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Text and Meaning: A Deconstructive Overview

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ABSTRACT

Language is powerful and it creates thoughts/ideas through its meaning. Producing meaning is essential to form dialogue, discourse, and even the text. Writers write and readers generate the meaning of the text. But everything happens because of the creativity of language which is built-in. We get new words, new meanings, new phrases from texts through the passage of time. Language believes in change and this quality of language generates new meanings. Basically, language is the center of human life. Language, of course, is the most unique thing in human beings. This article highlights the relationship between text and meaning in the perspective of deconstruction.

Keywords: Text, Word, Meaning, Author, Reader, Structuralism, Deconstruction

Introduction

Language constructs discourse and new meaning through the text. To find out the overall meaning of a text and to become critical thinkers the readers follow some processes or strategies. Basically, everything is psychological in reading or in writing and it generates new ideas in the mind of the authors to create text and its meaning. Deconstruction plays dynamic role here. In 2000, Nicholas Royle proposes that one way of approaching deconstruction is to see how it treats speech acts and language. Deconstruction shows how every constative, every assertion, also includes a performative within it. Thus, there are no 'pure' constatives, each being contaminated with the other. As a result, all the time a text is plural. According to Pramod K. Nayar (2010), deconstruction's chief strategy has been this: to discover impurities, contamination, border-crossing that upset purity, structure, linearity, and origins. In every statement, deconstruction argues, one can see trace elements of other sounds, statements, truisms.

Structuralism is an intellectual movement, primarily derived from the linguistics theories of Ferdinand de Saussure that examines social structures, mythology, works of art and even human psychology, mathematics, and science, as a set of underlying relationships among their irreducible parts (Goldwag, 2007). Structuralism is interested in the relationship between the elements of a structure that results in meaning. Since it believes that meaning is the effect of the coming together of elements, it follows that if we understand the rules governing the relationship between elements, we can decipher the processes of meaning production. Structuralism is the study of structures of texts – film, novel, drama, poem, politics, sports – with specific attention to the rules, or grammar, of the elements. According to Jonathan Culler (1990):

- Structuralism is an attempt to describe the language of literature in linguistic terms so as to capture the distinctiveness of literary structures.
- It is the development of a 'narratology' that identifies the constituents of a narrative and their various combinations.
- Structuralism is an attempt to show how literary meaning depends upon the codes produced by prior discourses of a culture.
- It promotes analysis of the reader's role in producing meaning.

In 1915, Saussure was proposing a radical rethinking of the nature of language. It is not enough to see how words acquire meaning over time. We need to see how words mean within a period and as part of a general system of language. Saussure also proposes a relational theory of language:

- Words existed in relation to other words.
- The meaning of each word was dependent upon the meaning of other words.

Thus, meaning was the result of being able to recognize the difference between words – 'cat' is 'cat' because it is not 'bat' or 'hat'. It is different in terms of the sound produced and the way in which it is written. Meaning thus emerges in the difference or opposition between words. We work with binary or paired oppositions to make sense of words and sounds in speech. Cat, bat, and hat are all words in the system of language. They are related to each other because they belong to the same system, and because they make sense only in being different from each other. We should not be able to recognize 'cat' as a unique word if we did not have other words from which it is different. This principle is the structure of language itself that of difference and opposition. Language imposes its structures whatever be the individual contexts in which the sounds or words are being used. We are aware of this system that makes conversations and understanding possible. We learn to use the differences that generate meaning (Nayar, 2010).

The meaning(s) of an utterance (sentence, clause, phrase, word...) does not depend entirely on its form; it also depends on its function in a setting. The meaning of what is said depends on who says it to whom, when, where, and with what effect. In other words, the context of situation in which an utterance is said is very important in deciding its overall meaning (Verma and Krishnaswamy, 1999). According to Aristotle, speech is the representation of the experience of the mind. We know that language is an open-ended system and the authors/writers collect their ideas of writing through the speeches of the common people in the society and they make discourses and conversations. In this way, the authors make texts and meanings from the utterances of the people.

Text and Deconstruction

Deconstructionism begins with the philosophical/linguistic stance that the meanings of texts are multifarious, indeterminate, and ceaselessly shifting; written language always subverts its authors' explicit intentions. Jacques Derrida described this phenomenon as "the play of difference." He coined the word as a portmanteau of the words differ, which refers to a separation in space, and defer, which refers to a separation in time. It is in the nature of words and language to perpetually displace and defer their meanings, he declared, any text can thus be infinitely interpreted (Goldwag, 2007). According to Lois Tyson (2015), deconstruction has a good deal to offer us: it can improve our ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by ideological of which we are unaware because they are 'built into' our language. And because deconstruction offers these

advantages, it can be a very useful for Marxism, feminism, and other theories that attempt to make us aware of the oppressive role ideology can play in our lives. In order to understand how reveals the hidden work of ideology in our daily experience of ourselves and our world, we must first understand deconstruction's view of language because, according to Derrida, language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them (Tyson, 2015).

