



FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE AS THE FATHER OF MODERN LINGUISTICS

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ABSTRACT

Ferdinand de Saussure is usually referred to as the father of modern linguistics. His contribution to linguistics lay in the following; firstly he made a distinction between two approaches to the study of language: the synchronic approach and the diachronic approach. The synchronic (or descriptive) study of a language is concerned with that language as it exists at a particular point of time. As opposed to this, the diachronic (or historical) study of a language is concerned with the historical development of that language through time. A study of the history of the English language is diachronic. Secondly, de Saussure distinguished between what he called langue and parole. Parole is the concrete manifestation of language either through speech or through writing. As opposed to this, langue is the abstract knowledge necessary for speaking, listening, writing and reading i.e for producing instances of parole. It is the total set of conventions that the members of a language community share. The aim of every linguist is to study this set of conventions (langue) and for arriving at statements about langue he makes use of were! occurrences of speech or writing (parole) as his data. Let us consider the Game of football. In order to play it the Players must agree on a set of conventions regarding the number of players an a team, the function of each player, what is counted as a goal, what is counted as a foul and so on. These rules of the game can be compared to langue. The langue of football, the rules of the game, are an abstract set of principles which are necessary to play concrete game. An individual game of football can therefore be compared to parole. The distinction between langue and parole runs parallel to the distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance as given by Chomsky. But, the two differ as the former is sociological and the latter is psychological.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1957, a revolutionary linguist called Noam Chomsky published his *Syntactic Structures* in which he attacked the basic tenets of Structuralism and proposed a new theory which has come to be known as *Transformational Generative Grammar*. An elementary account of this method has been given by E Bach. Some of the disciples of Chomsky have proposed new theories known as Case Grammar, Generative Semantics etc. S.R. Leavis proposed the application of transformational grammar theory of poetry Richard Ohmann was another follower of N. Chomsky. These transformation lists have used poetic utterances to test the efficiency of their grammatical concepts. An attempt is made to make grammar of English adequate to describe language outside normal usage. They given special attention to utterances of a certain type which mostly appears in poetry – “a grief ago,” “he danced his did”, etc. Such utterances are on the borderline of poetry and nonsense, grammar and non-grammar, lexical decorum and anarchy of diction. They have attempted to make grammar of English adequate to describe and explain the place of any utterance within the corpus of English sentences. Their attempt is not just to state that an utterance is ‘grammatical’ or ‘ungrammatical’; but to place it in an understandable place on the scale of grammaticalness.

In British Linguistics, the study of language, in modern terms, is supposed to have begun with the works and contribution of J.R. Firth. There may be a dispute. Regarding the “nature of (his contribution, but there is no doubt about the fact that he was a pioneer in the study of language and linguistics. Perhaps it is yet too early to give an assessment of his work. But the message spread from Firth and some of his students followed the ideas and developed his concepts. Prof. M.A.K. Halliday is one such example. Taking the main ideas and concepts of Firth - such as level, substance, form, concept of situation - he developed them and presented an integrated theory of language. In the final presentation, Halliday substantially modified Firth's ideas and notions. But the main inspiration came from Firthian inquiry. Even in the case of Halliday, the theory has not remained the same but has undergone considerable changes during the course of understanding and experience. But there is no doubt that, Halliday lays considerable emphasis on text - both verbal and written. Rhee study of language must take into account the actual text produced in language. This fact is the fundamental difference between Chomskian linguistics and Hallidayan linguistics. The former is concerned with the mechanism that produces text and the latter with a mechanism to describe the text. For this reason the Hallidayan model appears appropriate in stylistics. Literature exists and there is a body of text known as poetry.

Stylistics is the study of the language of literature and cannot ignore a textual study. This is the main reason for choosing largely the Hallidayan model for the present study.



