

Language: A Homogeneous Closed Structure or Heterogeneous Uses?

Millia Solaiman, M.A.

Ph.D. Scholar

Center for Linguistics

School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi, India

mgmillia20@gmail.com

Abstract

There has always been a discrepancy between those who viewed language as a mere abstract structure or closed system and those who viewed it as a practical reality of different uses. These two different visualizations of language mark the basic turning point from the structural approach to the post-structural, pragmatic and dialogical approaches to language and meaning. Thus, in order to answer the question posed in this paper, viz.: ‘Is language a homogeneous closed structure or heterogeneous reality of different uses?’, I will present and discuss how some selected leading scholars of the structural, post-structural, pragmatic and dialogical approaches viewed language in this regard.

Keywords: Language, homogeneous, heterogeneous, closed structure or system, different uses, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, pragmatic, and dialogical approaches.

1. Introduction

The structuralists assume that every human language is a part of ‘a larger system or structure’. For them, this ‘system’ or ‘structure’ is closed, lies under the surface of meaning and determines where each language element is located. This assumption is criticized by the followers of the post-structural, pragmatic and dialogical approaches, for whom language is different uses in the different situations. Moreover, by creating their own terms and theories, they tried to open up the structuralists’ closed system or structure of language. In this paper, I will present and discuss language views and theories of the most prominent scholars and philosophers of each of the previously mentioned approaches. This will help us come at a conclusion of whether language is a homogeneous closed system of meaning or a heterogeneous reality of different uses.

2. Structuralism and the Homogeneity of Language Structure

As an intellectual movement, ‘Structuralism’ is based on the assumption that the elements of human language must be understood ‘in terms of their relationship to a larger system or structure’. The term ‘structuralism’ was first used by the Russian Linguist Roman Jakobson. However, as an intellectual approach to language, Structuralism emerged in the late 1950s with the work of the Swiss linguistic theorist Ferdinand de Saussure.

For Saussure, who is considered to be as the father of Structuralism, language is just a complex ‘system of signs’ that express ideas, with rules which govern their uses. In his book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916/1959), he distinguished between the two basic components of language: ‘la langue’; the system; in other words, the underlying abstract structure of a language, and ‘la parole’; the use; in other words, the concrete ‘manifestations’ or ‘embodiments’ of that structure. As a structuralist, Saussure was more interested in ‘langue’ than in ‘parole’. He considered that it is the system - rather than the individual instances of language use - that creates the meaning in any human language. Thus he defined language as ‘a system of signs’. Based on this definition, he argued that language components get their meanings because they are elements in a system of relations. Moreover, he emphasized that understanding the shifts in language depends on understanding the system in which they are constituted. So, Saussure tried to replace the empirical prospects of language by viewing language as a system not as a speech act. That is why he defined language as ‘a system of signs’ in which the sign is a combination of the ‘concept’ and the ‘sound-image’, with ‘abstract and systematic rules and conventions’ governing that system of signification. According to him, ‘langue’ is independent and it pre-exists individual users, and thus language is a universal system which has an underlying, fundamental structure so that linguistic communication can work. He also emphasized that language must be studied not in terms of what is apparent externally; i.e. not in terms of what is available as materials physically manifested on the surface, but in terms of what is underline; i.e. the system.

Saussure (*ibid.*) also differentiated between two levels for analyzing this system: the ‘syntagmatic’ and the ‘paradigmatic’. He was primarily concerned with the three important systematic relationships, namely, ‘sign, signifier, and signified’, in language. He concluded that any individual sign is essentially arbitrary, and that there is no natural relationship between a signifier (the word) and the signified (the conceptual image). He said that meaning arises only because of the differences between the signifiers which are of two kinds; namely, syntagmatic and paradigmatic; where syntagmatic relationship refers to the possibilities of combinations, and paradigmatic is the functional contrasts which involve differentiations. He also said that languages are the ‘structural forms’ where the ‘signs’ are being organized. The most popular theory he proposed in this regard is the ‘Difference’ theory. He suggested that the difference between things is what makes people understand them, and therefore it deals with the fact of how we communicate and interact. Thus, his ‘Difference’ theory is related to something that creates meaning. In order to explain this theory in details, he aligned the ‘signifier’, i.e., the shape of a word or its phonic

components with the chosen ‘signified’ which is the ideational component or concept that appears in one’s mind after hearing or reading the signifier in order to create the sign. He proposed that languages are the systems where one thing is defined simply as being different from another, and that ‘signifiers and signified’ are always different from each other. According to him languages are the system of difference where the linguistic identities and their values are purely relational as a result of what the totality of language is involved in each single act of signification. He (1959: 88) stressed that “in language there are only differences, without positive terms [...] language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system”, by which he meant that language has a system which is composed of negative (contradictory) signifiers and when they are put together, the positive forms of language are created. Any linguistic system, according to Saussure, is “a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas”. In other words, for Saussure language keeps incorporating differences from every other ‘sign’, and thus meaning arises from the functional differences between the elements called ‘signs’ which are within the system called ‘language’.

