

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 16
Structuralism: Ferdinand de Saussure

Hello and welcome to another lecture on Literary Theory. And the topic that we are going to take up today is Structuralism. The first quarter of the 20th century is exceptionally significant as far as this particular 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 for instance or Russian formalism or even reader response theory which we traced back to the writings of Edmund Husserl during the first quarter of the 20th century.

And we will again see this phenomenon today when we discuss structuralism and when we take up for discussion the works of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work forms the basis of this structuralist school of literary theory.

But before we start discussing Saussure, let us first consider the term structure from which this particular theoretical category derives its name. Now, usually we start with the dictionary definition and then proceed from there, but this time let us make an exception by starting with an example rather than with a definition. So, from this example we will gradually work towards an understanding of structure.

So, one of the most common forms of structure that we encounter every day visually are other various buildings that we see around us. So, why is it that we would regard these buildings as structures? And why at the same time for instance we will not consider as structure a pile of bricks and rubble, randomly dumped next to a building? Well, in case of that pile each of its components has a separate and independent existence. That is above and beyond its existence as part of that pile; which means that in a haphazardly dumped pile of bricks for instance, each brick has an independent existence that is complete in itself beyond the pile. And therefore, a pile of bricks dumped haphazardly together can at best be called an aggregate, but not a structure.

On the other hand, a building is regarded as a structure because each of its component parts are subservient to the whole in that they do not have a genuinely independent existence outside the wholeness provided by the building. Think of a window for instance or a door; which basically frames blank spaces within a building right.

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. So, 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 buildings. So, 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 as well as its relevance. So, here we have already encountered 2 very important aspects of a structure. What are they? Well 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 same structure. This is to say that none of the constituent parts make sense outside the structure at least in the same way that they do within the structure.

So, as I told you if you take a window out of a building, and you put it in a field, it will immediately cease to make sense at least make sense as a window. Now 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. Now each raga is a structure on its own; in which musical notes work as component parts.

Now not only are these component parts subservient to the whole, but they also do not have any 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 a monotonous noise which has nothing musical about it.

This is because each musical note gains its musicality as it were not by itself, but rather 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 the rules are unique to the structure, the rules that guide the relationship between the component parts of a structure, are unique to that structure itself. And one cannot seek either to justify or to invalidate these rules with reference to anything outside the structure.

To understand this let us go back to the example of raga that we were just discussing. So, 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 right. For instance, there is a very popular evening raga called yaman, where you the sequence that is allowed is ni re ga, but not ni sa re ga.

So, why one particular note sequence is allowed and why another particular note sequence is not allowed within a raga, cannot be either justified or invalidated by referring to anything outside the structure of the raga. So, for instance, you cannot make arguments like some sequences are allowed because they are more natural, and other sequences are allowed because they are more unnatural; there is nothing more or less natural about the sequence ni re ga, and nothing less natural for instance about the sequence ni sa re ga.

So, that does not explain why this particular note sequence is allowed in this particular note sequence is not allowed. So, rules that operate within a structure has nothing natural or unnatural about them. This will become even more clear when we revisit these characteristic features of a structure with reference to language. That is where we will be heading soon. But here I would like to reiterate the major points that we have so far touched upon. So, a structure has at the very least these 4 important features. What are there?

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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.

The first feature is that it is made of constituent parts; which are subservient to the structure as a whole.

The second point is that the constituent parts of a structure do not have any meaningful existence outside the structure at least in the same way that they have within the structure. The third point is that the constituent parts derive their relevance within the structure not because of any inherent quality that they have, but because of the way they relate to each other one component part one constituent part of particular structure relate to another constituent part of that same structure. And the fourth point is that structures are self-regulated and relations between the constituent parts of a particular structure are guided by rules that are arbitrary. Because they are unique to the structure itself, and do not require any external validation.

So, with these 4 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.

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Ferdinand de Saussure

(1857 - 1913)

• *Cours de Linguistique Générale*
(1915)



Source: In My Own Terms

So, as I mentioned before Saussure was a Swiss linguist, and he is primarily known today for the book course in general linguistics which is basically a collection of his lecture notes originally published in French. By his students and his students made these notes between 1906 and 1911 and published the book under the French title *Cours de Linguistique Generale* in 1915. And by then Saussure was already dead. So, it was a posthumous publication.

Now, the main contribution of Saussure was to establish the fact that language operates as a structure; which means that language is marked by the characteristic features of a structure that I have just enumerated. And since language is the medium of literary expression, this theorization of language as a structure had tremendous influence on twentieth century literary criticism. So, why does Saussure refer to language as a structure? And even more importantly how does this identification of language as a structure is something that is of influence to 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 have mentioned a few minutes back. And this understanding is pivoted on the fact that language is constituted of independently meaningful words that are put together for communication.

