



The Linguistic Turn of Literary Theory: An Introspection

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Traditional approaches to literary interpretation have been replaced by a number of new approaches in the twenty-first century. At the turn of the twentieth century, modernist techniques were prevalent. The formalists and new critics made preliminary efforts, prioritising close reading of the text and ignoring all other concerns, and they were clearly influenced by phenomenology and then structuralism. The over-idealistic overtone of structuralist approach was eventually replaced by flexible post-structural analysis in the second half of the twentieth century and proved that any literary text is multi-layered and do not have any fixed centre. Even the author lacks much control over the language he employs. Even words, let alone literary texts, do not have set meanings. It is not the author's inability to find a fixed centre in his text that is the problem; it is the ambiguity and unpredictability that are inherent in any language.

Reader Response Theory, Deconstruction, and other deconstructive interpretive theories such as Post-Structuralism, Feminism, and Post-colonialism are now considered the most important interpretive approaches under the umbrella term "Postmodernism."

At the beginning of 20th century, Freudian psychoanalysis assumed that there is one set of fundamental meanings that stretch out in the unconscious mind,

which can be understood through a certain sort of analysis. So there was an explicit method that has been approved by the psychoanalysts, by means of which, they get to this data, this fundamental data, which lie in the subconscious mind and which they believe constitute the most important meanings to be understood.

In its modern philosophical context, phenomenology assumes that there are some fundamental facts, known as essences, that are directly given to consciousness. These basic immediate data are pure and transcendental, and they are given to consciousness. Phenomenology believes that certain universal truths, referred to as essences, are explicitly given to consciousness in its modern metaphysical sense. The fundamental immediate data that consciousness is granted is pure and transcendental.

The term "phenomenology" first gained popularity during the Enlightenment, when philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel started to use it; however, phenomenology in its present philosophical sense began in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the work of Czech German philosopher Edmund Husserl, and has continued into the twenty-first.

At the most basic level, phenomenology is the attempt to explain what we see exactly as we see it. There are two fundamental differences within the scope of this project: pure phenomenology, also known as transcendental phenomenology, is the type of phenomenology associated with Husserl, and existential philosophy, associated with Martin Heidegger.

Within Husserl's framework, we see reality, in terms of what he calls the 'natural attitude', where we carry on our lives with the common natural belief, but the reality, we live in, is fundamentally separable from our subjective experience of it. For instance, from the point of view the 'natural attitude', a 'minute' is simply a 'minute of time' irrespective of how or where we spend it. However from the point of view the phenomenological attitude, a minute

depends on how we actually experience it. For instance a minute may pass very quickly for an extremely excited person or very slowly for a bored one.

Phenomenology had reasonable impacts on the Russian formalists in the area of literary criticism. Just as Husserl 'bracketed off' the real object for attending to the act of knowing it. Therefore in literary criticism, the formalists bracketed off the real object and focused instead on the way it was recognized. Phenomenological criticism tries to apply the phenomenological method to literary works. Just like Husserl's 'bracketing off' the real object, the authentic historical context of the literary work, its author, the socio-economic circumstances under which the text has been written and readership are ignored. Structuralism, which started in France in the 1950s and 1960s, argues that reality and human subjects are culturally constructed to a large extent. Structuralism believes in common universal structures. It believes that meaning is very universal, stable and a-historical. A linguistic sign does not link a name and a thing, but a concept (signified) and an acoustic image (signifier). Before structuralism we had 'Formalism' where linguistics was applied in the study and criticism of literature. Formalists used 'devices' like sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, meters and their 'Defamiliarising' effects.

Although they were interested in analyzing literature structurally, they were particularly not concerned with meaning as differential and analyzing text into basic deep structures, and hence 'Formalism' is not exactly modern-day 'Structuralism'. Unlike the Formalists, who were interested in finding the uniqueness of a literary text, 'Structuralist critics are primarily interested not in what makes an individual literary work unique, but in what it has common with other literary works' (Morner and Rausch, 1998 : 23). Structuralist literary critics, try to analyze texts as product of a system with a specific 'grammar' that controls its form and meaning. A reader, who has mastered the grammar that governs the production of a text and operates within it, can understand the text.

During the 1970s, structuralism drew a lot of attention from all over the world. Structuralists looked at prose narratives that linked the text to a larger containing structure, such as a network of intertextual links, a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, or the notion of narrative as a complex of repetitive patterns or motifs. Literature is interpreted by structuralists in terms of a number of underlying similarities with language systems as defined by modern linguistics. For example, Lévi-Strauss' definition of metheme, which denotes the smallest units of narrative "meaning," is based on the morpheme. The structuralists want to extend the idea of systemic patterning and structuring to the entire field of Western culture, as well as across cultures. Simply put, structuralism is a way of thinking about the world that is primarily concerned with structural perceptions and explanations. According to structuralists, the essence of each element in any given situation has no meaning in and of itself, but is decided by all other elements in that situation. The structuralists claim that every entity's complete meaning can only be realised after it has been incorporated into the framework of which it is a member. They are of the opinion that all human activity is constructed.

Although structuralist critique is traditionally a linguistic phenomenon, structuralism is not. Literary language is a type of language that is used for a particular purpose, has a distinct function, and thus possesses distinct linguistic qualities and sound-meaning relationships.

Genette is looking forward to systemic research at the text's macro level, such as narrative analysis. Rather than putting effort into the content, structuralists present a series of comparisons, echoes, reflections, patterns, and contrasts, resulting in a highly schematized narrative.

He continues,

“Structuralism, in fact, challenges the aesthetic and humanist theories of twentieth century Europe. Now it was confirmed that ‘meaning was

neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence : it was the product of certain shared systems of significance. The confident bourgeois belief that the isolated individual subject was the fount and origin of all meaning took a sharp knock: language predated the individual, and was much less or her product than he or she was product of it. Meaning was not 'natural', a question of just looking or seeing, or something eternally settled, the way you interpreted your world was a function of the languages you had at your disposal, and there was evidently nothing immutable about these. Meaning was not something which all men and women, everywhere intuitively shared, and then articulated in their various tongues and scripts; what meaning you were able to articulate depended on what script or speech you shared in the first place. There were the seeds here of a social theory of meaning, whose implications were to run deep within contemporary thought. It was impossible any longer to see reality simply as something 'out there', a fixed order of things which language merely reflected. On that assumption, there was a natural bond between word and thing, a given set of correspondences between the two realms. Our language laid bare for us how the world was, and this could not be questioned. This rationalist or empiricist view of language suffered severely at hands of structuralism: for if, as Saussure had argued, arbitrary one, how could any 'correspondence' theory of knowledge stand? Reality was not reflected by language carving up the world which was deeply dependent on the sign systems we had at our command, or more precisely which had us at theirs. The suspicion began to arise, then, that structuralism was not an empiricism because it was yet one more form of philosophical idealism that its view of reality as essentially a product of language was simply the latest version of the classical idealist doctrine that the world was constituted by human consciousness'

Narratology consists in generalising this model beyond the unwritten 'texts' of tribal mythology to other kinds of story. Vladimir Propp in his 'Morphology of the Folk Tale' (1928), reduced all folktales to seven 'spheres of action' (the hero, the helper, the villain etc.) and thirty one fixed elements or 'functions'.

Narratologists mostly direct their critical attention away from the narrative's mere 'content' instead concentrating on the narrator and narratee. Thus

analysing a discourse using narratology as a tool to structural investigation, several new avenues may open up, suggesting how meanings are constructed in narratives.

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