STRUCTURALISM AND THE QUEST FOR A SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM

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Article:

The term "structuralism" can be broadly construed. It can include the thought of critics as widely diverse as Frye, Jameson, and Barthes. In one sense, to be classified as a structuralist all one has to believe is that a text should be considered as a whole, or as a part of a whole, and that the meaning of a text is determined by the relation of part to part and part to whole. If we accept this definition, then most of what we now call criticism can be labeled as kinds of structuralism. From this point of view, Jacques Derrida's claim that all of Western thought is structural makes some sense.

For my purposes, however, I will use the term "intrinsic theory" to refer to this rather broad concept, even though that term once referred to a rather specific version of this school of thought.

Intrinsic theory has always wanted to be a science. It has quite openly proclaimed its intent, and it has consciously held up scientific empiricism for its model. Sigurd Burckhardt was probably the most direct about it when he said that "the interpretation of nature, scientific method and intrinsic method belong inseparably together."[1] Every time the work is considered to be essentially a structure, the motive to become scientific is at play.

However, of all the "intrinsic theorists," those who most nearly achieved the scientific ideal were the French structuralists, who appropriated the science of structural linguistics for their immediate model. According to Roland Barthes, structuralism *per se* is best defined by its dependence on the linguistic model: he reserved the term "structuralism" to the "methodological movement which specifically avows its direct link with linguistics."[2] If we accept Barthes' definition, we can say that not all intrinsic criticism is structuralism. Nevertheless, it is fair to characterize intrinsic criticism as being structural. For example, Donald R. Riccomini has recently exposed a "deep affinity" between the work of Northrop Frye and that of the French structuralists.[3] It is certainly true that Frye intends his work to approach science and, moreover, he says that

> It seems absurd to say that there *may* be a scientific element in criticism when there are dozens of learned journals based on the assumption that there is, and hundreds of scholars engaged in a scientific procedure related to literary criticism.[4]

I take the point of view here that, because it not only acknowledges its intention to become scientific but also explicitly models itself on linguistics, which by common consent is the closest we have to a scientific approach to language, if any criticism deserves to be called scientific, it is French structuralism. If structural criticism is not science, no intrinsic criticism is.

When in his *Structuralist Poetics* Jonathan Culler sought to expand Barthes' definition, he identified "three distinct ways in which linguistics has affected French criticism."[5] Linguistics served as "the example of a 'scientific' discipline," provided "a number of concepts which could be used eclectically or metaphorically in discussing literary works," and when "these concepts [were] not used eclectically but taken as constituents of a

linguistic model," they supplied "a set of general instructions for semiotic investigation" (*SP* 255-56). The last way represents the essential connection between linguistics and structuralism: "Linguistics is not simply a stimulus and source of inspiration, but a methodological model which unifies the otherwise diverse projects of structuralists" (*SP* 4).

Structuralist criticism therefore can be defined as the application of the methodology of structural linguistics to units of discourse larger than the sentence. Even those who have questioned the appropriateness of such a move have not challenged its scientificness. Paul Ricoeur has said,

> The triumph of the structural point of view is at the same time a triumph of the scientific enterprise. By constituting the linguistic object as an autonomous object, linguistics constitutes itself as science. But at what cost?[6]

To discover that cost, Ricoeur returns to re-think the presuppositions of linguistics—presuppositions shared by structuralism. He finds the loss in a fundamental notion: "That language is composed of a hierarchy of levels" *(CI* 80). Ricoeur finds "that the passage to the new unit of discourse constituted by the sentence or utterance constitutes a break, a mutation, in the hierarchy of levels" (CI 80). For Ricoeur, this "mutation" means that a structuralist approach to a text cannot deliver an explication from the ground up, so to speak. Structuralist explication is appropriately one moment in a dialectical process, of which interpretation is the other moment.

Ricoeur's conclusions apply to those elements of linguistic theory that will become heuristic models for structuralist criticism. Now I am concerned with the initial constitution of the linguistic/structuralist object, and I ask whether it is indeed an act founding a science, as Ricoeur and others think, and if so, whether it is at all applicable to texts.