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So, study of language you 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. And to understand this let us look at language more closely. Now, as you will all agree language in its essence is fundamentally a system of signifying. Words which are the constituent parts of language are therefore, basically signs which refer us to something or the other. For instance, words like dog or pen act as signs which refer us to things like barking 4 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 2 different aspects.

The first aspect is the sound of the word words like dog or the sound of the word pen.

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If we look at 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**, like “dog” or the word “pen”. This aspect of the sign is referred to by Saussure as the “**signifier**”.

Now this aspect of the sign the aspect of the sign marked by the sound is referred to by Saussure as a signifier. But the sign also has a second component apart from the sound marker. And this is the concept that the signifier or the word sound refers us to. So, if the signifier is the word sound dog, then it refers us to the concept of a 4 legged barking animal. Alternatively, if the signifier is the word sound pen, then it refers us to the concept of a writing instrument right.

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The second aspect of the sign is the **concept** that it refers to and is termed by Saussure as the “**signified**”.

So, 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 2 overlapping aspects a signifier and a signified and they can be graphically represented as follows.

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$$\text{Sign} = \frac{\text{signifier}}{\text{signified}}$$

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 relationship between any particular signifier and it is signified. So, take for example, the word tree we have already discussed this example in our earlier lectures, but here it is also very apt to bring back this example.

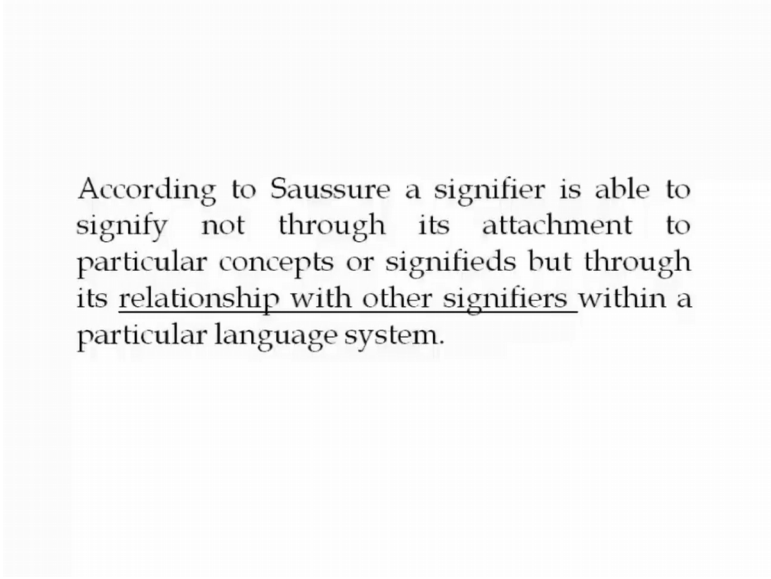
So, if we consider the word tree word sound tree, as a sound image tree is a signifier. And whenever we utter this word sound tree, we are inevitably directed to a signified; which is something which has a wooden trunk and which has wooden appendages, and they have green leaves growing on them something like that. According to Saussure there is no inherent connection between the word sound tree and this concept of a thing made of wood and leaves.

The fact that there is no inherent relationship between the 2 between the signifier and the signified is actually very easily gathered from the fact that the same thing the same signified that we are refer to in English by the signifier tree is referred to in other languages other language structures by radically different sounding signifiers.

Like for instance in German, it will be referred to by the word sound bound. And in Bangla it would be referred by the word sound of the signifier Gachch. If the signifier was something rooted in the signified, then in each of these languages that I have just mentioned a particular concept or a particular signified should have had the same signifier to refer to it. Or at the very least the signifiers should have been similar to each other. If the signifier derived from the signified because in all of these languages we are referring to the same signified, the signified is not changing, what is radically altering is the signifier the word sound.

But since these languages do not share similar sounding signifiers, the only conclusion that we can draw is that the signifiers the word sounds they do not derive their existence, or their ability to make sense from the signified. But then how is a signifier able to signify if there is no umbilical cord connecting it to one particular signified.

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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.

Well, according to Saussure a signifier is able to signify not through its attachment to a particular concept or a particular signified, but through its relationship with other signifiers within a particular language system.

In other words, language functions just like a structure; where it is constituent parts word sounds in this case 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 it is

oppositional relationship to the walls around it, a word sound within a language structure gets its meaning through its oppositional relationship with other words sounds surrounding it. So, that is to say the word sound tree signifies what it does, because it is different from other words sounds like bird for instance, or fruit or dog or pane window door etcetera.

