

UNIT 1 STRUCTURALISM AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

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1.0. OBJECTIVES

The chief objective of this unit is to get acquainted with the central themes and thinkers of two related and very influential intellectual movements of our times: structuralism and poststructuralism. By the end of the unit the students should be able:

- To see how the common roots of these movements lie in Saussurean linguistics
- To see how cultural and social phenomena can be understood as sign systems
- To see how poststructuralists radicalize the main insights of structuralists to de-stabilise the project of Western philosophy itself.

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Structuralism was a novel approach to the study of all cultural products such as language, mythologies, literature, kinship relations, rituals, fashion etc. The structuralists subjected these and similar social phenomena to a type of analysis that they called “structural analysis,” (of which we shall learn more in the following). It originated and developed in France in the 1950’s and 1960’s. However, its foundations had already been laid long ago in the work done in

linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), Prince Nicholas Troubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson (1896-1982). The main theoreticians and practitioners of structuralism were Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. In the 1970s by radicalizing and challenging certain philosophical positions of structuralism, post- structuralism was born in France. The main proponents of poststructuralism are Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault.

1.2. STRURCTURALISM

THE LINGUISTIC BASIS

The basic insights that underlie the emergence of the structuralist movement were first formulated in the field of linguistics, the science of the systematic study of languages. It was done by Saussure, a French speaking Swiss linguist. All these insights were part of a new approach he evolved to study languages, and put forward in a course in general linguistics, which he gave in Geneva between 1901 and 1911. None of these theoretical materials was published during his life-time. However, after his death some of his students who had attended that course put together a book called *Course in General Linguistics* from their notes. It was from this book, which has by now become a classic in its field, that the wider world came to know of his potent ideas. His new approach not only brought about revolutionary changes in linguistics but also became, in the hands of structuralists like Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes etc., the paradigm or model for studying other cultural products.

The novelty of his approach to the study of languages, which is known today as “structural linguistics,” is that he saw any language as a system of significations and devised concepts and tools to identify the elementary constituents of the system and the rules of their combination. Saussure had already seen that language is not the only sign system and that all cultural products are similar sign systems and therefore could be studied using the resources of structural linguistics, when he spoke of a general science of signs or “semiology”. However, it was left to the later thinkers to apply the methods and tools that Saussure had used to study language to other systems of meanings. Thus Lévi-Strauss applied it to the study of cultural anthropology; Roland Barthes to literature and so on.

Let us first examine some notions which Saussure had developed in linguistics and which have now become part of the common repertoire of all structuralists.

Synchronic Approach in Linguistics

Up until 19th century, linguistics (or, philology, as the science of languages was then known) followed what is known as “the diachronic approach” to the study of languages. But Saussure introduced “the synchronic approach.”

The diachronic method approached languages from “comparative” and “historical” (or “evolutionary”) perspectives. Assuming a “comparative” perspective the linguist saw his task as one of analyzing the similarities and differences within a family of related languages; and from a “historical” perspective he studied the evolution of a family of languages, or changes within a particular language over a long period of time. For instance, noting the similarities between the verb “to be” in Sanskrit (*asmi, asi, asti, smas, stha, santi*) with the same verb in Latin (*sum, es, est, sumus, estis and sunt*), linguists set about investigating other similarities between these two languages and concluded that they both evolved from an earlier language; on the basis of this conclusion they began to study how the two languages evolved from an earlier one.

The synchronic approach considers a language in its own right as a contemporary entity, as if it were frozen at a given moment of time and laid out for systematic study. It does not inquire into its ancestral forms or its similarities with and differences from other languages. Saussure does not downplay the importance of the diachronic study; such a study is very useful. But it does not give us any understanding of the internal structure of language, which was what Saussure was interested in studying. Only the synchronic approach, he held, could give us an understanding into what kind of an entity (system) language is and how it functions.

Synchronically studied language manifests itself as a system whose elements hang together. Various aspects and elements of the system can be identified and studied. In fact Saussure claims that language is reducible to five or six dualities or pairs of things such as signifier/signified,

individual/mass, langue/parole, synchrony/diachrony and comparison/exchange. The two dualities that have become most important for the structuralist movement are *langue/parole* and signifier/signified.

Langue, parole and langage

Language exists in two modes: as speech and as written form. Of these, speech is the primary mode of being of language. We learn to speak before we learn to write. Saussure therefore directs his attention to language as speech. He notes that it is composed of two aspects, which he called *parole* and *langue* in French. *Parole* literally means “spoken word; and *langue* literally means “tongue”. *Parole* is the aggregate of acts of speech. Every act of speech is individual, a here-and-now, and is executed by some person. Such individual acts of speech executed by individual speakers of a linguistic community constitute *parole*. Language is not exhausted by *parole*. For these acts would not be acts of speech if there were not a set of norms according to which they are organized. The system of norms according to which *parole* is organized and becomes meaningful speech is called *langue*. For the general phenomenon of language, undifferentiated as to form or function he used the term *langage*.

