Structuralism and Poststructuralism

Background Summary and Analysis

The Kantian Background

1. What defines the nature and structure of human experience?

    a. **Space and Time** (the *a priori* **forms** of Intuition).
    b. **Categories** (the *a priori* **concepts** of the Understanding).

2. For Kant, these forms and concepts are fixed and universal, i.e. **ahistorical**.

3. Problems: Kant's categories seem arbitrary and their universality is merely **assumed** by Kant, not proven.

4. In a post-Darwinian world, it seems more likely that such concepts and categories of human experience are historical, i.e. subject to change—contingent.

5. In response to this shift in emphasis, philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and others suggest that we **look and see** what the status and role of such categories might be **independent of our theoretical presuppositions.**

6. Social scientists, who approach this issue empirically—through observation, the construction of models, and hypothesis testing—suggest that there may be significant variations in **conceptual frameworks** culturally and historically. But the evidence is not entirely conclusive. So, from an empirical standpoint, the issue remains open.

Summary of Saussure's Structural Linguistics

The French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure studied language from a formal and theoretical point of view, i.e. as a **system of signs** which could be described **synchronically** (as a static set of relationships independent of any changes that take place over time) rather than **diachronically** (as a dynamic system which changes over time).

According to Saussure, the basic unit of language is a **sign**. A sign is composed of **signifier** (a sound-image, or its graphic equivalent) and a **signified** (the concept or meaning). So, for example, a word composed of the letters p-e-a-r functions as a signifier by producing in the mind of English-speakers the concept (signified) of a certain kind of rosaceous fruit that grows on trees, viz., a pear.

CONCEPT

SOUND IMAGE
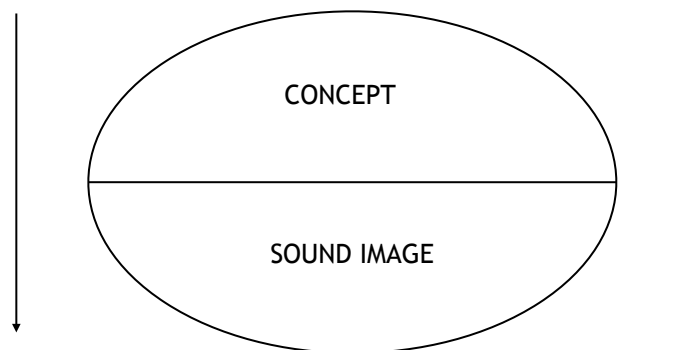
According to Saussure, the relation between a signifier and a signified is **arbitrary** in at least two ways. First, there is no absolute reason why these particular graphic marks (p-e-a-r) should signify the concept *pear*. There is no **natural** connection or **resemblance** between the signifier and the signified (as there would be in what Saussure calls a **symbol**, i.e. an **iconic** representation such as a descriptive drawing of a pear). After all, it's not as if the word "pear" looks or sounds anything like a pear! In fact, a moment's reflection makes it clear that the connection between the signifier and the signified is due to a contingent historical **convention**. It didn't have to happen the way it did. In principle, the word "pare", "wint", or even "apple" would have worked just as well in associating a word with the concept *pear*! But given that the word "pear" has come to signify the concept *pear* in English, no one has the power to simply change it at will. In other words, the relationship between a word and a concept is arbitrary in one sense (in terms of its **origin**) but not in another sense (in terms of its **use**).

Saussure makes a second point about the arbitrariness of the sign. He points out that the relation between the **sign** itself (signifier/signified pair) and what it refers to (what is called the **referent**, i.e. the actual piece of fruit—the physical object) is also arbitrary. This claim is less plausible than the former. For example, one might object that the **concept** in the mind of the speaker is formed, either directly or indirectly, by actual pears. Ideally then we would expect it to be the case that the **properties of actual pears** would be **causally related** to our **concept of a pear**—that the characteristics of pears produce in one's mind the concept of a pear either directly through experience with pears, or indirectly through pictures of pears, descriptions, or some such thing. Thus, the concept *pear* might be thought of as some basic information and set of beliefs about actual pears, e.g. what they look like, how they feel and taste, what they're good for, etc.

