

Concepts of *Difference* and *Differance* A Comparative Study of Saussure and Derrida

Neha Garg
Shivek Kumar
Vaibhav Sharma

Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of *difference* and *differance* in relation to views of de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. While emphasizing on the study of meanings in languages Saussure said that meaning arises only because of the differences between the signifiers which are of two kinds, namely, syntagmatic and paradigmatic According to Derrida, languages are made up of units that don't contain inherent meaning. Meaning in 'deconstruction' is therefore constantly deferred, which can never be in place, or in other words, be stable.

Key words: *Difference*, *Differance*, de Saussure, Derrida, deconstruction

Introduction

Difference and *differance* are the two important key terms of the post structuralism given by the two prominent philosophers, namely, Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. In order to explain these two terms in a broader way we will try to establish the relations between these two in this paper and will also try to show some differences between them.

In the very first part of this paper we will first explain the two prominent movements, namely, structuralism and post-structuralism which will shape the background of this paper and will also help all of us to understand issues on hand. These two were two different linguistic-philosophic movements started with the prime concern of understanding languages on their own accord.

Structuralism

It was a literary movement primarily concerned with the understanding of how language works as a system of meaning production. In order to answer this question, structuralism turned its attention to form. Focusing on the form or structure of literary work and the particular use of language in the work would allow structuralists to think of language as body of signs.

The primary theorist of this movement was Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed the idea that languages are composed of arbitrary units that were void of concept or meaning until they acquired meaning through a language system that relied on differences between terms within their larger linguistics and social contexts.

Post-structuralism

This is less singularly defined as a movement than that of structuralism. A number of literary theories fall under this movement, of which ‘gender theory and reader response theory’ were more popular. These theories recognized the overarching notion that meaning doesn’t exist outside of the text and that meaning is not fixed but rather contingent and unstable.

This movement evolved alongside Jacques Derrida’s theory of ‘deconstruction’ which emphasized meaning as it functioned in language.

According to Derrida, languages are made up of units that don’t contain inherent meaning.

According to him, meaning in ‘deconstruction’ is therefore constantly deferred, which can never be in place, or in other words, be stable. Post-structuralists recognized the lack of fixed or inherent meaning and have also acknowledged the need of language in order to acquire meaning.

Saussure’s Structuralism and the Concept of ‘Difference’

Saussure was a structuralist. In his book *A Course in General linguistics* which was published in 1916, he emphasised the importance of looking into languages as a living

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:11 November 2014

Neha Garg, Shivek Kumar and Vaibhav Sharma

Concepts of *Difference* and *Differance* - A Comparative Study of Saussure and Derrida

phenomenon as against the historical view of studying speech. He also analysed the underlying system of language in order to demonstrate an integral structure and has placed language firmly in the social milieu.

According to Saussure, languages are said to have composed of two important aspects where in the first place languages are studied as a system and in the second one it is the act of speaking. He wanted to move away from the empirical prospects of language. Therefore, defining languages as a system he termed languages as one's opinion.

In order to study language as a structure, he gave three prominent terms and they were "langue", "langage", and "parole" where langue means language which encompasses the abstract and the systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system. According to him, langue is independent and it pre-exists individual users. He said it is a series of speech acts, made by a linguistic subject.

On the other hand, langage is a universal system which has an underlying, fundamental structure so that linguistic communication can work. Parole is the individual speech act.

According to him langue is the rule of playing chess and parole is the individual preference of playing the game. In his later works he also proposed the notions of 'Syntagm' and 'Paradigm' to study of languages as he was primarily concerned with the three important systematic relationships, namely, Sign, Signifier and Signified in languages.

While emphasizing on the study of meanings in languages he said that meaning arises only because of the differences between the signifiers which are of two kinds, namely, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, where syntagmatic relationship refers to the possibilities of combinations and paradigmatic is the functional contrasts which involve differentiations. These provide a structural contexts to a language within which 'Signs' make sense. He said that languages are the structural forms where the 'Signs' are being organised.

The most popular theory in this regard which he proposed was the 'Difference' theory which is also the prime concern of this paper. He says that the difference between things is what makes people understand as to what is said and depicted, and therefore deals with the fact as to how we communicate. Thus, his 'Difference' theory is related to something that creates meaning.

In order to explain this theory in detail he aligned the 'Signifier', i.e., the shape of a word or its phonic component with the chosen 'Signified' which is the ideational component or concept that appears in one's mind after hearing or reading the signifier in order to create the sign.

In his theory of 'Difference' he proposed that the languages are the systems where one thing is defined simply as being different from another. He said that 'Signifiers and Signified' are always different from each other as for example, the word 'ink' itself and its physical image are quite different.

According to him languages are the system of difference where the linguistic identities and its values are purely relational as a result of what the totality of language is involved in each single act of signification.