To be historically correct, we should center our investigation on the founding work of linguistic science, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics.*[7] But because Saussure was more concerned with giving the outlines of his new science than with examining its presuppositions, because his language is encumbered somewhat by an outmoded terminology not fully suited to his ideas, and because the text we have is not from Saussure's own hand but from his students' lecture notes, Louis Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena to* a *Theory of Language* will provide a more consistent, easily understandable discussion with which to begin.[8]

According to Hjelmslev,' structural linguistics is based upon what he calls the *empirical principle,* which states that "the description shall be free of contradiction (self-consistent), exhaustive, and as simple as possible" (*PTL* 11). By virtue of the empirical principle, the linguist ceases to regard the transcendent abilities of language and focuses upon it as an object for empirical science. The objectifying reduction was first performed by Saussure; it is implicit in his distinction between language *(la langue)* and speech *(la parole)—a* distinction between "a product that is passively assimilated by the individual" and a willful "individual act" (CGL 14). *Langue* becomes by this distinction an isolated, homogeneous object, so that everything within *longue* becomes an object for the same science, linguistics; whereas, things concerning individual speech acts fall variously into the domains of psychology, sociology, etc. (*CGL* 15).

Saussure also distinguishes two different types of linguistics according to the observer's point of view. Diachronic linguistics deals with the evolution of a language; *synchr*onic linguistics is concerned with the state of a language at any one time *(CGL* 81). Saussure declared that language as diachronic "does not exist insofar as the speaker is concerned," and thus synchronic linguistics takes precedence over diachronic *(CGL* 81). Obviously, Hjelmslev's requirement of exhaustive description rules out any deductive consideration of the dynamics of language. Not surprisingly, then, Hjelmslev extended Saussure's preference for synchrony to say *a priori* that "for every process there is a corresponding system, by which the process can be analyzed and described by means of a limited number of premises" *(PTL* 9). This presupposition means, in essence, that change in a language can be considered only as change from one state in a system to another; synchronic linguistics is logically prior to the diachronic.

If it is to accommodate what Hjelmslev called the *simplicity principle* as well as the empirical principle, synchronic linguistics must deal with abstraction. As Saussure put it, *"language is a form and not a substance"* (CGL 122). Evidently following the geometric model, Saussure asserted that "in language there are only differences"; in other words, in linguistics, terms are to be considered in their opposition to one another *(CGL* 120). Or, as Hjelmslev said, the parts of a language "can be defined only by the dependences joining [them] to other coordinated parts. . . ," so that "the 'objects' of naive realism are, from our point of view, nothing but intersections of bundles of such dependences" (*PTL* 23).

Of course, such an abstract simplicity can be accomplished only within a closed system; if the parts can be defined only in relation to the other parts, it is because the whole is determined by the sum total of the parts and because the relationships of part to part are determined by the parts' relationships to the whole (PTL 23). Once again, this presupposition depends upon the empirical principle, which demands exhaustive description. By this presupposition, linguistics can establish phonetics by reducing the sound of speech to a finite number of phonemes in a language; by the same principle, linguistics can establish syntax by constituting a finite set of forms and rules. Looking ahead to a linguistically based theory of literature, we can expect to find a finite set of structural rules presupposed for the analysis of closed texts. Furthermore, it is evident that if a linguistic system is to remain closed, any texts must be analyzed in abstraction from their reference to a world. Only internal references can be included in the analysis.

These four presuppositions—(1) that language itself is an object for empirical science whereas linguistic theory is deductive, (2) that diachrony must be seen in terms of changes in synchronic states, (3) that language is formal, and (4) that systems must be closed—all originate in Hjelmslev's empirical principle. Saussure's and Hjelmslev's definition of the sign, perhaps the concept most influential to literary structuralism, conforms explicitly to these presuppositions: the concept of the sign is best understood in their terms. For once *langue* has been distinguished from *turole,* synchony from diachrony, form from substance, and the closed system from all outside references, there is no way to define a sign except by its relations of opposition to other signs and by internal differences within that sign. Thus Saussure distinguishes the signifier from the signified, the signifier being a "sound image" and the signified being a "concept" (*CGL* 67). These two together constitute a single sign. Hjelmslev gives us the same idea in the terms "expression" and "content" (PTL 47). Saussure maintains that the sign exists as a *"concrete entity"* that disappears into abstraction when only one of the dichotomy is retained (*CGL* 102). Hjelmslev abandons this terminology to describe a *"sign function"* and asserts that "there will always be a solidarity between a function [the sign] and (the class of) its functives [expression and content]" (*PTL* 48). The point here is that, for both Saussure and Hjelmslev, the sign *by definition* presupposes linguistic closure.