So, the meaning making ability of a signifier does not depend on it is positively being related to something or the other outside the particular language structure. But rather, it depends on it is negatively or oppositionally being related to other signifiers within that language system, within that language structure. And each signifier occupies the space that other signifiers do not. And each word sound therefore, signifies what other words sounds do not because they are in oppositional relationship.

So, let us say that the signifier red, according to Saussure theory does not signify any particular colour. But rather, it signifies those colours which are not signified by other words sounds within the particular language system like for instance green yellow white black. So, red occupies that space which is not occupied by other word sounds. 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 we speak in English as well as the colour magenta.

But the moment the word sound magenta is introduced into that language, the meaning of the signifier red would become more specific and more narrow, as it will cease to signify the colour that is now referred to by the new word sound magenta. Now, all of 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 relationship with other signifiers. And this is a very important concept which we will use not only to understand structuralism, but also beyond that when we take a post structuralism.

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Language like a structure is always complete and self-contained at any given point of time and therefore linguists should study it 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.

So, according to Saussure language like a structure is always complete, and self-contained at any given point in time. And therefore, linguists this was his argument should study language in terms of it is internal relationship that exist at any given point in time, rather than merely in terms of it is history. And this is why Saussure approach to language is referred to as synchronic as focused on all the aspects of language at any given point of time rather than diachronic which is the historical approach.

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 this oppositional relationship 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 as sound difference separating one-word sound from another within a particular language, depends upon the unique rules followed by that specific language structure. To explain this let us take an example for instance consider these 2 sentences.

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Consider these two sentences:

- I *thread* the needle.
- I *tread* the unknown road.

The first sentence reads I thread the needle. And the second sentence as you can see in the slide, reads 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 English language because the English language speakers register a difference between the sounds tha and ta. But on the contrary if we take a word like quote for instance, and let us say we pronounce it in 2 different ways. In the first way we pronounce it as quote without aspirating the initial key sound. And in the second way we pronounce the word as quote by aspirating the initial key sound.

Now, if you are communicating in English, then the structure of that language will not allow you to notice between notice any difference actually between these 2 sounds any meaningful difference. And both the pronunciations will still be registered as the same signifier. So, even though you might be able to hear the difference technically, they will not be registered by you as English language speakers to be meaningful differences.

Yet for someone located outside the English language structure, let us say a Hindi speaker, ka and kha 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. So, within the English language a hard ta and an aspirated soft tha will count as different.

Whereas an aspirated kha it will be registered that sound as not different or no meaningful difference will be registered between the kha sound and the unaspirated ka sound. And such kind of peculiar arbitrariness can be noticed throughout any given language structure. So, though I mentioned English you can find such arbitrary rule governing the oppositional relationship if you look at any language. So, 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*. And to understand this distinction let us first ask ourselves this question.

When we speak of language is a structure what exactly do we mean? Do we mean the sentences which for instance 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 exist as a structure of communication between several individuals. For instance, between me and you at this particular point in time; which means that my individual utterances can only be part of a bigger structure, but can never be the entire structure in itself because if my speech was the entire structure, then you will not be able to understand it is arbitrary rules of opposition as someone located outside that structure.

So, then what is that structure when we are talking about language of the structure, and how do we know of it is existence, if not through concrete acts of language utterances language uses. Saussure answers this by referring to a game of chess. Now any particular game of chess involves a set of specific moves made by individual player's right. Needless to say here that 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, all of the moves in any particular game of chess.

So, for instance in all individual games of chess, the bishop will move in one particular way which is again very peculiar to the structure of the game of chess, whereas, the knight will move in another very peculiar format. Now these deep sets of rules are above and beyond individual games. And indeed all of the rules cannot even be guessed by observing a single game of chess because all of them are not activated in any single game of chess.

Just like all of the language rules are not activated during the utterance of any single sentence or even a whole speech. 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. And when we speak of language as a structure, we employ a similar kind of duality.

Language tool like chess has a deep lying and invisible layer of rules and regulations, which governs it structurally and makes specific uses of language possible.

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The 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.

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 any given point in time which parallels the sequence of chess moves made by an individual player during a particular game. So, the sentence is that I am uttering now in front of you are examples of parole, whereas, the set of regulations inherent to the structure of English language which is guiding my utterances form the langue. And this langue is not limited only to me as a speaker, but is in fact, shared by others including you who is listening to me, and you who is able to understand me.

And it is this shared quality of the langue that makes individual paroles understandable, meaningful and helps us communicate using them. So, with this we come to an end of our discussion on Ferdinand de Saussure and his unique intervention in the study of

language. But what was missing crucially missing from this discussion was 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 intervention in the field of language study has opened up a whole new field, a whole new way of looking at literature.

Thank you for listening.