things from within the cultural context of society" (Peck and Coyle 192).*

As a result one can propose that Structuralism is a detached and mechanical way of looking at the world without any attention to the old and traditional conventions of such a looking. It is, however, "interested rather in that which makes meaning possible than in meaning itself: even more crudely in form rather content" (Hawthorn 33). In other words, the Formalists' emphasis on the form of a text and their neglect of its content is similar to the Structuralists' interest in the structure of the system without regard for its meaning. The structuralist thinker, after considering different cultural products as different systems, looks at the different units of a system and analyzes the rules that make such a system work. This analysis takes place

without any attention to the content and meaning of those units. In fact, it is the structure of that system, the difference and relation between its units which in a Structuralist perception of that system.

For example, considering language as a system, the structuralist thinker looks at the words as different units, and takes place the rules between these units as the specific grammar of that language. As it is known in different languages the grammar rules are different, as are the words, but the structure is the same in all languages. The structure of all languages is founded on those rules that put the words together within a grammatical system in order to make meaning. From the perspective of a Structuralist, such structures that give order to the constituent units and rules of a system and make them meaningful are, indeed produced by the human mind itself, and not by the sense perception. Accordingly, a structuralist thinker agrees with this proposition that the order we perceive between the objects is not inherit in the world, but it is merely a product of our minds.

Therefore, Structuralism seeks to uncover all the structures that are found in whatever human beings feel, perceive and produce. To analyze the relations and differences between the units of a system, such as religion, philosophy and literature, is what a Structuralist critic does. Concluding this part, one can say that such systems, in a Structuralist thinker's point of view are universal. In other words, the mind of man in different cultures and different historical phases has used a structuring principle in order to shape and perceive different cultural units and productions.

The structuralist thought has been applied on different cultural, philosophical and even religious activities. It has sought to study different activities as diverse as religious rites, games, literary and non-literary texts, philosophical approaches, and even the items of popular cultures. The main objective behind these studies is to discover the deep structures through which meaning is generated within a culture.

One of the highlights of such studies in the work of the famous French anthropologist, Clade Levi Strauss, whose researches have been a powerful impetus to Structuralism. He analyzed different cultural phenomena including mythology, kinship between the members of a community and serving rituals in different cultures. M. H. Abrams remarks:

> *In its early forms, as manifested by Levi-Strauss and other writers in the 1950 and 1960s, Structuralism cuts across the traditional disciplinary areas of the humanities and social sciences by undertaking to provide an objective account of all social and cultural phenomena, in a range that includes mythical narrative, literary and non-literary texts, advertisements, fashions in clothes, and patterns of social decorum. (Abrams 280)*

The structuralist reading of culture made by Claude Levi Strauss was directly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics. As a result. culture, in such a view is a self-contained system of signification whose different items and elements are in direct relationship with each other. If the language in Saussurean idea was a self-sufficient system operating its own internal rules, Levi Strauss applies the same theory on culture; that is, a specific culture has a deep structure that organizes the norms of that culture through its constituent units and internal rules. On the other hand, while the Structuralist linguistics believes in the universality of the deep structures of all languages, the Structuralist anthropology of Levi-Strauss argues that the deep structure of all cultures is universal. Therefore, whereas the languages differ from each other only in their surface structure, the cultures, too, are different only in their surface structures. In other words, the constituent parts of different cultures are not the same, but their internal rules are universal.

Consequently Levi-Strauss as Hans Bertens says, attempted to show "how the most diverse myths, recorded in cultures that seemingly have no connection with each other, can be seen as variations upon one and the same basic pattern" (Bertens 61). The different and numerous parts of a culture constitute a sign system that has a structure functioning in two levels: surface and deep structure. The surface structure is the signifier, and the deep structure is the signified behind it. The surface structure of a specific cultures include, for example, eating customs, kinship relations, food preparations and the taboos of that culture. Each one of these cultural activities is taken as a sign. The signs also become meaningful through their difference from the other signs of that system.

The meaning of these signs is nothing but the deep structure of that culture. It should also be mentioned that these signs lose their meaning outside of this system. That is why the cultural activity of a culture seems meaningless and loses its function in another culture. Furthermore, the relationship between a specific cultural phenomenon and its meaning is arbitrary. This statement shows the other direct impact of Saussure's theories on Structuralist anthropology. As it is mentioned earlier in this study, Saussure believed that the relationship between the signifier and the signified was arbitrary. In different cultures, this relationship is arbitrary since such a cultural activity is shaped and determined by convention.

Such an attitude when applied on myths is actually what Levi-Strauss has ventured to discuss in his The Structural Study of Myth. Here he is concerned with why myths from different cultures of the world seem so familiar. He attempts to give an answer to this question by emphasizing the form and structure of myths, rather than their content and meaning. He ultimately comes to this conclusion that myth itself is a language not because it has to be told in order to exist, but because it includes the same structures that a language has.

One of the revolutionary influences of the ideas of Levi-Strauss on Structuralism was that he believed that the 'binary oppositions' exists at the basis of different social structures and cultures. Levi-Strauss, in his most popular book, The Raw and the Cooked, described how the primitive man built his world based on the binary oppositions, and how the structures of myths provided basic structures of understanding cultural relations. These relations appear as binary pairs or opposites, as the title of his book implies: what is 'raw' is opposed to what is 'cooked'. The raw is in association with nature, while the cooked is associated with culture. Such oppositions form the basic structure for all ideas in a culture. They are basic to all culture phenomena from language to cooking. In this view, meaning itself becomes relational. That is to say that the meaning of the word 'right' is known only because of its contrast with the word 'left'.

From the primitive man some creatures were dangerous, and some were not; some things were edible and some were not; some natural phenomena were pleasant, and some were not. Moreover, man's body itself consists of binary oppositions such as right and left hand, right and left eye, right and left ear and so on. Man and woman also constitute a binary opposition biologically. Thus the culture of the primitive man and the language produced in such a culture are founded on binary oppositions. In other words, the structure of culture, language, myth and other sign systems is binary. Subsequently, these binary oppositions have entered religion, philosophy and literature. On the other hand, Roman Jacobson, who met Levi-Strauss in New York in 1940s and with whom collaborated in some intellectual Structuralist projects, had already been dealing with such binary oppositions as the vertical/horizontal axes, the vowel/consonant sounds and the selection/combination principles of language.

Conclusively, one can propose this point that Structuralism was trying to do for culture what grammar does for language. This new attitude towards culture, world, objects, reality and perception, which dominant in 1950s and 1960s, had its roots in Formalism and Prague School on one hand, and Saussurean linguistics on the other hand. Being influential in different academic fields in its early phase, Structuralism began to affect contemporary philosophy more than any one area. The influence of Structuralism on contemporary philosophy was so deep that it became a distinct and independent branch of philosophical discourse, later to be challenged by Post-structuralist philosophy of the recent years. Moreover, the highly important role played by language in contemporary philosophy has resulted in considering the "philosophy of language" as one of the main branches of contemporary philosophy.

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