Linguistic closure is not, however, the simple and scientific notion that it has been taken to be, and it marks off immediately a difference between linguistics and other sciences—a distinction that Saussure apparently recognized. He says that whereas "other sciences work with objects that are given in advance," for linguistics, "far from the object preceding the point of view, it would seem it is the point of *view* which *creates* the object" *(CGL* 8; my italics). Precisely in what sense the linguistic perspective "creates" its object is the overriding question for structuralism's claim to be scientific.

Samuel Weber, in his "Saussure and the Apparition of Language: The Critical Perspective," examines this "point of view" in detail.[9] He begins by analyzing Saussure's concept of the sign, particularly that feature which is often taken to be most distinctive of linguistic thinking—the sign's arbitrariness. In fact, he says, the characteristic of arbitrariness, "inasmuch as this notion is simply held to state that the signifying material of the sign bears no intrinsic nor natural resemblance to what it signifies," has a long tradition in Western thought ("SAL" 919). It is implicit in Plato; explicit in Aristotle's "On Interpretation." He reminds us that Aristotle distinguishes "two kinds of relationships of representation or symbolization," that of *"resemblance,* obtaining between things and psychic states, which is natural and universal," and that of *"signification* or *designation,* the arbitrariness of which is demonstrated by the multiplicity and nonuniversality of the different spoken and written languages" ("SAL" 919).

Saussure seems to be attempting to undermine the traditional conception of language as nomenclature: the linguistic sign does not unite "a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image" *(CGL* 66). But as Weber rightly points out, Saussure's discussion of the "Nature of the Linguistic Sign" does *not* challenge the traditional notion:

> For if he is only concerned with replacing the extra-linguistic referent by a mental representation—the "concept" or "signified"—this would by no means radically call into question the underlying category of denomination as the basic structure of the linguistic sign. . . .
>
> ("SAL" 919)

In the traditional view, what is named is "present to itself before all representation, as self-identical and constituted anterior to and independently of its designation by signs" ("SAL" 920). In other words, it doesn't matter to representational theory whether the signifier points toward the actual object or toward a concept or image of the object. All that matters is that the final signified be "construed as being constituted and self-identical prior to its representation through the sign" ("SAL" 920).

Therefore, at this stage in the process of constituting the linguistic object, the sign cannot be considered fully arbitrary. Saussure recognizes this, saying,

> The signified . . . is fixed, not free, with respect to the community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other. . . . A particular language-state is always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable. . . .
>
> (*CGL* 77-82)

So far, then, since the sign is a unity of signifier and signified, and since the signified is determined by particular circumstances, the sign remains in the province of rhetoric, not linguistics.

Saussure cannot remain here, obviously, for that would mean that language would have no independent essence and would not be a proper object for a science. The fact remains that we know the limits of the signifier only because we know the meaning it expresses: "The signified, which is represented, enables us to delimit the signifier, which represents it—and not inversely" ("SAL" 920). The problem is one of the *material* of language. If Saussure could have gone directly to the word, the problem would have been solved, but the word itself is variable and too abstract to be the necessary identical unit. Weber rightly says that Saussure could not have solved his problem until *after* he had begun to perceive language as a system. Once considered within a system, "identity thereby appears as a function of the position of the sign with regard to other signs, and Saussure names it 'value' " ("SAL" 921). *Value* serves in place of *identity* or *entity*. Language becomes a "system of pure values, as distinct from meaning as from sound" ("SAL" 922).

How, then, did Saussure go from describing a referential language to positing a language "where elements hold each other in equilibrium in accordance with fixed rules" (*CGL* 110)?

