The Analysis of Literary Signs in Terms of Dualism of Roman Jacobson and Roland Barthes—The Analysis of Dyads and Triads of Semiotics

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Abstract. The object of this thesis is literary signs. With this purpose, this thesis tries to analyze the dualism of two outstanding representatives of structuralism: Roman Jacobson and Roland Barthes, including Jacobson’s alienation, zero-signified and six functions of language, and Barthes’s ERC system. Dualism provides a significant methodology for scholars to study signs of literary speech.

Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure (1887-1913), a Swiss linguist, is the founder of modern structural linguistics. In his famous book Course in General Linguistics, Saussure points out that “Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology.” [1] Saussure proposes his dualism of linguistic signs, which has deep influence in modern linguistics and semiotics.

The linguistic sign is defined as a two-sided psychological entity consisting of a concept and a sound image [2]:

![Figure 1. The Linguistic Sign of Saussure.](image)

Saussure gives other two terms “signifier” and “signified” to replace sound-image and concept. This quality is stressed to the effect that the sign has no necessary connection with its referential object, which is excluded as an extra-linguistic thing. Saussure’s dualism is the description of “pure” language.

However, in speech, especially in literary speech, the relation between the signifier and the signified becomes free, because the meaning can increase or be enlarged endlessly. For instance, “tree” is defined as “a woody perennial plant with one main stem or trunk which develops many branches, usually at some height above the ground” [3]. But in Robert Frost’s poem Birches, “birches” (a kind of tree) stands for a place that can escape from the cold world and provide mental support. The relation between “tree” and this new meaning is free, not agreed upon.

Later linguists and semioticians propose models of their own to describe the semiotic structure of the signs of literary speech. Their theories can be divided into two groups: dyads and triads. The representatives of the first group are R. Jacobson and R. Barthes, whereas those of the second group are C. S. Peirce, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards.
Backgrounds of Dyadic Theories

Saussure’s theory has great influence to modern structuralism and formalism.

In the West, the study of literary language is started with Russian formalism. Its representatives are R. Jacobson, V. Shklovsky and B. Tomosivsky. The Russian formalists’ theories form a trend of thought, which is called “formalism”. Russian formalism has three main features: literary independence, formalistic literature and linguistic literature.

In 1928, Jacobson went to Prague and set up the Prague School there. The representatives are R. Jacobson, J. Mukarovsky, V. Brondal, A. Martinet and V. Mathesis. His theory and Saussure’s structural linguistics merge into structuralism of literary language. Structuralism of literary language focuses on the study of the meaning of structure. They hold the idea that it is the structure of language that decides the meaning of language. “Literariness” of language comes from the author’s artistic organization of structure. Jacobson points out that the subject of literary study is not literature, but literariness that is the thing that makes a work to be literary work. He also insists that “literariness” originates from “alienation” which is a kind of skill and artistic creation.


At the same time, in the 1930s, British-American Formalism came on to the scene. Its focus is “how to write” in literature. This opinion stresses literary skill from another train of thought.

Jacobson’s Theory

Roman Jacobson (1896-1982) is a world-known semiotician and an outstanding critic. His theory lays the foundations for formalism and structuralism.

“Alienation”

Jacobson points out that the subject of literary study is “literariness” or “poeticity”. He gives an interesting metaphor to show the function of “literariness” [4]: “literariness” or ‘poeticity” is like “cooking oil”, which is not something attached but something that can change not only the color but also the taste of the food. In the same way, ‘literariness’ or ‘poeticity’ changes the mode of existences of signs and produces the artistic effect needed.

Poeticity, according to Jacobson, is a kind of self-expressing and self-advocating. It attracts the reader’s interest with the form or structure, such as sound, rhythm, meter and syntax. It, at the same time, strengthens the conflict between signs and their referents by destroying any normal relationship between sound-image and the concept, between signs and referents. Jacobson calls this effect “alienation”.

On that account, “poetic language has its features distinct from general language. Poetic language is the intentional deconstruction of general language” [5].

In the poetic line “fame is a bee”, new meanings of “bee” appear out of its basic the meaning of the word “bee” listed in the dictionaries. The original relation between “bee” and its concept is destroyed. New meaning appears. Artistic effect is brought about. The same effect happens to sentences in Emily Dickinson’s poems as “Oh, my love’s like a red, red rose”, “Hope is a thing with feathers”, “God is a Distant—Stately Lover” 40 “I hear America singing”, “the darkness / Falls from the wings of night”, “There are four seasons in the mind of Man”, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”, etc. “Alienation” violently destroys the natural bond between the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept) and provides the space of imagination.

“Zero-Signified”

Jacobson maintains that when the natural bond between the sound-image and the concept is destroyed by “alienation”, the theory of “zero-signified” is natural. The essence of “zero-signified” is that in poetry the word becomes a signifier with no signified, because the original concept of the sign exists no longer. In the poetic line “fame is a bee”, the signified (concept) of “bee” disappears, i.e. the
signified has no function in this line. There exists only a signifier “bee” alone. The sign “bee” thus become a poetic sign, referring back to itself. “Zero-signified” is thought to be “a typical poetic feature” [6].

The cause of “zero-signified” is the result of “alienation”.

**Six Functions of Language**

In his thesis Closing Statement: *Linguistics and Poetics* (1960), Jacobson maintains that language used in communication must be investigated with six factors [7]:

- CONTEXT
- MESSAGE
- ADDRESSEER ------------------- ADDRESSEE
- CONTACT
- CODE

Figure 2. Six Factors of Language.

The stress of each of these six factors brings about a different function of language. As a consequence, language has six basic functions [8]:

- REFERENTIAL
- POETIC
- EMOTIVE------------------- CONATIVE
- PHATIC
- METALINGUAL

Figure 3. Six Basic Functions of Language.

