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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Foundations of Literary Theory

Course Code: ENG5CJ302 • Module 1 Notes

Module I: Structuralism and Formalism

1. The Linguistic Turn & Ferdinand de Saussure

The twentieth century witnessed a profound revolution in literary studies and human sciences known as the "Linguistic Turn." Prior to this paradigm shift, language was viewed naively as a transparent, instrumental nomenclature—a neutral window through which an autonomous writer directly observed and described an objective external reality. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure shattered this classical mimetic assumption in his foundational lectures posthumously published as *Course in General Linguistics* (1916).

Saussure established that language is not a collection of labels pinned onto pre-existing objects; rather, language is an autonomous, self-contained **relational system of signs** (a semiotic structure). Saussure's structural linguistics rests on three revolutionary insights:

- **The Anatomy of the Sign: Signifier and Signified:** Saussure conceptualizes the linguistic sign not as a link between a word and a physical object, but as a two-sided psychological entity uniting a *Signifier* (the sound-image or visual graphic pattern, e.g., the letters c-a-t) and a *Signified* (the mental concept or psychological abstraction of "cat-ness").
- **The Arbitrariness of the Sign:** The relationship uniting signifier and signified is entirely arbitrary, conventional, and unmotivated. There is no natural, inherent, or metaphysical connection between the sound-sequence /d-o-g/ and the four-legged barking canine; the association exists purely by social convention within a specific linguistic community.
- **Relational and Differential Value:** In language, there are only differences without positive terms. A sign does not mean anything in isolation; its value derives exclusively from its network of relations and oppositions within the system. The letter or sound /b/ means what it does only because it is distinct from /p/, /t/, or /d/. Language is a system of reciprocal differences.
- **Langue versus Parole:** Saussure strictly differentiates between *Langue* (the underlying abstract grammatical system, rules, and codes shared by a speech community) and *Parole* (the individual, concrete utterances produced by a speaker in daily life). Structuralism prioritizes the study of the invariant structural system (*Langue*) over subjective manifestations (*Parole*).
- **Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Axes:** Language operates across two intersecting axes: the *Syntagmatic Axis* (the horizontal axis of combination, where words are chained together in linear grammatical sequences) and the *Paradigmatic Axis* (the vertical axis of selection or substitution, where words of the same category can replace one another in a given slot).

2. Language: Representation of Reality vs. Constitutive of Reality

The philosophical consequences of Saussurean structuralism transformed literary epistemology. If language is an arbitrary system of differential signs, language does not reflect an independently pre-existing reality; rather, **language constitutes reality**. We perceive, categorize, and experience the world through the linguistic categories and cultural sign-systems available to us. Human beings do not speak language; language speaks human beings. Literary form is not an ornamental vessel carrying pre-existing truth; the structural configuration of language actively produces textual meaning.

3. Russian Formalism: Defamiliarization and Literariness

Emerging in Russia between 1915 and 1930 through the Moscow Linguistic Circle (Roman Jakobson) and OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language in Petrograd: Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum, Yuri Tynyanov), Russian Formalism sought to establish literary scholarship as an autonomous, rigorous scientific discipline:

- **The Object of Literary Science: Literariness (Literaturnost):** As Roman Jakobson famously declared: "The object of study in literary science is not literature, but *literariness*—that which makes a given work a work of literature." Formalists rejected biographical, psychological, historical, and sociological reductions of literature. They analyzed the specific linguistic devices and formal configurations unique to literary art.
- **Defamiliarization (Ostranenie):** In his seminal essay *Art as Technique* (1917), Viktor Shklovsky introduced the concept of *defamiliarization* (making strange). Habitual, everyday perception numbs human consciousness: "Habitization devours objects, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war." The purpose of art is to disrupt habitual perception, to make the familiar unfamiliar, to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived rather than merely recognized. Art increases the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself.
- **Foregrounding:** The linguistic technique of making stylistic devices and verbal patterns stand out prominently against the background of standard, automatized communicative language (through meter, rhyme, alliteration, syntactic inversion, and unusual tropes).
- **Fabula versus Syuzhet:** Formalists rigorously distinguished between:
  - *Fabula (Story):* The raw, chronological sequence of events occurring in real or fictional time.
  - *Syuzhet (Plot):* The artistic arrangement, temporal disruption, and narrative structuring of those events within the actual literary text (involving flashbacks, flash-forwards, ellipses, and deliberate delays).

4. Roman Jakobson: The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles

In his landmark 1956 study *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances*, Roman Jakobson correlated the two axes of language with two fundamental rhetorical tropes and literary modes:

- **The Metaphoric Pole (Similarity & Selection):** Based on equivalence, similarity, and substitution. One signifier replaces another based on perceived analogy (e.g., "life is a dream"). Jakobson links the metaphoric pole to Romantic poetry, Symbolism, and Surrealism, where associative vertical leaps dominate discourse.
- **The Metonymic Pole (Contiguity & Combination):** Based on physical proximity, spatial association, cause-and-effect, and linear sequence (e.g., "the White House issued a statement"). Jakobson links the metonymic pole to the Realist novel and narrative prose, where plot progresses through chronological and spatial contiguity.

Advanced Critical Theory, Epistemological Debates & Hermeneutics (Extension Phase 1)

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- **Humanist Essentialism versus Post-Structuralist Anti-Humanism:** Classical liberal humanism viewed the author as a sovereign, intentional creative genius endowed with a stable core identity. Post-structuralism (Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author", Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?") dismantled this romantic myth, demonstrating that the "author" is a discursive construct and that language speaks through the subject rather than vice versa.
- **Universalism versus Postcolonial & Intersectional Particularity:** Eurocentric critical traditions long posited Western aesthetic values as universal human truths. Postcolonial theorists (Said, Spivak, Bhabha) and Black feminist scholars (bell hooks, Crenshaw) deconstructed this epistemic violence, revealing that universalist claims erase the historical specificities of colonial conquest, racial violence, caste oppression, and patriarchal hegemony.

2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Major Theoretical Schools & Key Concepts

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Psychoanalysis	The unconscious; desire, repression, and psychic formation of subjectivity.	Id/Ego/Superego; Mirror Stage; Imaginary/Symbolic/Real; Lack and the Gaze.	Sigmund Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), Jacques Lacan (*Écrits*).
Marxism & Ideology	Materialist base-superstructure relations; class conflict and power hegemony.	Commodity Fetishism; Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA); Cultural Hegemony; Interpellation.	Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci (*Prison Notebooks*), Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton.
Post-Structuralism	Instability of meaning; critique of logocentrism; deconstruction of binaries.	Différance (differ/defer); Discourse/Power/Knowledge; Rhizome; Incredulity toward metanarratives.	Jacques Derrida (*Of Grammatology*), Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze.

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3. Glossary of Theoretical Terms & Critical Frameworks

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Écriture Féminine	French Feminist Theory	"Women's writing" formulated by Hélène Cixous, asserting that women must write through their bodies to disrupt patriarchal phallogocentrism.

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