Saussure’s way of viewing language deduces that to understand any human language, a sense of totality is required which is only possible through differences. If this feature is not there, then language will not constitute a system and hence no signification would be possible at all.

3. Post-structuralism, Pragmatism and Dialogism and the Heterogeneity of Language

Structuralism claims that the structures of languages are closed, which means no individual contribution nor historical kind of movement. This point is criticized by the post-structuralists, who tried by creating their own terms and theories, to open up these closed structures.

i. Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida attacked Structuralism in his 1966 paper ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, which marked the emergence of Post-structuralism in the seventies as a critical approach that displaced Structuralism as the prevailing approach to language and meaning. Derrida also opposed Saussure and was not fully satisfied with the relational system he proposed. Thus he elaborated a theory of ‘deconstruction’ to challenge the idea of the ‘system’ and to set forth the notion that there is nothing called ‘structure’ or ‘centre’. The majority of Derrida’s prominent and influential ideas of his ‘Deconstruction’ theory of language are introduced in his well-known work *Of Grammatology* (1976). Under this theory, he explained that the direct relationship between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ which Saussure introduced does not exist. He justified this by emphasizing that there are infinite shifts in meaning transmitted from one signified to the other. Under this theory, Derrida also claimed that because people may experience different moods, be of different backgrounds and have different ways of thinking, a

word may not conjure the same meaning to everyone. So, on the basis of this theory, he refuted the structuralist theory of constructing meaning and understanding language.

Derrida also invented a new word; ‘differance’, to convey the divided nature of the sign and to replace Saussure’s ‘difference’. The term ‘differance’ was first used by Derrida in 1963 in his paper ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’. Derrida (1972/1982) defines the term he invented in his essay ‘Difference’ as:

‘[...] the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of difference indicates this indecision as concerns activity and passivity, that which cannot be governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition) production of the intervals without which the "full" terms would not signify, would not function.’

If we closely examine Derrida’s ‘differance’, we may conclude that it is homogenous with Saussure’s ‘difference’, but with an additional meaning, i.e. to differ as well as to defer (to postpone). Thus, Derrida’s ‘differance’ is a notation to suggest that meaning is not only differed but also deferred; i.e. postponed.

So, language for Derrida is a system of signs that do not have inherent meaning, and meaning for him is only the result of the contrast between these signs. Consequently, meaning is never inherent, present or stable, but rather is ‘deferred’ to other signs. This means that meaning has no finality or totality, which is opposed to what Saussure proposed.

ii. Gilles Deleuze

Following Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze, tried to replace the idea of ‘signification’ with ‘sense’ and ‘sensation’ in his work *The Logic of Sense* (1969/1990). He based his steps on the notion that sense and sensations are reliant on the subjective existence and on the individual’s feelings of the object. He insisted that it is the sense and sensations that keep the paradoxicality of language use at the level of the world and reality. Thus Deleuze spoke of ‘immanence’ as things which are kept below meaning and repressed below language.

In the fourth chapter of their work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980/1987), Deleuze and Guattari intervened in a debate in linguistics in favor of pragmatics. They continued to refer to language as a ‘system’, but unlike Saussure’s scientific systems, this system is not ‘a clean, static, optimally-functioning set of machinery’. The system of language, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is characterized by ‘fits and starts, blocks and flows, heterogeneity, variables and relatively stable constants’. In other words, the synchrony of such system is determined by a diachrony. Moreover, the ‘langue’ of this system is substituted with more speech

acts rather than with parole. So, unlike Saussure's system, such system is unstable, having its own ways of changing. For these two scholars, language 'can be rationally described, but as a multiplicity of heterogeneous currents, each with its own speed or temporality, each following its own line of flight'. Actually, Deleuze and Guattari didn't deny that a langue can be separated from this heterogeneous and varying system. However, they insisted that langue, being inseparable from speech acts, is 'temporary' not 'universal'. This means that language system for Deleuze and Guattari is based on 'partial generalizations' and 'defeasible maxims'.

To crack the closed system of language that Saussure spoke of, Deleuze and Guattari introduced the concepts of 'deterritorialization' and 'reterritorialization'. This allows some of the units of any language system to escape, so that one language system can form a multifaceted relationship with other systems. Thus for these two thinkers, language is not homogeneous, its stability is artificial and it is not limited to a frozen system. That is why they suggested that literature rather than linguistics is the best favorable adequate tool to study the continuously varying system of language.