Halliday conceives of language in terms of levels and the different levels together constitute the meaningfulness of language. The different levels have their own organisational patterns and therefore even to be separately. But this does not in any way imply that each level is independent of the others. For instance, language operates at the levels of substance, form and situation. Substance is the physical aspect of language - the sounds or the science on a Paper. They have their own rules and methods of organisation. A speaker or a reader knows this aspect. Form is the basic level of organisation where words combine into a meaningful pattern. But, Halliday looks upon the level of form as of two kinds because of the two different kinds of constraints working almost simultaneously open in comparison to grammatical choices which are extremely restricted. These two different kinds of choices make the level of form. Language is a social activity and there is always a certain context or situation in which language functions. Context or situation goes a long way in determining the meaning in language. Halliday, therefore, recognises a level of context as well. Difficult though it is to systematize the parameters of contexts because of their number and variability. However, in recent years, Halliday has made certain advances and modifications in his theory of language. Presently, he looks upon language in terms of choices - choices being crucial to language structure. Language, Halliday maintains, is a network of choices and these choices are finite. These choices are determined in terms of certain, rules and laws". An attempt to determine the rules that control these choices leads to the description of language. Halliday looks upon these choices as constituting systems, which are not arbitrary. Owing to Halliday's emphasis on systems, the present version of Hallidayian theory has come to be known as the "Systemic Model". A writer/speaker operates through these systems and the reader/hearer responds to these systems. This is the basic fact about the production and understanding of language.

Evidently, this model is suitable to textual study where text occupies a key position such as poetry is given in literature and the task in stylistics is to find out the parameters or dimensions in which the poet has made the choices that give rise to poetry. A poet makes a selection out of a number of possibilities and the choice of one at the same time implies the rejection of others. For example, we can take the well known poem by Wordsworth – "A slumber did my spirit seal, "as a case in point. The choice of "slumber" rather than sleep is extremely significant to change them would be destroying poetry. It is this aspect of the choices in language that needs to be investigated. Obviously, a model based on text would be appropriate in stylistics, for that alone will provide the necessary insight into the poet's choice. The present study makes an attempt to study Dylan Thomas' poems within the overall framework of the Systemic Model.

It is neither desirable nor necessary to give a comprehensive, linguistic/ stylistic analysis of each of his poems. However some poems and passages have been identified for this purpose. An



analysis provides sufficient evidence to substantiate the feature of linguistic innovations necessitated by the variety of themes.

We can begin with the poem 'Light breaks where no sunshine's'.

This poem is in regular stanza form, with a steady rhythm and occasional rhyme. Of the various levels of meaning it communicates, I take it that the basic level is a description of the state of existence; the theme is the process of living. In place of the usual dissonance and rhyme, there is new assonance (shines, tides, light) interwoven with tenuous consonance of "s" in the first stanza. Later stanzas return to habitual dissonance and shades. The stanza is a variation upon that of the "green fuse 18- almost identical is we lengthen the first line, omit the fifth, and loosen the rhythm. Similarly of form may imply similarity of subject. Certainly the images are familiar. The monotony of rhythm, the recurrence of verbal patterns the repetition with variation in place of detectable forward movement are equally familiar. Monotony of word and theme and repetition of pattern struck an early reviewer (in New verse, 1935) as tiresome not functional as they could be if the theme is regular process. But the theme is a puzzle. Is the poem about individual development from fertilised egg to maturity and the coming of knowledge proper to each stage? Or is the poem an abstract arrangement like a recent painting?

In the first stanza, the clue to the moment of existence occurs in the 'warring images' of the last line. Since no flesh yet decks the bones, Thomas is probably referring, to the period during or immediately after conception. Thus, the 'light' of prescience 'breaks' within the embryo, as the blood pushes through its veins like the tides of the ocean. The phrase, 'broken ghosts with glow-worms in their heads' seems to be in opposition to 'the things of light'. The contrast between the concrete and abstract nouns is great. More generally, the particular word – order, 'where no sun shines', is established by these repetitions in the first stanza, to be repeated with diminishing frequency in the following stanzas. Its use is both formal and functional since it ties the poem together and permits a sharper conflict of images.