Saussure's way around this obvious objection is to say that his interest is in the **structure** of language, not the **use** of language. As a scientist, Saussure limited his investigation to the formal structure of language (**langue**), setting aside or bracketing the way that language is employed in actual speech (**parole**). Hence, the term **structuralism**. Saussure bracketed out of his investigation any concern with the real, material objects (**referents**) to which signs are presumably related. This bracketing of the referent is a move that enabled him to study the way a thing (language and meaning) is experienced in the mind. In this sense, his motivation was similar to Husserl's. And in the end, Saussure never offered a method for investigating how language as a system hooks up to the world of objects that lie outside language. As we shall see, this was to have far-reaching effects.

Thus, according to Saussure's structural linguistics, each sign in the system of signs which makes up a language gets its **meaning** only because of its **difference** from every other sign. The word "pear" has no meaning in itself or in the **intention** of the speaker, but only due to the fact that it differs from other possible graphic images such as p-e-e-r, p-e-a-k, f-e-a-r, b-e-a-r, etc. In other words, it doesn't matter how the **form** of the signifier varies, as long as it is different from all the other signifiers in the system (langue). To the structuralist, meaning arises from **the functional differences between the elements (signs) within the system (langue).**

An economic analogy helps to illustrate Saussure's theory of meaning. The signs of a linguistic system are like the coins of a monetary system or currency. Thus, a **system of signs** (words of a language) is analogous to a **system of values**.

A quarter has a certain monetary value determined by its exchange value. Quarters can be exchanged for other things because they have a designated (but flexible) value. Quarters can be used to buy goods or commodities. But they also have a fixed value in relation to *other coins*. So, for example, a quarter is *equal* to two dimes and a nickel; it is *more* than a penny; it is *less* than a dollar, etc., etc.

Linguistic signs also have values in relation to other signs. For example, the word "bachelor" can be "exchanged" for the term "unmarried man". This is, in many ways, an *equal* exchange. That's what it means for words to be **synonymous** - they have the **same meaning** or **linguistic value**.

They can be substituted or exchanged for one another just as the quarter can be exchanged for two dimes and a nickel.

The Significance of Structuralist Theory

The first thing to notice is that, according to structuralist theory, meaning is not a private experience, but the product of **a shared system of signification**. Furthermore, texts are to be understood as **constructs** to be analyzed and explained scientifically in terms of the **deep-structure** of the system itself. For many structuralists, this "deep-structure" is understood to be universal and innate.

If we consider the application of structuralism to art and extend the monetary analogy, we can think of paintings as comprised of many languages or sets of conventions that play a role in the exchange of signs. For example, the language of western academic painting can be contrasted with the language of African sculpture or Japanese brush painting. Just as one word in the English language is paired with a concept, so a visual image, icon, or symbol is paired with a concept or idea that it is said to "express". Such a study of signs in the most general sense, whether visual or verbal, is called **semiotics**. In the West, art schools are the institutions that have the social function of passing on these visual conventions.[1]

Second we should note that in structuralism, the individual is more a **product of the system** than a producer of it. Language **precedes** us. It is the medium of thought and human expression. Thus, it provides us with the structure that we use to conceptualize our own experience.

And third, since language is arbitrary, there is no **natural bond** between words and things, and thus no privileged connection between any particular language and reality. Some proponents of this view go so far as to claim that **reality** is **produced by language**. Thus, structuralism is often characterized as a form of **idealism**.

It should be clear from what we've just said that structuralism, at the very least, contrasts with the claims of early modern empiricism that, a) all knowledge is based on experience, and b) *what is real is what we experience directly—independent of language*.[2] Structuralism can also be seen as an affront to common sense, esp. to the notion that a text has **a meaning** that is, for all intents and purposes, self-evident. This conflict with common sense, however, can be favorably compared with other historical conflicts (e.g. Copernicus' heliocentric system). In other words, things are not always what they seem to be.[3] This view has important implications, as we shall see below.