iii. Ludwig Wittgenstein

The idea of language as 'use', based on differences and variations, rather than a closed system or frozen structure was even known more after the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein insisted that language consists not of a system but of use. He said that there are different kinds of language uses. To explain his view of language, he introduced the term 'language games', in his work *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1958), as a philosophical concept to refer to the various language uses and to the idea that language has meaning only in its specific context. Wittgenstein used this term to draw more attention to the different forms of language use rather than its system. This concept of 'language-games' is based on the following analogy; the rules of language are analogous to the rules of games. Thus, saying something in a language is analogous to making a move in a game. There are different kinds of games like football, basketball, tennis, chess, etc., which have nothing in common. Using language is similar to the games which are different and have very little in common. No general logic or rule for games; i.e. each game has its own logic and system of rules which is something fundamental. The aim of these games is pleasure and entertainment but not opposition. This analogy between language and games demonstrates that words have meaning depending on the uses made of them in the various human activities. Wittgenstein believed that every word we speak is part of a language game. What he meant is that language only has meaning in its specific context, and when it is taken out of that context and put into a different one, it may not mean the same thing. Wittgenstein explained that 'language-games' are not the same, e.g. the language of prayers is quite different from the language of psycho-analysis, each of them is a different language game of different language uses. Each game has different rules, locations, times, etc. Moreover, each game is different which means that language use does not have the same paradigm; in each situation language use is different.

Wittgenstein said that what matters is not the language system or statements of language as such; what really matters are the diverse types of language uses. He added that in relation to the world what really exists is not the statements but their uses in the different contexts. Thus, language is used in so many different ways. These different uses of language are referred to by Wittgenstein as ‘language-games’. So, Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘language-games’ can be taken as a metaphorical term to prove that language is not a closed, static, homogeneous system or structure. On the contrary, language keeps changing with time. Furthermore, language has variant uses which resemble the ‘forms of life’:

‘There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols”, “words”, “sentences”. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. [...] Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.’ (Wittgenstein, ibid.: 11)

iv. **Mikhail Bakhtin**

Even before Wittgenstein, Mikhail Bakhtin was the first person to focus on language use in modern context. Being a Marxist, Bakhtin viewed meaning as a product of language use. He also criticized the splitting of ‘langue’; ‘the mere passive structure’ and ‘parole’; ‘the individual and concrete use of language’. He said that language use is an ‘intersubjective’, ‘interlocutive’ and ‘interactive’ phenomenon. In other words, language for Bakhtin is essentially ‘dialogical’. He developed a ‘dialogical’ theory of utterances. According to this theory, language is understood in terms of how it orients the speaker to the listener. ‘Dialogic’ and ‘dialogism’ are the key terms used by Bakhtin in his work, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), where he tried to show that language is strongly affected by the social context. The basic distinction that Bakhtin tried to convey is that language is seen either as something inside the mind of individuals or as something that appears in society. For him, language is not a system or structure but ‘a tool’. To illustrate this view, he presented two ideas about language: ‘abstractive objectivism’; the idea that language is out there, and ‘individualistic subjectivism’; the idea that language is in the minds of the individuals. The position that he favored is that of ‘dialogism’; i.e. language exists basically in society. However, Bakhtin considered that language does not exist the same way for every individual in society. For example, a statement like ‘The weather is good today’, is not socially equal to every individual in society; people will have different responses to it. Thus, the language used in different social situations has different statements and responses. The idea of having language as a ‘uniform entity’ was never the case for Bakhtin because he viewed language as always being open-ended; everyone is making new statements and responses in language. This is the idea of dialogism; language exists in the social and linguistic contexts.

“There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into boundless past and boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue.”

(Bakhtin 1986: 170)

Bakhtin actually stressed that language is always evaluated. It is the evaluative character where dialogism lies. Thus, language is not a matter of something being said or understood. He said that meaning of language is in the individual acts. There is always an evaluating dimension for language and not only understanding its meaning. Language does not only exist in society per say. According to Bakhtin, it also exists in the inter individual entity (territory). In other words, it is not only a structure; it is also an evaluation. Therefore, when someone says something, it is interpreted in many different ways depending on the participants, the context, the discourse, and even the tone of voice. For example, the same statement, ‘The weather is good today’ can be taken sarcastically, ironically, literally, as a question, etc. So, it is all about the individual’s evaluation. Therefore, language is not ideal; it does not always constitute a uniform structure.

4. Conclusion

All poststructuralist authors present different critiques of Structuralism, but their common themes include the rejection of the structuralists’ notion of ‘system’ and the idea of the ‘structural centre’, especially in the writings of Derrida and Deleuze. Wittgenstein, with his use-base questioning of the system, and Bakhtin, with his dialogical questioning of the system, also denied the idea that language consists only of a system or structure. These thinkers made a clear distinction between language on the level of structure (totalized and finalized system) and on the level of use (differences and variations).

Is language a homogenous structure or heterogeneous uses? Well, it cannot be denied that each language is structured in a unique way. However, to assume that language belongs to a larger closed system or structure means that it has totality and finality; i.e. homogeneous, which cannot be the case of any human language. No human language can be an ideal uniform entity. We cannot reduce our understanding of language to a system or structure. Therefore, language is not homogeneous; it is always open-ended. The proof of this is that everyone makes new and different statements and responses in language in the different contexts and situations. In fact, there are variations of the language system itself. Therefore, language is full of complexities and differences; i.e. heterogeneous.

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