In the second stanza, the sexual symbolism of the 'candle in the things' is clear, and that it 'warms youth and seed' makes sense. The word, 'unwrinkled', is capable of an ironic sexual interpretation, as well as the following phrase 'bright as fig' a fig may be shiny when ripe and young, or wrinkled when dry and old. The last line varies the metaphor; 'where no wax is', where there is no flash or vitality, 'the candle shows its hairs' the dead wick or the fleshless bone remains. This stanza contracts the states of being young or old, virile or important.

In the third stanza, the statement that dawn breaks behind the eyes' may refer to the arrival of consciousness in the infant. This image is clear, but the last three lines present the jumble of imagery. Any interpretation must hinge upon the meaning of 'gushers of the sky'. The syntax

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is fluid and the reader is inclined to equate ‘gushers of the sky’ simply with the process of nature and conclude that Thomas is saying that life goes on mingled with joy and sadness.

In the fourth stanza the last three lines are a variation of the preceding idea. “where no cold is”, or “where the warmth of knowledge exists”, the “skinning glasses” or the process of living (skinning” because they flay or lay bare) loosen the winters robe “or release the cold impulses of the unconscious. Again a sexual interpretation of skinning gales is possible. The ‘film of spring’, or the prelude to self knowledge, then becomes visible, existing just beyond the eyelids. The contrasts in this stanza lend themselves to multiple interpretations, and the poet is in danger of losing any precise meaning in a welter of connotations.

The last stanza is perhaps the most elusive. The process of self explorations described in terms of the visible or conscious tips of buried thoughts which ‘smell in the rain’. The last phrase is striking in its context but ambiguous. The next three lines, beginning with ‘when logics die’, are a little out of key, for they appear to be an endorsement of the intuitive existence dispenses with logic and the eye learns the ‘secret of the soil’ while life becomes full or the ‘blood jumps in the sun’. The last line however is effective. In sudden contrast Thomas reminds us the above the ‘wastage allotments’ of life, death is hovering ‘dawn’, a word analogous to the words of flight with which the poem is teeming comes to end. Day may follow, but it, too, will hold. We are born to die.

In this poem, certain of Thomas stylistic habits, such as Biblical allusions and the use of compound words, are not represented. More central characteristics, such as the choice of subject-matter, the method of composition, and the devices of technique are well displayed. The poem is a good example of Thomas’s dialectical method in practice. The reader sometimes finds himself undergoing the discouraging experience of appearing to discover an adequate or even thrilling meaning of a phrase, only to realize upon careful reexamination that the phrase is more complex than he first thought and rather defies interpretations. A truce dictated by exhaustion rather than by Thomas results. Yet the effect is frequently electrical and it may be observed that the most obscure phrases in the poem, such as ‘broken ghosts’ and ‘gushers of the sky’, owe little of their difficulty to the dialectical method. Thomas’s obscurity seems to arise in part from his fluid syntax, although his diction and language are seldom as simple as they appear in this poem.

He is at his best in the latter in the magnificent ‘Sonnets’; at his worst perhaps, in ‘because the pleasure – bird whistles after the hot wires’ means ‘Because the song bird sings more sweetly after being blinded (with red-hot needles or wires)’, drug-white shower of nerves and food means ‘snow’, snow being seen both as the ‘snow of cocaine – addicts and as manna from heaven; ‘a wind that plucked a goose ‘means’ a wind of fatherly snow’, ‘the wild tongue breaks its tobsm’ and the ‘red’ wagged root ‘refer to fire’; ‘bum city’ refers to Sodom, ‘bum’

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meaning simultaneously 'bad' and 'given to sodomy'; the 'frozen wife' and 'the salt person' are of course lots' wife; and so on.

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