In our daily lives, most of us take language for granted, assuming that it communicates what we want it to, and if it doesn't, we assume that the fault is in ourselves, not in language. A phrase such as "Mary, please hand John the book" usually results in the desired action, and even when it doesn't, we assume that the fault lies not in language but in Mary's or John's failure to understand the request or refusal to act on it. Because we are so used to the everyday patterns and rituals in which language seems to work the way we want it to, we assume that it is by nature a stable and reliable means of communicating our thoughts, feelings, and wishes. Deconstruction's theory of language, in contrast, is based on the belief that language is much more slippery and ambiguous than we realize (Tyson, 2015).

According to Roland Barthes texts can be either 'readerly' or 'writerly'. A readerly text was one that left the reader with nothing to do - it explained, explicated, described everything. It controlled meaning and the reader was a mere passive recipient of meaning. A writerly text, on the other hand, was one where the reader had an active role to play. The text teased, hid, offered clues to the reader to decode. In other words, Barthes was proposing that meaning was not embedded within the text but within the reader who derived meaning from the textual process (Nayar, 2010).

As Roland Barthes (1968) puts it in "The Death of the Author", "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination". Barthes also suggested that a work is a physical object that occupies shelf space and is carried in the hand. A text, on the other hand is a process in language. Text here begins to:

- Mean a series of linguistic processes that are decoded by the reader.
- Assume the 'structure' of narrative negotiation between the language (of the text) and the reader.

Derrida's chief contribution has been to show how language is fundamentally slippery, based on self-contradictory, unfinalizable conditions of difference and deferral. His arguments have focused on the need to pay closer attention to the way in which meanings are produced temporarily rather than with any finality, through contradictions and ambivalence, and have consistently rebelled against any 'authoritative' or authoritarian meaning.

Deconstructive thinking in Derrida begins by worrying about the distinction posed in linguistics and culture between speech and writing. Speech is privileged because it is seen as more authentic, since it happens only with a speaking person. Writing is treated as artificial, and as suggesting death, loss and unreliability since writing can exist independent of-after the life of-the writer. Thus, speech is taken to mean presence (of the speaker) and writing to mean absence. Writing is, therefore, about absences and thus less privileged in this scheme. The repeatability of the sign, Derrida proposes, is in fact common to both speech and writing. If signs are by definition citable, repeatable, then there is no end to repetition. In other words, signs-written or spoken-can be repeated anywhere anytime. All forms of language, Derrida

shows, are based on this fact of iterability, whether in speech or in writing. Hence, the privileging of speech over writing is false. Derrida uses the term 'writing' to therefore include both spoken and written forms, in order to emphasize that 'speech is a form of writing' (Nayar, 2010).

This argument illustrates a basic feature of deconstructive 'method': to analyze a hierarchy, to reverse, it and to show how the elements of the hierarchy are constitutive of each other. Thus, speech and writing are not opposing terms or binaries but rather, each contains the other. 'Text' requires a clearer explication in Derrida:

- i. 'Text' is not restricted by a book's margins or binding.
- ii. A text overruns, spills over its borders. The end of the 'book' is not the end of 'writing'.
- iii. Every text carries 'traces' of other texts (recall here the notion of intertextuality).
- iv. Every text is, therefore, a network of other texts, from which it differs.

The world, constructed through and in language takes on a textualized form, based on difference, deference, and multiplicity. There is no reality outside the game of language, of language as difference and open (Nayar, 2010).

Since language is inherently unstable (due to its arbitrariness, traces, absences and deferment) we cannot come to a definite meaning about reality or identity. All we have as reality is a system of shifting signifiers, difference, and openness, full of ambiguity, absences, traces of other texts. This notion of reality being located within writing-or text-leads Derrida to declare: 'there is no outside text'. Derrida is proposing that everything takes on a textualized form (of difference and deference), but also that texts are politicized. Even the speech community sometimes creates its own community meaning. In 2002, Lomax and Ferguson said that the speech community is most helpfully seen as a primitive sociolinguistic category which escapes precise definition but nevertheless has a heuristic value. It is that portion of human society in which language behavior - or, better, languages behavior, because the typical speech community is multilingual - has some important shared community meaning.

Derrida proposes that history, politics, economics, reality itself is based on difference. And difference is the basis of writing. What Derrida suggests is that all these domains take the form of writing, of texts, Bennington (2001) writes: Deconstruction does not have a place for language over here, and a world over there to which it refers... there is no essential difference between language and the world, the one as subject, the other as object.

Text is undecidable. Later critics have theorized about textuality as being different from 'text'. Textuality is what constitutes the text in particular ways. This involves interpretive acts, contexts, and the knowledge produced through the text. Textuality is the process of reading the text. To put differently: a text is the object that is read, and textuality is the act of reading/interpretation. Textuality-the process of reading-is what constitutes the text. But this process of reading is undecidable, infinite and open because we always bring other textualities into our reading. And this means, because textualities are open and undecidable, texts are also rendered open and infinite. For Roland Barthes:

- The text is plural.
- The text is open to other texts in an endless series of intertextual operations.
- The author is 'dead' and is therefore no more the sole authority over a text's meaning.
- The 'pleasures' of a text lie in the process of playing the narrative (Nayar, 2010).