So, this deduces the fact that, for languages, a sense of totality is required in order to understand them which is only possible through differences. If this feature is not there, then the languages will not constitute as a system and hence no signification would be possible at all. According to him, languages keep incorporating differences from every other 'Sign'. For instance, the word 'Pear' has no meaning in itself or in the intention of the speaker but only due to the fact that it differs from other possible graphic images such as 'fear, Bear,' etc. So, for the structuralists like Saussure, meaning arises from the functional differences between the elements called 'Signs' which are within the system called 'language'.

Saussure as a structuralist has made the way out for the other linguists to study language as a system which is well structured and where the meaning could only be derived from the concept of 'difference'.

For the structuralists like Saussure, 'Signs' are the primary concepts in order to study languages better. A word gets its meaning only in relation to or in contrast with the other signs remaining in the system of signs.

Derrida's Concept of 'Differance'

On the contrary, Jacques Derrida's theory of 'Signs' fits into the poststructuralist movement which was just opposite to that of Saussurean structuralism. Derrida has elaborated a theory of "Deconstruction" that challenged the idea of structure and has put forward the notion that there is nothing called structure or centre, or univocal meaning.

Under this theory he explained that there is no direct relationship between 'Signifier & Signified' as we have infinite shifts in meaning relayed from one signified to another.

Derrida after proposing his theory has rejected structuralism and as a result the Saussurean schema has been rethought. Derrida disputes the idea that a text or a communication has an undergoing, unified meaning. While proposing his theory of '*Diffarence*' he has also challenged the author's intentions and shows that there may be numerous legitimate interpretations of a text produced by an author.

Derrida after proposing this theory has also given the idea of 'deconstruction' where he considered the author as dead or irrelevant once he has completed his written text as the text has to be analysed and understood through the reader's perspective. So, he means to say that once the text is written the author's input is finished. Under his theory of deconstruction, he claimed that because of the different moods of the person, their backgrounds and their different ways of experiencing things, a word or its meaning will not conjure the same idea to every person.

So, on the basis of this theory he refuted the structuralist theory of constructing and understanding meaning.

With the concept of 'differance' Derrida was mainly concerned dealing with the fact that the opposites interact and meaning becomes unstable.

In order to explain his theory in a better way he has also referred to the concept of 'deconstruction' of binary oppositions under which he proposed that every single term is privileged over the secondary term and this privilege often has to deal with the presence of the first. For instance, in order to explain the concept of speech and writing speech has historically been considered more present, and writing is nothing but a supplement to speech.

Derrida studied 'differance' not as a concept but as a possibility of conceptuality of a conceptual process and its system in general.

Thus, with this theory he tends to describe the situations or conditions under which all identities and meanings can occur so that it can be repeated in an infinite number of potential but undetermined addresses.

Through this theory Derrida wanted to convey the divided nature of signs and also to explain how meaning was both a matter of difference and deferring.

Derrida concludes that meaning is the result of difference between sign & signifier which can also be deferred easily. So, perfect meaning is impossible according to his theory as there is always an element of undecidability in the unstable sign.

So, for the post-structuralists like Derrida meaning can't be understood until and unless deconstruction is done and this deconstruction is applied to the text with the force of 'differance' which is the part of the system of thoughts that gives a meaningful production and correct signification.

Conclusions

Post-structuralists rejected the very notion of the existence of the signs. They talk of meaning in terms of their multiplicity, differance, infiniteness, and deconstruction. All these are

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:11 November 2014

Neha Garg, Shivek Kumar and Vaibhav Sharma

Concepts of *Difference* and *Differance* - A Comparative Study of Saussure and Derrida

quite antithetical to the structuralists' position. To indicate the paradigm shift in theory from structuralism to post-structuralism, the French philosopher Derrida introduced the word 'différance' in order to indicate the relation between signifiers as one of both difference and deferral. If a word's meaning is solely the result of its difference from other words, then the meaning is not an additional thing 'present' in the sign itself. On the contrary, 'meaning' is the perennial play of difference between signifier and signifier, a 'slipping from word-to-word' in which each word retains relations to the words that differ from it. Later, language is studied in terms of discourses to get an overall and multi-dimensional aspect of meaning.

References

1. Harris. Roy and Taylor, J. Talbort , Landmarks in Linguistics Thoughts. (1989). London and New York: Routledge
 2. Manjali. Franson, Labyrinths of Language. (2014). New Delhi: Aakar Books
 3. Saussure, de Ferdinand. A Course in General Linguistics, ed. Bally, Charles and Sechehayae, Albert (1959). New York City, USA: The Philosophical Library.
-

Neha Garg, M.Phil.
Department of Linguistics
University of Delhi
Delhi 110007
India
gargnehavns@gmail.com

Shivek Kumar, M.A.
Department of Linguistics
Jawahar Lal Nehru University
New Delhi 110067
India
Loveshivek89@gmail.com

Vaibhav Sharma
Indira Gandhi National Open University
New Delhi 110068
India
Vshoney7@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:11 November 2014**

Neha Garg, Shivek Kumar and Vaibhav Sharma

Concepts of *Difference* and *Différance* - A Comparative Study of Saussure and Derrida