

Course Three:

### **Four Dichotomies in Structuralism**

Structuralism is an intellectual movement that began in France in the 1950s and 1960s.

In literature, 'Structuralist critics are primarily interested not in what makes an individual literary work unique, but in what it has common with other literary works'. Structuralist literary critics, try to analyze texts as product of a system with a specific 'grammar' that controls its form and meaning.

Structuralism in fact has its roots in the thinking of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). His 'Course in General Linguistics', published after his death, influenced Russian formalists to try to isolate the underlying set of laws by which different elements are universally structured in any text.

#### **Saussure's Dichotomies**

##### **1-Synchronic and Diachronic**

Diachronic : The term, coined by Ferdinand de Saussure, refers to the examination of languages (or a language) with reference to their origin and changes accross time.

Synchronic : A term coined by Ferdinand de Saussure that refers to the study of a linguistic system without attaching any importance to its origin, history and development. According to Saussure, a language must be understood keeping in mind that each sign acquires its meaning in relation to the other signs that are not only related to it but also define it within its synchronic system

Saussure's approach to language differs significantly from that which 19th century philologists offered us. In opposition to a 'historical' – diachronic linguistics which looks at the changes which take place over time in specific languages, Saussure pursued a synchronic linguistics. His course focused on the nature of linguistic sign.

##### **2-Signifier and Signified**

Actually anything that tells us about something other than itself is a 'SIGN'. There are many terms that mean one thing in everyday usage and something quite different when they are used as technical terms by Saussure and by other linguists—like the word 'SIGN'.

The sign tells us about something other than itself. Now comes the question, what is meant by 'other than itself'? Because the red light at an intersection of a few roads does not make us think about its redness; it is there to make us stop.

Saussure raised a valid question that had been astonishingly overlooked by earlier linguists— i.e. ‘what is the nature of the subject-matter under study in linguistics?’

The earlier linguists actually confined their interests to the historical study and the origin of language. Saussure, instead of written texts, stressed on spoken words as a starting point of understanding of expressive act.

Saussure raised a valid question :

“Psychologically, what are our ideas, apart from our language? They probably do not exist. Or in a form that may be described as amorphous. We should probably be unable according to philosophers and linguists to distinguish two ideas clearly without the help of a language (internal language naturally)”<sup>10</sup>

— from Saussure’s lectures (class note on 4 July, 1911)

Saussure said, when we utter words, sounds are made from vibrations and this sound image creates in the brain of the listener a mental concept of the corresponding object; e.g. if one utters ‘TREE’—the sound image forms a mental imprint of the concept of a tree.

Here Saussure argues:

“... beside this entirely indistinct realm of ideas, the realm of sound offers in advance quite distinct ideas (taken in itself apart from the idea.”<sup>11</sup>

— Lectures, 4 July, 1911.

Signifier and signified are body and soul, or they are recto and verso of a leaf of a paper. Its two sides are ultimately inseparable— one side does not exist without the other. Thus a linguistic

Thus, we can conclude that :

The Sign does not link a name and a thing, but a concept (signified) and an acoustic image (signifier).

The only reason that the signifier does entail the signified is because, there is a conventional relationship at play. Agreed rules govern the relationship (and these are in action in any speech community). But if the sign does not contain a ‘neutral’ relationship with signifiers, then how is it that signs function?

Signs in different languages divide up the world differently. To explain this, Saussure uses the word ‘boeuf’ as an example. He cites the fact that while, in English, we have different words for the animal and the meat product: ox and beef, in French, ‘boeuf’ is used to refer to both concepts.

A perception of difference between the two concepts is absent from French vocabulary. In Saussure’s view, particular words are born out of a particular society’s needs, rather than out of a need to label a preexisting set of concepts. For Saussure, the sign signifies by virtue of its ‘difference’ from other signs and it is this difference which gives rise to the possibility of a speech community.

A sign’s form differs from that of other signs as form: a sign’s concept differs from that of other signs’ concept. When we utter words, we hear some sounds during that utterance,—its form creates a sound image in our brain. It has obviously two inseparable parts— signifier and signified as we have proved earlier. But how do we recognize them?

‘CAT’ and ‘MAT’ are different signifiers – before recognising them collectively we have to make distinction between ‘C’ and ‘M’. ‘C’ is not ‘M’ or ‘P’ or ‘S’. Thus sign acts by different minimal pairs (rat/ hat) show us how linguistic forms function to give meaning by difference.

Language is therefore a system of interdependent entities. But not only does it delimit a sign’s range of use, for which it is necessary, because an isolated sign could be used for absolutely anything or nothing without first being distinguished from another sign, but it is also what makes meaning possible.

Saussure focuses on what he calls language, i.e. ‘a system of signs that expresses ideas’ describes the way in which the general phenomenon of language

### **3-Langue and Parole**

**Parole** is the way an individual uses the resources of a language. It is the individual acts of speech and putting into practice of languages

**Langue** refers to language as a whole, that is shared by the ‘collective consciousness’. It is a system of differences between signs. It refers to the abstract system of language that is internalized by a given speech community.

Saussure defines ‘speaking’ (or utterance) as an intellectual individual act. ‘Speech’ is a natural phenomenon: human beings have ‘the faculty to construct a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas’<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, ‘language’ is ‘both the social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.’

Saussure is of the opinion that language is not a function of the speaker, but is passively assimilated. Speaking is a premeditated act, as Saussure concludes.

While parole is composed of unrelated or differing parts of elements and ‘sound images’ in which both parts are psychological.

Thus by analysing language synchronically, Saussure frames a linguistic structure and finds a system, mechanism or structure in which a language works. Hence his approach to linguistics for which he laid the ground work came to be known as structuralism.

### **4- Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic**

Saussure asserted that there are only two types of relations: syntagmatic and paradigmatic

The two systems that produce meaning in language are paradigmatic and syntagmatic. Jonathan Culler writes in Ferdinand de Saussure that “Paradigmatic relations are the oppositions between elements that can replace one another...Syntagmatic relations define combinatory possibilities; the relations between elements that might combine in a sequence” (60). According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms, a paradigm is: a set of linguistic or other units that can be substituted for each other in the same position within

a sequence or structure. A paradigm in this sense may be constituted by all words sharing the same grammatical function, since the substitution of one for another does not disturb the syntax of a sentence. Linguistics often refers to the paradigmatic dimension of language as the 'vertical axis' of selection. The following definition is given for a syntagm: a linguistic term designating any combination of units... which are arranged in a significant sequence. A sentence is a syntagm of words. Language is said to have two distinct dimensions: the syntagmatic or 'horizontal' axis of combination in which sequences of words are formed by combining them in a recognized order...The syntagmatic dimension is therefore the 'linear' aspect of language. For example, in a sentence "The cat was sitting on the rug," "the" is chosen from among a number of words such as "a," "their," "his," and "my" that could have filled the same slot based on the paradigmatic system, that is, "the 'vertical axis' of selection." Also, "cat" is chosen instead of "dog," "boy," or "baby," and "was" instead of "is," and so on. Also, both the sentences "I write what I know" and "I know what I write" consist of the same units, "I," "write," "what," and, "know." However, the meanings of these two sentences are different because the units that compose the sentences are arranged differently based on the syntagmatic system, that is, "the 'horizontal' axis of combination." As we have seen, any expression that conveys a message is structured along these two systems, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic. These two systems are commonly illustrated diagrammatically as follows:

These two systems are summarized in The Linguistics Encyclopedia as follows: On the syntagmatic axis, words are linked, or chained, together according to grammatical rules, but we make choices about which words to link together on the paradigmatic axis, the axis of choice.