With these moves Barthes has put in place a different view of textuality itself arguing for an openness and endlessness of meaning-making and narrative process. Jacques Derrida. Often associated with the movement in philosophy known as deconstruction, is arguably one of the most elusive, controversial, and influential figures in Western intellectual history. His work has spanned philosophy, literature, the law, political theory, and social theory. Obsessed with the functioning of language, Derrida's mode of writing is playful, elliptical, and sometimes obscure. However, the point is that the way he makes his arguments is the argument itself, a degree of self-reflexivity that is not seen in contemporary writing.

Word and Meaning

According to Lois Tyson (2015), structuralists are not interested in individual buildings or individual literary works except in terms of what those individual items can tell us about the structures that underlie and organize all items of that kind. For structuralism sees itself as a human science whose effort is to understand, in a systematic way, the fundamental structures that underlie all human experience, therefore, all human behavior and production. For structuralism, the world as we know it consists of two fundamental levels – one visible, the other invisible. The visible world consists of what might be called surface phenomena: all the countless objects, activities, and behaviors we observe, participate in, and interact with every day. The invisible world consists of the structures that underlie and organize all of these phenomena so that we can make sense of which can be pronounced in any number of different ways by different speakers, resulting in millions of different utterances of individual words.

Saussurean notions of language and signification played vital role on the early works of Derrida. He argued that if the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary and all languages are relational then the process of 'reading' is a movement from one signifier to another. We can never come to the 'end' of signification and discover the meaning because when we get to the end, we are faced not with the signified but with yet another signifier. Every signifier refers to other words/signifiers in an endless postponement deferral of meaning. We never arrive; we only travel along the path of meaning-making. Thus, in order to explain the word 'cat' we use further terms like animal, organism, whiskers, tail – more signifiers along the chain of signification. There is no 'final' signified because even that signified will consist of more words, the signifiers (Nayar, 2010).

According to J.A. Foley (2013), language change when new words are created or when old words get new meanings. And this is an inevitable social consequence of languages being used by people. A language that never changes is really a dead language; people no longer use it. This is because when people use languages, they always need to modify and adapt their languages to suit their different purposes or to express new ideas. This is how new dialects, new registers, and new genres come about. Put simply, languages change because people and their activities change. This includes the kinds of ideas and values that people want to express, as well as the ways in which it is considered appropriate to express them.

According to Derrida, every signifier is made up of an absence. Building on Saussure's assumption that meaning is the result of difference (cat is different from bat, hat, fat...). Derrida suggests that every word carries within it the words that we are aware of as being different. Every signifier is a series of differences from other signifiers, all of those are the absences that constitute this one for us. Cat is produced because fat, hat, and bat are absent, but these absences are crucial because without them we would not know 'cat'. This means the meaning

of 'cat' is the result of absence rather than mere presence of difference. Meaning, ironically, depends as much on the absence of other words as on the presence of 'cat' (Nayar, 2010).

Conclusion

M. Maniruzzaman says, language is an inseparable part of human life and society. Human civilization has been solely through language. That is, it is through language only that humanity has come out of Stone Age and developed science, art, and technology in a substantial manner, to an astonishing extent. Language functions as a means of communication; it is arbitrary; it is a system of systems. We know that speech acquired naturally is primary, whereas writing learned formally is secondary (Maniruzzaman, 2013). According to George Yule, humans are continually creating new expressions and novel utterances by manipulating their linguistic resources to describe new objects and situations. This property is described as productivity (or "creativity" or "open-endedness") and essentially means that the potential number of utterances in any human language is infinite (Yule, 2010).

Text talks about humans, especially the different aspects of human life. People express their thoughts and ideas through the words of language or languages. This is the process of generating meaning. In other words, the sociology of language is about the 'social life of language'. It is about language as a particular window into human condition, as a perspective from which to consider social interaction (Foley, 2013). In texts, the authors use language to create new meanings through the social interactions of people. Basically, in this way, we have seen the application of deconstructive expansions.

Structuralism believes in structures. The world is full of structures and all the structures have their own meanings having the combination of all. Structures are forms made up of units that are arranged in a specific order. These units follow particular system or rules in the way they are organized or related to each other. Literary structuralism, as embodied in its purest form, has been criticized on a number of counts. Its focus on the inner workings of the text and on describing literature as an independent system can result in a lack of attention to the author and to the context in which the work is created (Goodman, 2005). Word, meaning, and texts are related to each other. The author makes his or her literature in his or her own ways. Here, the author is the ultimate authority to produce the literature. But, at the end, meaning of the text has been generated by the readers. No meaning is fixed and that's why text is always plural. Goodman (2005) rightly says that deconstruction is necessarily incomplete but it conveys some sense of the diversity of the conversations in which deconstruction takes part. While these conversations approach deconstruction differently, they are alike, but not identical, in that their readings of text do not take act of interpretation for granted. They sustain the possibility or impossibility of reading as a question central to any textual engagement.

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