According to structuralist theory, a text or utterance has a "meaning", but it's meaning is determined not by the psychological state or "intention" of the speaker, but by the deep-structure of the language system in which it occurs. In this way, the **subject** (individual or "author") is effectively replaced by language itself as an autonomous system of rules. Thus, structuralism has been characterized as **antihumanistic** in it's claim that meaning is not identical with the inner psychological experience of the speaker. It removes the human subject from its central position in the production of meaning much as Copernicus removed (de-centered) the Earth from its

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[1] For more on the application of structuralism to painting, see Francis Frascina, "Realism and Ideology: An Introduction to Semiotics and Cubism", in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, Harrison, Frascina and Perry, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, 87-183.

[2] Note that the contemporary debate does not so much focus on empiricism vs. idealism (or rationalism), but rather between the claims of empiricism and scientific realism.

[3] The claim that structuralism is a version of idealism can also be characterized in the following way: Reality and our conception of it are "discontinuous". Cf. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983, 108.

position at the center of the solar system. And since language pre-exists us, it is not we who speak, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger was to say, but "language speaks us".

From Pre-Structuralism to Structuralism to Post-Structuralism

The shift from a pre-structuralist to a structuralist theory of language and the implications drawn from it by **poststructuralists** is represented in the following diagrams:

A. **Pre-structuralist** theory assumes that there is an intimate connection between material objects in the world and the languages that we use to talk about those objects and their interrelations.

PRE-STRUCTURALIST LINGUISTIC MODEL

P-E-A-R   denotes →

(word)   (object)
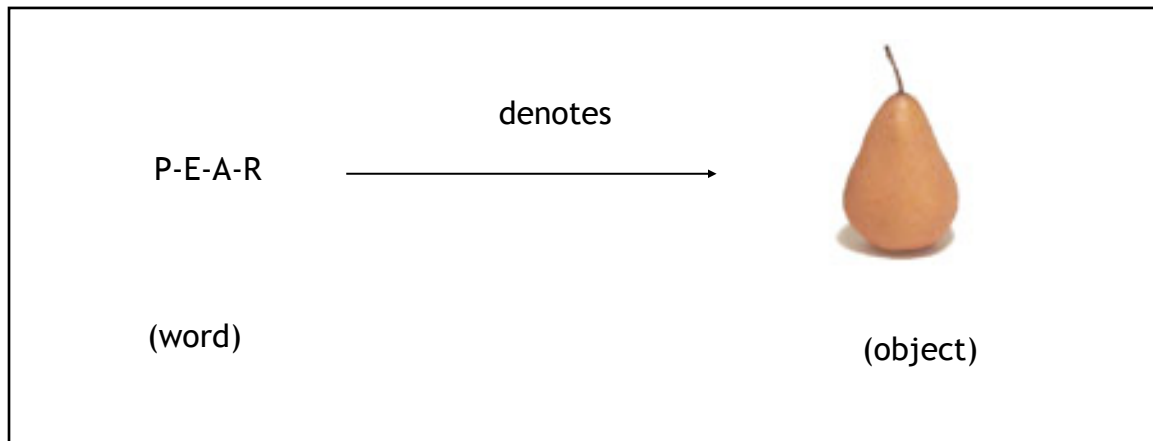
B. According to Saussure's **structuralist** theory of language (see next illustration), the meaning of a term (a word or expression) does not begin and end with the **speaker's experience** or **intention** (as it does in Husserl's theory). The act of speaking and intending presupposes a language already in place and upon which the speaker must rely in order to say anything at all. Concepts or meanings are picked out (**signified**) because of the differences in the network of words (sound- or graphic-images) that make up the language (**langue**). Thus each word—each structural element of the language—finds its own **relative position** or **node** within the **network of differences**.

In other words, the meaning of a particular term in a language is due to its relative difference from all other terms in the language. A signified, i.e. a concept or idea, is properly understood in terms of its position relative to the differences among a range of other signifiers (words with different **positions** in the network (*langue*) and, hence, different **meanings**).

