

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Seventeen: Structuralism (1)

Antecedents: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1915). Words are signs; the sign = signal (sound pattern) and signification (concept); more commonly: signifier and signified, the connection between the two is arbitrary. “Linguistic signals are not in essence phonetic. They are not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by the differences which distinguish one such sound pattern from another.” No concern with language as a reflection of a pre-existent reality or the expression of human intentions. “[S]hift in focus, from objects to relations” (Culler).

Parole (speech) and langue (language = linguistic structure, the shared system of language which underpins parole and makes communication possible)→parole = the individual realization of langue.

Language as a system of signs placed in a larger context: “It is [. . .] possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. [. . .] We shall call it semiology. [. . .] Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge.”→Just as there is a grammar of language, a grammar of other sign systems (culture, myth, literature) is also possible.

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Saussure’s ideas first took root and yielded results (the discovery, through the study of signs, of basic structures) in linguistics and anthropology in the 1950s and ’60s. The significance of **Roman Jakobson & Claude Lévi-Strauss**.

■ Important first step taken in this direction by Russian formalist critic **Vladimir Propp** in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928)—Jakobson knew and appreciated him. Plots of folk tales broken down to 31 basic units or functions, which can be combined into sequences; 7 types of characters also established. Note the analogy with grammar.

Jakobson, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles” (1956). Formulates the terms selection and combination as the two axes of linguistic operations, governed by the principles of similarity and contiguity. Cf. “The teacher marked the papers” (teacher chosen from “schoolmaster/mistress,” “instructor,” “pedagogue,” etc.; marked chosen from “judged,” “graded,” “evaluated,” etc., the two then combined on the basis of contiguity in time & space to make a statement). These principles most apparent in metaphor and metonymy. As poetry is focused upon the sign (language), prose upon the referent, metaphor abounds in poetry, especially the Romantic variety, metonymy in prose, especially the realistic novel.

“Linguistics and Poetics” (1960). Poetics is an integral part of linguistics. Language, an overall code, consists of “a system of interconnected subcodes”: the referential, the emotive, the poetic, etc. Defines the poetic use of language with the help of what it is not: everyday usage. (NB. Two basic modes in verbal behaviour: selection and combination.) In ordinary cases, we start with selection: cf. topic of message is “child” > (1) we select one of several words with more or less similar meanings—“child,” “kid,” “youngster,” etc., then (2) we combine this with a semantically cognate word: “sleeps,” “nods” or “dozes,” etc.: “The kid sleeps.” In poetry, as summed up by Jakobson:

The selection is produced on the base of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and antonymity, while the combination, the build up of the sequence, is based on contiguity. The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence.

The principle of equivalence working in the axis of combination in poetry apparent in that sequences in verse are composed of equivalent units: syllables, long and short, stressed and unstressed, word boundaries or no boundaries, rhymes, parallelisms, etc., arranged in a system of binary oppositions. Consider

| x x / | x x / | x x / | x x / |
'Tis a sight to engage me, if anything can,
| x / | x x / | x x / | x x / |
To muse on the perishing pleasures of man;

Although Jakobson's concern is how verse design (abstract structure) is turned into verse instance (the realization of that design) he notes that "[t]he supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous."

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Structuralist literary studies become prominent in 1960s. Reasons: in an increasing number of disciplines structuralism perceived as a powerful new tool for extending the scholar's field of inquiry, and in part that by eschewing interpretation and striving "to define the conditions of meaning," it seemed to offer a solution to the problem posed by the unstoppable multiplication of interpretative studies.

Roland Barthes. Significant move towards establishing a narrative model, "a structure or grammar of narrative" (the langue position) from which all instances of narrative are divergences (the parole position) in his "textual analyses" of Balzac's *Sarrasine* in *S/Z* (1970). Divides the novella—the story of a young French sculptor's fatal infatuation with a castrato singer in Rome—into lexias (textual signifiers = units of sense) and examines the network they create.

A more accessible example of B.'s method: "Textual Analysis of a Tale by Poe" (1973, the tale is "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"). The text is cut up into lexias, then "structuration" examined; the text observed as a production in progress. NB. B. makes a distinction between "structural analysis" (applied to oral narratives, such as myths) and "textual analysis" (of texts).

"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845): narrator ("My Dear P.," in V.'s letter to him), a mesmerist, to try novel experiment of mesmerizing a person in articulo mortis (at the moment of death)—what effect will it have: is it possible at all, will it be more effective, or will it delay death? Valdemar, a Pole living in America, friend of P.'s, suffering terminal illness of phthisis, with exact date of death predicted, willing to cooperate. Mesmerized, in sleep-waking state he communicates with narrator mesmerist; a kind of running commentary on the process of dying; announces that he is dying; then that he is dead; still, for some seven months, kept in hypnotized state; when awakened and asked about his feelings: "I say to you that I am dead" and the corpse disintegrates in a moment, "leaving a liquid mass of . . . detestable putrescence."

Division into lexias: 1—17; 18—102; 103—110; first and last group only in detail; middle part discussed in terms of action rather hurriedly. Pledge: he will ignore Poe the author; literary history; translation.

Example: lexia 1, the title analyzed; result: the title is coded language (the lexia gives rise to associations, which we have to decode):

enigma code ("facts," "case" to find, to give the meaning of); cf. French title: "La Vérité sur le cas de M. Valdemar"; "facts" gives rise to empirical, "vérité" to hermeneutical expectations;

metalinguistic code (the facts and the case could be spoken about without being announced; but they are announced—language doubled into two layers);

narrative code (the metalinguistic announcement has an aperitive function, the title as appetiser);

socio-ethnic code (a proper name is the "prince of signifiers"; what nationality is Valdemar?);

symbolic code (the name may be broken down to Val de Mer: "valley of the sea" suggesting the depths of the sea, abysses "dear to Poe"); NB. pronunciation ought to be [væ|dɛmɑ:] and not [vɑ:|dɛmɛə]; la mare = puddle; la grande mare = the sea, but only in a humorous sense; la mer = the sea; Barthes' English at fault;

social code (saying "M[onsieur] Valdemar" not the same as "Valdemar"; elsewhere Poe uses simple names: "Ligeia," "Eleonora," "Morella").

Is the pledge—nothing of author, literary history, translation—made at the start fulfilled?

Literary effects produced, an illusion of reality created, but no truth-value attached (the literary work reflects no pre-existent reality); neither is it an expression of anything relating to the author's personality.

Referentiality: both the mimetic and expressive functions of literature are ignored. But note that both in Saussure and Barthes (and in Lévi-Strauss): the prospect that a grammar/structure is possible to create is fundamental.