It is asserted that when the focus is on the Message, there is the poetic function of language. “This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects.” [9]

The theory of ‘six functions of language” is the theoretical support of “zero-signified” and “alienation”.

**Understanding of Jacobson’s Theory**

The focus of Jacobson’s study is on literary language, i.e., the study of the signs used in literary works. On that account, his theory is different with Saussure’s dualism, for the former is the study of signs of literary speech while the latter, signs of language. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is destroyed by “alienation” in poetry signs. Self-referential signifier appears while the signified (concept) disappears.

It deserves our attention that there are some poems, which have no “alienation” or “zero-signified” happening.

In W. C. Williams’ poem “The Red Wheelbarrow”, we can hardly find “alienation” or “zero-signified”. The whole poem, without any figurative speech, such as metaphor or symbol, is as common as daily speech, but we cannot deny the “poetry” existing in the poem and the glamour and excellence of the poem, too. So do *This is Just to Say, Classic Science, Between Walls*, and so on by the same author. How can “alienation” or “zero-signified” explain this kind of phenomena?

Jacobson’s theory is based on the relationship between the signifier and the signified. What is different of him is the belief in the loss of the original signified and the substitution by a new signified, or what the self-referential signifier signifies beyond or about itself. He is, by nature, dyadic.

Jacobson’s “alienation” can explain some phenomenon of literature, but not all.
Barthes’ Theory

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) is an outstanding semiotician of French structuralism. His book *Elements of Semiology* (1964) makes a succinct, strict and systematical exposition and is the necessary and elementary book of modern Western literary semiotics.

ERC

Barthes sets up a system of “ERC” that describes the semiotic structure of linguistic signs in another way.

Barthes points out there are three basic correlates in a linguistic sign: ERC. E stands for the plane of Expression; C, the plane of Content; and R, the relation of the two planes [10].

Barthes points out “the signification coincides with the relation (R) of the two planes.” In other words, “R” stands for signification. According to Barthes, the signification “can be conceived as a process; it is the act which binds the signifier and the signified, an act whose product is the sign.” After that Barthes defines the signification as “semiosis”. In short, “R” refers to the signification or semiosis which is a process or an act that binds the signifier and the signified.

Two Systems of Signs

In Barthes' another book *Mythologies*, he talks about his basic idea about artistic and literary signs from the angle of myth. Saussure maintains a linguistic sign is a union of the signifier and the signified. Barthes calls this linguistic system of signs “the first system of signs”. He points out myth is “a kind of speech” and “a kind of specific sign”. Myth is named by Barthes as the second system of signs. The first system becomes the signifier of the second system, so myth consists of two systems of signs. One is linguistic system, the other is myth itself. He points out linguistic sign, which belongs to the first system, is the most basic system of the whole semiotic system. Moreover, myth and literature belong to the second system based upon the first system—linguistic system of signs [11].

Therefore a system “ERC” becomes in its turn the signifier of a second system, which is more extensive than the first. It can be shown as following [12]:

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  2 E R C
 /   \
1    
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Figure 4. (ERC)RC

It is also called (ERC) RC. This is what Hjemslev calls connotative semiotics. “The first system (ERC) becomes the plane of expression, or the signer, of the second system. The first system is then the plane of denotation and the second system (wider than the first) is the plane of connotation.” The “common cases of connotation will of course consist of complex systems of which language forms the first systems (that is, for instance: the case with literature.),” [13]. Here Barthes emphasizes the literary system of signs is based upon the linguistic system of signs.

Understanding of Barthes’ Theory

Barthes proposes a system of “ERC”, which in fact, is equal to a sign. He points out between “E” and “C” there must exist a certain relation “R” which unites the two elements. Without “R”, “E” and “C” will have no connection. However, he has not explained what kind of relation “R” is on earth. “R” is taken as the signification or semiosis. It is not the third element of literary linguistic signs. On that account, Barthes’ “ERC” is still a dyadic theory. He studies the signer (E) and the signified (C) and their relation (R), excluding the referential object.

Barthes’ theory is the improvement of Saussure’s dualism, but he is confused with Saussure’s “concept”. He writes, “Saussure himself has clearly marked the mental nature of the signified by
calling it a concept: the signified of the word ox is not the animal ox, but its mental image.” [14] Here Barthes looks “concept” as “mental image”. However, in the same book on page 50, he points out “even for Saussure, the sign is not the ‘thing’, but the mental representation of the thing (concept).” Is “concept” “mental image” or “mental representation”? Barthes has not clearly explained.

Barthes takes literary signs as a second system, which is based upon the first system, linguistic signs. He finds the meaning of literary signs is various and developing and pays attention to the generation of meaning of literary speech. He points out, “the union of signifier and signified, as we shall see, does not exhaust the semantic act.” [15] Barthes realizes the meaning in use is endless. However, his system “ERC” cannot perfectly explain this problem, for in the second system of signs (literary system of signs), “E” is still the original sign itself, “R” is the abstract connection of “E” and “C”, and “C” is the only factor that does operate in the process. In this case, C1 produces C2.

But S. C. Levinson maintains “the feature-mapping process is both too limited and too determinate to capture the metaphorical force of the expression.” [16] According to Levinson’s opinion, there is the possibility of C1 generating C2, but the space is too limited. On that account, the generation of the endless meanings of literary signs cannot be explained by Barthes’ ERC.

Summary

The literary criticism theory of structuralism occupies an important position in literary theories emerged in the 20th century. Dualism, as the most important and most fundamental theory and principle in structuralism, provides a significant methodology for scholars to study signs of literary speech, and thus to interpret and evaluate literary works from a brand-new perspective.

References