STRUCTURALIST MODEL

SIGNIFIER

SIGNIFIED

signifies

P-E-A-R $\longrightarrow$
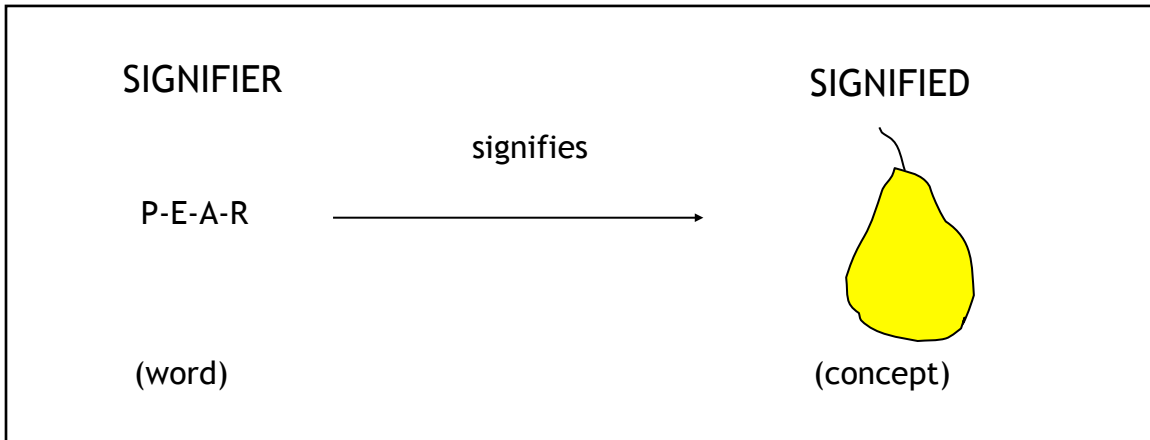
(word)

(concept)

C. **Poststructuralist** theory denies the distinction between signifier and signified. According to some versions of poststructuralism, **concepts are nothing more than words**. Thus, signifiers are words that refer to other words and never reach out to material objects and their interrelations. To indicate this shift in theory, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida introduces the word "**différance**" to indicate the relation between signifiers as one of both **difference** and **deferral**.

POST-STRUCTURALIST MODEL

SIGNIFIER

SIGNIFIER

defers to

PEAR $\longrightarrow$ ROSACEOUS FRUIT
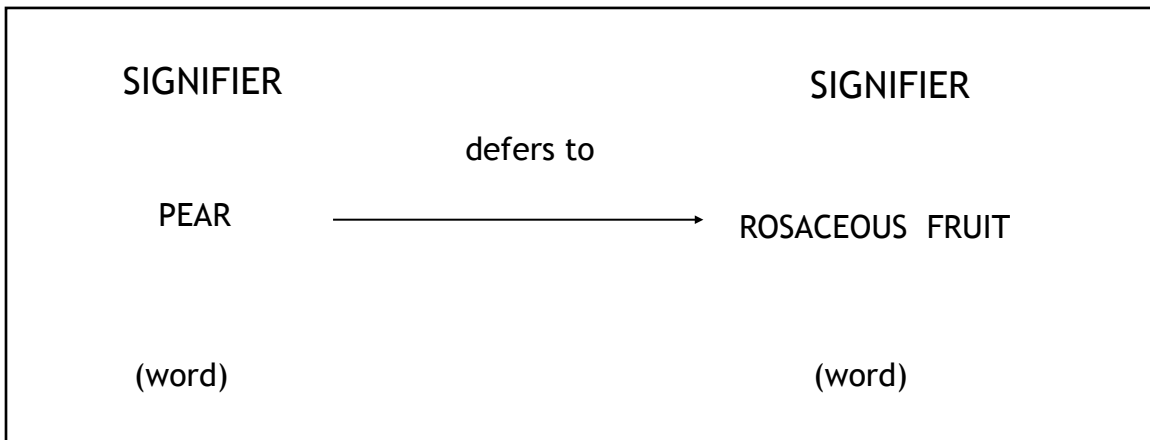
(word)

(word)

If a word's meaning is solely the result of its difference from other words, then the **meaning** (the concept or signified) is not an additional thing "present" in the sign itself. On the contrary, "meaning" (if it can be called that at all) is the ever-moving play of difference from signifier to signifier; a slipping from word to word in which each word retains relations to ("traces" of) the words that **differ** from it.