First of all Saussure had to perform a reduction. The process achieving the movement from the word to the sign required in the first instance an explicit refusal to posit existence. The language phenomena had to be seen from a standpoint that denied all categories but that of relation. Signs do not *exist;* only words exist. In this respect the linguistic reduction resembles Husserl's phenomenological *epoche,* which "inhibits acceptance of the Objective world as existent, and thereby excludes this world completely from the field of judgment."[10] As Husserl says, during this first stage of transcendental phenomenology, he does "proceed like the natural scientist in his devotion to the evidence in which Nature is experienced. . . " *(CM* 29). At this point the founding act of phenomenology resembles the founding act of science. And as Paul Ricoeur observes, if Husserl had stopped here—if the transcendental reduction had not in fact entailed the eidetic reduction—then phenomenology would have been a transcendental empiricism.[11]

If Saussure had been able to stop with a single reduction, he would have been on his way toward a legitimate empirical science. But, at this point, he still *has no entities* with which to work. Stripped of referentiality, the word has no identity. Until language becomes regarded as a system, so that signs can become fixed with regard to other signs—until the identity of the sign is understood as a function, a *value*—linguistics has no object. The linguistic object is not constituted, therefore, by either an empirical or a phenomenological attitude, for linguistics displays an entirely different *telos* from phenomenology or empirical science. Phenomenology does not even require a system. In fact, Husserl's work has been called a "system in reverse," for it moves farther and farther away from system.[12] And empirical science certainly does not move from system to entity. But for Saussure to achieve linguistics, "on the contrary, one must begin with the whole in order to obtain, through analysis, the elements it comprises" (CGL 113).

Linguistics is therefore a "science," but not an empirical science. And the question we must ask is whether a non-empirical science of this sort can serve as a model for sciences of criticism.

The question can be answered after observing a fundamental difference between the objects of linguistics and those of what are more commonly called sciences, especially those that, like linguistics, do not deal with real objects. Husserl, in his essay "The Origin of Geometry," points out that the difference between the ideal objects of language and those of the mathematical sciences, such as geometry, lies in their respective capacities to distinguish between their assertions and what is asserted.[13] In geometry,

> Whenever something is asserted, one can distinguish what is thematic, that about which it is said (its meaning), from the assertion, which itself, during the asserting, is never and can never be thematic.
>
> (CES 357)

When a geometric object is produced—as when a circular drawing on a blackboard is idealized and considered as a circle—the circle becomes the object of assertions, but the circle itself is not assumed to assert anything that will in turn become an object of geometry. Thus there can be only one definition of the circle, for it cannot assert something even slightly different in this circumstance or that one, or mean something different in Russian, English, or French. In the production of linguistic objects, however, what is asserted by the signs—their "values"—is actually the object of the discourse.

For precisely this reason, linguistics does not seem to be an appropriate science to serve as a model for criticism. If the sign itself can be achieved only by an *epoche* which reduces from the word's reference to a reality, whether conceptual or existential, and by a second, constituting act which closes a system, quite obviously any system of relations established by this series of acts will depend entirely upon the interpretive procedures that had determined the referential significance of the words in the first place.

Referential significance is an aspect of language usage that structuralists tend simply to ignore. The history of criticism is littered with terms attempting to describe the phenomenon—tone, tenor, connotation, authoral intention, etc.—but none of these concepts has been formulated adequately enough to stand against the onslaught of structuralist thought. Yet we easily recognize it whenever we re-phrase to accommodate altered circumstances or broken expectations, such as when as teachers we define a term differently for different classes or state "the same thing" in new terms for a student who has obviously misunderstood our first attempt.

Certainly, such re-phrasing would be impossible if a lecture comprised a "closed system" of signs. More important, however, is that we recognize *what* we are re-formulating. The student has not "lost track" of the structure (such as it may be) or failed to connect a concept with an entity so much as he has failed to appreciate the significance of whatever structure he may have grasped or of whatever signification he attributed to the sign. In other words, in such cases the listener has failed to understand the motivations that prompted the speaker to structure signs in a certain way during a particular instance of discourse.

If the listener does not understand the referential significance of an utterance, it certainly cannot matter whether he has grasped the structure of signs or not; he is nevertheless lost. Critics loyal to structuralist theory will point out here that such a critique may be appropriate for speech events, but not for written documents, and especially not for written documents with fictive or non-experientially verifiable references. Yet I would argue that the force of referential significance exerts itself whether "referents" are defined as things "out there," or as concepts, or simply as "marks" in Derrida's sense. Even if the phenomena of writing forces the signs to "turn back upon themselves" to produce a "play" of signs in novel structures, the question of *why* such signs have been so playfully re-structured will take precedence, both psychologically and ontologically, over the question of *in what way* they have been structured. Accordingly, the reader's prejudices, in the sense in which Gadamer uses this term, will necessarily guide the way he sorts out the structural possibilities of the text. What he already knows or believes about the historical circumstances of the discourse, the usual use of language within those circumstances, the author's attitudes, etc., will determine what he sees as structural possibilities and what he does not.

