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Research Article




Reassessing Saussure and Jakobson in the Area of Applied Stylistics

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Abstract

There are various branches of literary analysis like hermeneutics, known as the theory of interpretation, concerned with problems of understanding the meaning of the text, or stylistics which helps the reader reveal all the expressive aspects of language like phonology and prosody, morphology, syntax and lexicology. Moreover, some genres of English literature hide meaning in themselves and make it indispensable to have some expert opinion to explain it further. Applying the stylistics approach to literary text teaches the students that the language

of literature is an independent kind of discourse, and the writers can use language differently. So when we analyze the literary text based on its language, we also train our students to build their knowledge of different registers- the various ways language is used, the patterns in which particular diction is used etc. Students can also clearly see the registers used in a literary text and easily compare them with the registers of a non-literary text. Keeping in mind the importance of applied stylistics, the present paper explores the pedagogical significance of using stylistics in Indian classrooms. The second part of the paper reassesses the valuable contribution of two great giants of the tradition – Saussure and Jakobson.

Keywords: Literariness, Stylistics, Semiotics, Pedagogy, Prosody

A literary text uses various tools like diction, figurative language, tone, themes, syntax, allusions etc. The literary text also possesses aesthetic and political dimensions. Sometimes the meaning is intentionally hidden deep in a literary text using allegory, symbols or irony. Hence, until one analyses the language used in a literary artefact, the work of literature does not release its full potential and sometimes even fails to reveal its aesthetic aspect. In the words of the great deconstructive literary critic Harold Bloom, you have to break the formⁱ and the meaning emerges.

There are various branches of literary analysis like hermeneutics, known as the theory of interpretation, concerned with problems of understanding the meaning of the text, or stylistics which helps the reader reveal all the expressive aspects of language like phonology, prosody, morphology, syntax and lexicology. Moreover, some genres of English literature hide meaning in themselves and make it indispensable to have some expert opinion to explain it further. For example, poetry is often considered more abstract and imaginative, while dialogues in dramas are often very realistic.ⁱⁱ So when we analyze the language of literature, we interrogate the relationship between form and content, assess the multiple interpretations of a text, and dissect the text to provide convincing evidence for some specific interpretations which are guided by different philosophical approaches to a text like feminism, postcolonialism, deconstructionism, Marxism etc.

The purpose of a literary analysis is to exhibit why the author has selected some specific ideas, structures, patterns, and word choices to convey their message. Sometimes, reading a text aloud or reading it closely can help us interpret it. In contrast, we need an intensive analytical approach like stylistics to dig deep into the literary meaning at other times (Bradford 12; Simpson 38).

Applying the stylistics approach to literary text also teaches students that the language of literature is an independent kind of discourse, and the writers can use language differently. So when we analyze the literary text based on its language, we also train our students to build their knowledge of different registers- the various ways language is used, the patterns in which particular diction is used etc. Students can also clearly see the registers used in a literary text

and easily compare them with the registers of a non-literary text. Before I further reassess the contribution of giants like Saussure and Jakobson, I must trace the different ideas of literary critics and writers on the use of language in literature.

Literariness of Literature

There is no denying that the issue of language, or rather the appropriate use of language, has been relevant to human nature since the ancient Greeks and Romans. With the rise of English identity during the Renaissance, many English poets and critics have discussed the issue of language in literature from different perspectives. All of them tried to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of language should be used in literature?
2. Can the language spoken in the street be suitable for literature?
3. Can literature be distinguished based on language as high or low literature?
4. How does the language affect the decorum of different literary genres?
5. What makes literary language unique and literary?

With the advent of the Renaissance period, various handbooks of etiquette, elegance and artistic style had emerged with the aim to train the British youthⁱⁱⁱ almost in the same frame as Greeks wanted to do using the discourse of rhetoric. During the Renaissance, much effort was made to bring glory to the poetic form. Undoubtedly, Sir Philip Sydney's "Apology of Poetry" can be seen as the best example of this. As the name suggests, it is a defence of poetry. Sydney articulated a theory of poetry primarily drawn from classical sources of ancient Greek and Rome as a tool for teaching virtue and ethics. Centuries before Jakobson's concept of metaphor and metonymy, Sydney had recognized the importance of metaphor for poetry as a linguistic device calling poetry "a speaking picture whose aim is to teach and delight" (22).

Though Dr Johnson^{iv} has criticized Shakespeare for his vulgarity, quibbles and fascination for figures of speeches, there is no denying that one of the most significant contributions of William Shakespeare is to use, empower and embellish the Elizabethan style with various registers of his era. I'm using the word register comprehensively, including vocabulary and syntax like his works' legal, religious and military registers. If in Shakespeare's era, the Bible is considered one of the most seminal texts to bring richness to the English language, the Augustus era produced the most authoritative text on the English language- *A Dictionary of the English Language*^v (1755) also known as *Johnson's Dictionary*.