Thus, according to philosophers such as Derrida, the specification of meaning is an infinite and endless process! Meaning, to some extent, always escapes one's grasp—it is always just out of

reach, ungrounded, with no **origin** in the **intention** of the speaker, contrary to what Husserl thought. In other words, when a speaker uses certain words ("This is a pear"), then according to the theory she does not have a **nonlinguistic** object or concept in mind—there is no additional thing or "object" outside of the language (i.e. no "meaning") that could be transmitted or made "present" to her listener or reader. There is nothing there in her speech but language, i.e. a **network of signification**.

Thus, "meaning" is the result of a play of **différance**—a movement which brings about both difference and deferral. (It may help here to bring in the traditional distinction between the **denotation** and the **connotation** of a term. The connotation may be thought of as the aura of suggestion, the echo or trace of other words to which it is related by such things as association, common usage, similarity, etc. The denotation, the relation (reference) between the word and the actual thing denoted by the word, from structuralism on, is bracketed and never brought back. Its absence, however, leaves its own "traces" in the form of problems for a poststructuralist theory of language. (See below.)

So the poststructuralist draws the following consequences from the study of language:

1. Meaning is never fully present in any one signifier, but is infinitely deferred or suspended.
2. Meaning is contextual, i.e. affected by related words.
3. There is always an excess of meaning.

But there is another, more radical, consequence that can be drawn from our analysis. If the meaning associated with an expression is not present in the expression itself, and if the speaker must make his own presence felt by communication through words, then it follows that **the speaker is never fully present in the act of using language**. And if, as a human being, I can only think and experience a world through language, then "I" and "my presence" are as much deferred as the meanings I attempt to grasp when I try to understand and explain myself. In other words, I am never present **even to myself**. Rather, it is language that speaks, not a unified and autonomous ego or self. (How is this related to Kant's theory of knowledge?)

One final note. On p. 60 of *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton makes use of the following argument:

1. All experience depends on language.
2. Since, to have a language is to be part of a whole form of social life, there is no possibility of a private language.
3. Therefore, all experience is social experience, i.e. there are no private experiences.

This argument presupposes the notion in Saussure (and Hjelmslev in *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*) that **language is constitutive of experience**.[4]

Critique of Poststructuralism

Notice the central role played by the premise that experience itself "depends on" or is structured by language. Without this assumption, the slide into the "de-centered self" is not so easily motivated. (Derrida himself says that consciousness is an *effect* of language.) This poststructuralist view of language undermines the theories of Descartes, Husserl and most of western metaphysical thinking about the primacy or centrality of the subject and reinforces the notion of the "decentered self" as characteristic of the human condition.

What alternatives can we imagine as a challenge to the poststructuralist position? One strategy would be to start by agreeing with Kant that we must have categories or concepts of some kind to organize human experience. But we might also disagree with Kant over the nature and *a priori*

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[4] See Robert E. Innis, *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985, 26.

character of those concepts. In doing this, we could borrow from Heidegger the view that the fundamental structures of human experience are **historical** in nature and potentially in flux—not fixed and universal. But then we might question the emphasis on the linguistic nature of these concepts by drawing on Gestalt psychology to argue for the existence of certain "structural" and hard wired components of human perception and thought of a *prelinguistic* nature. This is just one tentative direction one might take in challenging the view presented by the extreme form of poststructuralism that we've been considering.

Other problems are raised if we consider language not simply as an object but as a **practice**. Suppose I say to you, "Open the window" in a situation where there is no window in the room. You might ask, "What do you mean?" This would be to question my "intentions"—what am I trying to accomplish by saying what I've said? Perhaps I am making a point about the fact that there is no window in the room. My paradoxical statement—inexplicable in Saussure's structuralist terms—might be meaningful to you in another **practical** sense. This is because understanding is recognizing what **effects** one might seek to bring about through the use of certain words. My obscure command might function as a request that we move to a room that has a window.

In other words, speech is not just an object, it is a **form of behavior**, and as such it can only be understood **contextually**, i.e. in a situation. This realization of the pragmatics of language signals a shift from language to **discourse**, and a concomitant change in emphasis away from a text's meaning to its **function**.

In the end, we may want to say not so much that **reality is linguistic** but that **language is real**, and not necessarily *all* there is to human reality and experience.

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