As an elementary example, consider the modification of "servant" by the adjective "Irish," and suppose an episodic novel in which an employer time after time must extricate his Irish servant from difficulties the servant gets himself into but cannot get himself out of. Any reading of such a novel, if written by an Irish patriot, set in the late nineteenth century, and positing an aristocratic British master, would inevitably be so controlled by the reader's expectations and prejudices that an analysis of the opposition master/servant and the structural organization about it would be fairly predictable. Yet the "same" novel, *Modern Chivalry,* written by Hugh Brackenridge, an eighteenth-century American who advocated a restrained version of Jeffersonian democracy, would demand an entirely different understanding of the motivations behind the structuring of events and dialogue. Any structural analysis based on these presuppositions would naturally be of a different "text," even if the words of our two novels were exactly the same.

Elementary as this example is, it illustrates a central point: structural analysis is the analysis of a *reading,* not of a more or less adequately established text. In the sense I mean the term here, a text is not established by a definitive ordering of words or structures, for this process follows, and is dependent upon the ontologically prior process of understanding the possible motivations that may lie behind the ordering process. Interpretation precedes explication. We cannot even say, as Ricoeur does, that the reading process involves a dialectic between explication and interpretation.

A structuralist explication can be only either a systematic elaboration of a naive interpretation or an identification of a text as an exemplification of general linguistic rules. In the former case the structuralist could not claim any sort of universality about his interpretation, and in the latter case he could not legitimately say anything about this text that he could not say about any other text. Though it may be possible to establish a science or sciences of grammar, phonology, etc., there is *no route back* from system to particular utterance: the acts of consciousness establishing system simultaneously abolish the phenomena that should ground the system—the word defined in terms of its references. Linguistically based criticisms are forced to claim that literary texts are purely self-referential systems, but this claim is merely a consequence of the theory's premises, which themselves necessarily presuppose the capacity of signifiers to signify something beyond themselves. This is the contradiction at the center of the structuralist enterprise.

Structuralism places itself in the position geometry would be in if it were to make geometric statements the object of its investigations while excluding their reference to ideal objects. A thing cannot approximate a statement; geometry has practical applications precisely because things can approximate geometric objects about which geometers *can* make statements. Structuralism can have no legitimate applications because the objects of its investigations are merely linguistic statements which themselves, by definition, refer to an entirely different domain from the particular utterances of particular texts.

In effect, texts are not self-enclosed systems; structuralist theories are self-enclosed systems. Whereas it is possible for linguists, like other scientists, to agree that they disagree about something, in the case of the

structural analysis of particular texts, only those analysts who share the same theoretical presuppositions can truly disagree. For every set of structural expectations, readers produce a different "text." Instead of giving probable explanations of given phenomena, the reader imposes a possible exemplification of a given theory.

The structuralists themselves have observed their divergence from the usual aims of science, but they have tended to turn structuralism's limitation into a doctrine about literary reality itself. Michael Riffaterre, for example, in *La Production du texte,* recently translated as *Text Production,* claims that structural analysis "can clearly show (the literary] phenomenon [lies] in the relation between text and reader, and not between text and author, or text and reality."[14] Yet this move cannot escape the fact that the sign itself is a product of a two-fold reduction from the word and from the world. *Words* are spoken, written, heard, and read in the world, not signs. Until the sign can be redefined to maintain its connection with what it is meant to explain, structuralism, insofar as its theory depends upon the sign, will remain a theory only about itself.

Reference

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3 Donald R. Riccomini, "Northrop Frye and Structuralism: Identity and Difference," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 49 (1979): 33-47. See also Frederic Crews, "Anaesthetic Criticism: I," *The New York Review of Books* 26 (Feb. 1970): 33. Crews places Frye squarely in the tradition of intrinsic theory.

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