During the neoclassical age, representative writers like Dryden and Pope^{vi} promoted the ancient Greek notion of 'decorum' and, with their classical translations, proved the relevance of the great classical masters. Contrary to the respect rhetoric earned during the ancient and neoclassical era, Dr Johnson devastated the earned respect of rhetoric and Shakespearean reputation by calling rhetoric a mere quibble and the extreme fascination with figures of speech.

The Romantics were heavily influenced by the railing cry of the French Revolution – equality, fraternity and freedom, which kindled a new sense of national sovereignty and pride.

Moreover, Romantic writers like Wordsworth championed the cause of the common people, peasants and their colloquialism. In the rivalry of Wordsworth and Coleridge^{vii} the issue of the proper uses of the language of literature had got a new turn. Though various critics have criticized Wordsworth for going too far in the direction of what can be called marring the sanctity of poetic language, Wordsworth's insistence on the simplicity of the English language and the use of common themes has been very important. Wordsworth did not find any essential difference between prose and poetry, whereas, for Coleridge, poetry as a very sublime form only deserves filtered and refined language. Wordsworth explains it in detail in his *Appendix to Lyrical Ballads* (1802):

It is indeed true that the language of the earliest Poets was felt to differ materially from ordinary language because it was the language of extraordinary occasions; but it was really spoken by men, language which the Poet himself had uttered when he had been affected by the events which he described, or which he had heard uttered by those around him. To this language it is probable that metre of some sort or other was early superadded. This separated the genuine language of Poetry still further from common life, so that whoever read or heard the poems of these earliest Poets felt himself moved in a way in which he had not been accustomed to be moved in real life, and by causes manifestly different from those which acted upon him in real life. This was the great temptation to all the corruptions which have followed: under the protection of this feeling succeeding Poets constructed a phraseology which had one thing, it is true, in common with the genuine language of poetry, namely, that it was not heard in ordinary conversation; that it was unusual. But the first Poets, as I have said, spoke a language which though unusual, was still the language of men. This circumstance, however, was disregarded by their successors; they found that they could please by easier means: they became proud of a language which they themselves had invented, and which was uttered only by themselves; and, with the spirit of a fraternity, they arrogated it to themselves as their own. (128)

The birth of Romantic poetry can be traced back to one of the greatest revolutions in world history, the French Revolution; the birth of modern poetry can be traced back to one of the most disastrous events of world history, the World War. Hence, the ennui, alienation, complexity, existentialist theme, etc., penetrated English poetry during the avant-garde movement. Both the world wars also influenced the language of literature in genres like War-poetry, Imagist poetry or even in the form of techniques like automatic writing or stream of consciousness etc.

Moving to the 20th century, the Modernists' perspective on language, form and content was more complex and nuanced. If T. S. Eliot infused the poetry with complicated allusions and a certain degree of detachment, his contemporary Ezra Pound adopted the Chinese and Japanese styles to achieve a certain degree of concrete imagery and symbols in the English language. As we can easily observe so far, prior to the 20th century, the debate about the use

and value of languages was deeply influenced by the socio-cultural milieu of the times. With the advent of the 20th century, two writers formulated the notion of literariness in the most scientific, structuralist, and formalist way possible. These two writers, undeniably, became the game-changers not only in the field of linguistics but also in stylistics.

Ferdinand de Saussure

The contribution of Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) can never be fully justified because of his immense influence on linguistic and allied branches like Stylistics and Semiotics and the literary movements like Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Postmodernism etc. His popularity grew with his posthumous publication of the book, which was compiled from the notes of his students and undoubtedly can be classified as the most seminal text of the 20th century- *Course in General Linguistics* (1916).

Saussure's contribution is convenient and deeply concerned with language's functional aspect. How does the language have meaning? How do we speak by selecting the words and putting them instantly in a proper order helps us code and decode our meaning? Saussure's contribution towards stylistics can be seen as a seminal theorist who provided us with the basic framework of language as a vast network of structures and systems. His emphasis on syntagmatic relationships in a structure became foundational for several theories of language after that. He firmly emphasized the need to see language as a living phenomenon and presented his views against the traditional historical view of language, as opposed to the written text he highlighted to study speech, to analyze the underlying system of a language to demonstrate an integrated structure, and finally to place language firmly in its social milieu. Saussure argues:

A linguistic system is a series of phonetic differences matched with a series of conceptual differences. But this matching of a certain number of auditory signals and a similar number of items carved out from the mass of thought gives rise to a system of values. It is this system which provides the operative bond between phonic and mental elements within each sign. Although signification and signal are each, in isolation, purely differential and negative, their combination is a fact of a positive nature. It is, indeed, the only order of facts linguistic structure comprises. For the essential function of a language as an institution is precisely to maintain these series of differences in parallel. (178)

Signifier-Signified

The most cardinal and pivotal element of his theory of language is the concept of sign. According to Saussure, a linguistic sign does not relate directly to an object in the external world. First, the word takes shape in our mind, and when we utter it, it is decoded in the listener's mind in the form of an image. He named the verbal – the signifier and the visual as signified. His most famous contribution emphasized the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. (116)

To simplify this, the listener does not look for the dictionary meaning when one utters a word. Still, instead, immediately, the intricate image pops up in the listener's mind. For instance, when I say CAT, what happens in the listener's mind is that they get the picture of the CAT. So signifier and signified are interconnected, but their relationship is entirely arbitrary, as he rightly argues. In other words, no inherent or inbuilt meaning is hidden in the letters CAT. The description of the Saussurean sign system emerged called Semiotics, which plays a vital role in our understanding of human languages, their connotative and denotative interpretation, and profoundly impacts the further development in the history of literary criticism in the form of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction.

Synchronic-Diachronic

Before Saussure, linguistics was characterized by a diachronic investigation of language, but he focused more on the Synchronic approach. Unlike the diachronic studies, which traces the growth of language based on the historical method, he stressed the importance of the synchronic method to understand modern linguistics better, which emphasizes studying the language at a given point in time. He argues "everything is synchronic which relates to the static aspect of our science, and diachronic everything which concerns evolution. Likewise synchrony and diachrony will designate respectively a linguistic state and a phase of evolution." (134)

Langue and Parole

His philosophy of language is convenient because he allowed us to see behind the curtain functionality of the language. When we utter anything, even a single sound or a word, it is always guided by the invisible rules of grammar. In other words, we all perform the language based on specific standard rules. This is how our language is understood by other English-speaking communities, irrespective of their countries. He called his invisible corpus-*langue* and the speech act guided by it as *parole*.

Furthermore, he also stressed the inherent relationship between *langue* and *parole*. If *parole* is guided by *langue*, *langue* also develops its repertoire over the years, accepting and adopting the innovations in the language: modern stylistics and its method of analysis like foregrounding borrows a lot from this Saussurean concept. Moreover, Saussure was keen to explain how the signs exhibit their meanings. According to him, a word has its meaning not by itself but because it is different from other words. So the cat is a cat because it's neither rat, mat, hat, etc. In stylistics, we can see the base of indifferent deferral of signs. Later on, Derrida developed his notion of *différance*^{viii} based on the contribution of Saussure.

Syntagmatic-Paradigmatic

Saussure also showed how language works on both the horizontal and vertical axes, popularly known as the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes. When we speak a sentence, the sentences are formed almost horizontally governed by the rules of grammar. For instance, when I say, "Cat sat on the mat", following the rules of the world order, this sentence makes sense to us because it is according to grammatical rules. But we usually are not capable of

seeing the contribution of the absent paradigmatic axis where many other signs or words are also available to choose from and replace the words of the same category. In other words, the sentence 'cat sat on the mat', can be reformed as - the dog sat on the mat, the dog jumped on the mat, the cat jumped on the sofa so on and so forth. What we did in this sentence is that the noun 'cat' is replaced with other nouns like a 'dog', and the verb 'sat' is replaced with other possible verbs like 'jumped' and so and so forth. This contribution of Saussure allows us to see the immense possibilities of the construction of sentences without being tautological.

From the perspective of stylistics, it is fascinating to see that Saussure's emphasis on synchronic patterns helps to clarify the critical point that a diachronic investigation always presupposes a synchronic study. Modern linguistics and stylistics have developed the concept of dialect, which refers to the language system of a smaller community than that referred to by langue. The second important term is idiolect, which refers to the part of the langue of a community that exists within an individual at any stage of their linguistic development. After explaining the seminal contribution of Saussure, I would now like to turn to one more very influential writer of his age- Jakobson.

Roman Jakobson

Roman Jakobson, the Russian-born linguist, has produced a startling amount of corpus of interdisciplinary work which, in many ways, declares him as the pioneering voice in diverse fields like cultural anthropology, musicology, film and media studies, translation studies, comparative mythology and folklore studies, semiotics, philology and linguistics etc.

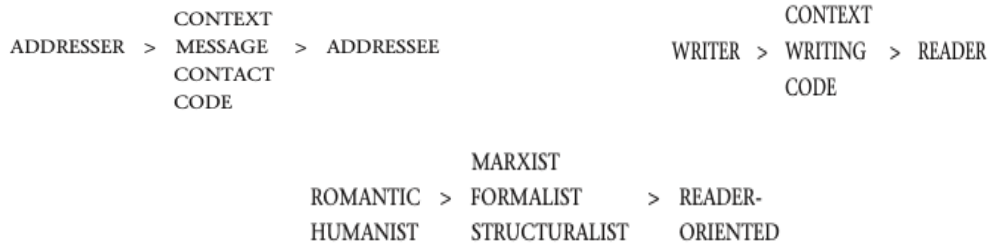
Enriching the legacy of Saussure, he anticipated various notions of structuralism as he emphasized the meaning of the text based on the linguistic difference and binary oppositions that shape a reader's approach to a text. But unlike Saussurean formalist structuralism, Jakobson developed the framework of a functionalist variety of languages. He analyzed language in the context of the contextual function of speech acts as a marker of communication.

Literariness

At the early phase of his career, Jakobson developed a very pragmatic approach to distinguish the language of literature from everyday discourse. As a true formalist and avant-garde artist, he prioritized the linguistic analysis of the text over the traditional biographical or historical analysis. Very close to the stylistic notion of 'foregrounding' and 'defamiliarization', he proposed the concept of 'literariness' of the literary writing based on a close analysis vis-à-vis semantic and metrical devices of the text. Though he strongly emphasized that the poetic function can also be dominant outside literature, just as some literary text may be characterized by functions other than the poetic.

In his seminal essay "Linguistics and Poetics",^{ix} he distinguishes his theory of linguistic communication based on six functions- Context, Addresser, Addressee, Contact, Code, and Message. The communication's meaning depends on which of these items is actually dominant. The same applies to the different theoretical schools or critical approaches to

literature as they also differ based on their point of insistence. Professor Raman Selden, Widdowson et al. in their seminal text *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (2013), have applied the model side by side to understand communication, emphasis and theoretical schools simultaneously as follows (5)-



His great contribution was to emphasize that the speech acts are in harmony with the two basic cognitive methods of selection, comparable with the Saussurean paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. It is the axis of selection that banks upon the possible alternative terms made available by the linguistic code, like a ship for car, is associated with the figure of metaphor which is a figurative term for close comparison. On the contrary, the axis of combination builds its linguistic codes on the process of contiguity which he equated with the figure of metonymy which is a figure of speech for the close association. According to Jakobson, the poetic function is the process of similarity rather than contiguity, which creates substantial meaning in the literary discourse.

Jakobson manifests various forms of inability to understand or express speech which he calls 'aphasia', and as a conclusion, he argues that all kinds of aphasia move between two important faculties of the human brain - metaphorical and metonymical. The former affects the ability to see relations of similarity. The latter affects the ability to see relationships of congruity. Connecting his contribution to Saussure's notion of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis, he argued that metaphor is related to the paradigmatic axis of language, which is the axis of selection. On the other hand, metonymy belongs to the syntagmatic axis of language, known as the axis of combination. So, choices from various paradigms are combined into syntagmatic chains producing sentences and text. Now we know that the metaphoric formation is very popular among poets as a poetic function of language, whereas metonymy points to the referential function of language.

Jakobson emphasizes the difference between poetic and non-poetic language. In other words, he uses linguistics and stylistics to validate the principle that poetry is different from ordinary language in the way that it involves certain patterns.

From my teaching experience, I have always found and realized that students appreciate literature more when they can explore the beauty of literary language. The language used in literature is unlike the common language we use in everyday communication. Hence, the aesthetic aspect of literary language must be shown analytically to the students. That is where stylistics proves to be a vital pedagogical tool in literature classes. The knowledge

of the concepts of Saussure and Jakobson can be a very important tool in the hands of teachers. The process of literary analysis is like a serious act of gold-digging, the process can be demanding, but the reward is undoubtedly gratifying.

Endnotes

- ⁱ See Bloom, Harold. "The Breaking of Form." *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 1979, 37.
- ⁱⁱ Upham, Alfred Horatio. "IX. Minor Literary Forms." *The French Influence in English Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1908. 403-447.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Lyly, John. *The Complete Works of John Lyly*. Vol. 1. Clarendon Press, 1902.
- ^{iv} Johnson, Samuel. *Preface to Shakespeare*. Good Press, 2019.
- ^v See Noyes, Gertrude E., and De Witt T. Starnes. "The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson 1604-1755." 1991, 1-433.
- ^{vi} See Amarasinghe, Upali. *Dryden and Pope in the Early 19th Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- ^{vii} Wordsworth, William. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1957.
- ^{viii} See Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- ^{ix} See Jakobson, Roman, and Thomas A. Sebeok. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology (1960)*: 147-175.

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