For Saussure *langue* belongs to the collectivity of the speakers of a language, *parole* to the individual; *parole* gives *langue* its concrete embodiment; *langue* gives *parole* its significance. If it were not for *langue*, *parole* would be a series of meaningless noises; if it were not for *parole*, *langue* would be a series of mute abstractions.

Sign: Signifier/Signified

Language is a system of signs. But what exactly is a sign? For Saussure a sign is essentially a complex entity constituted of two elements: “signifier” and “signified.” The signifier is the sound image or its written equivalent. The concept evoked by it is the signified. He compared these two elements of the sign to two sides of a sheet of paper, which face in different directions and yet are inseparable. At first it is tempting to think of the sign as the word. He notes that in current usage the term “sign” generally designates only a sound-image or the word. However the sound-

image or word by itself is not a sign. It becomes a sign only when it evokes a concept. For instance, the word (sound image) “tree” is called a sign only because it carries the concept “tree”, with the result that the idea of the sensory part implies the idea of the whole. Thus the linguistic sign should be construed as a two-sided psychological entity. Again, it is tempting to think of the signified as the object referred to by the word. However, the signified for Saussure is not the object, but the concept, or meaning.

The association between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. That is, there is no necessity that the sound image “dog” be connected with the concept “dog”, and not with the concept “cat”. However, this does not mean that we can choose any sound image we like and associate it with any concept we like. As Saussure points out, the sign once established “always eludes the individual or social will.”

Language as a System of Differences

Another important Saussurean discovery about language is that it is a system (structure), in fact a double system, of differences. It is his insistence, and that of the later structuralists, on this aspect that earned the structuralist movement its name.

Saussure insists that language constitutes a system, and one in which “everything hangs together.” But what does that mean? It means that the elements of language are essentially interconnected. Given this premise, the task of the linguist is to show the nature of the linguistic system and how it hangs together. He has to identify the locus and the elements of the system as well as its rules of operation and development.

As we mentioned above language is a double system. There is a system at the level of **phonology** and another system at the level of **morphology**. Phonology is the study of the elementary speech sounds, or ‘phonemes,’ of a given language. They are the most basic and the smallest elements in the expression system of a language. A phoneme is usually defined as the minimal (smallest) distinctive (contrastive) sound unit of a language. It is “the minimal unit” because it cannot be further subdivided; it is “distinctive” because when one phoneme is substituted by another, it

produces a meaning change. If the substitution of one elementary sound unit with another results in a different word with a different meaning that elementary sound unit is recognized as a phoneme. Thus when /p/ is substituted with /b/ in the word “pit”, we get the different word “bit”. Thus /p/ and /b/ are contrastive in English and hence they are two phonemes in English. Standard English has a system of forty-four phonemes and Hindi has forty-six phonemes.

Morphology is the study of ‘morphemes.’ A morpheme is defined as the smallest meaningful unit of speech sounds within any one language; that is, a morpheme is composed of one or more phonemes, and is a unit that recurs in a language with the same or at least similar meaning. Some morphemes constitute complete words, e.g., “man” “open” etc. Others occur as parts of words e.g., “dis-” in “disgrace, and ‘-ful’ in “disgraceful”. Morphology studies how phonemes combine to form words and other morphemes.

The most important observation that Saussure and subsequent structural linguists like Troubetzkoy make about these systems concerns their composition. The phonic and morphic systems are not the result of some pre-existing elements (phonemes and morphemes) entering into some kind of relation with one another. The elements of the systems do not have any positive substance or identity prior to and apart from the systems of which they are components. The identity of a phoneme, for example, is determined solely by the relations of differences it has with other phonemes of the system. In other words, the chief characteristic of a phoneme is simply that it is different from all other phonemes.

Saussure emphasizes that the meanings of words are also relational, or differential. No word, therefore, can be defined in isolation from other words. The definition of any given word depends upon its relation with other adjoining words. For example, the word ‘hut’ depends for its precise meaning on its position in what structural linguists call a “paradigmatic chain”, that is a chain of words related in function and meaning each of which could be substituted for any of the other in a given sentence. The paradigmatic chain in the case of the word ‘hut’ might include words such as “hovel,” “shed,” “hut,” “house,” “mansion,” and “palace.” The meaning of any one of these words would change if any one of the others were removed from the chain. Thus ‘hut’ and ‘shed’ are both small and basic structures, but they are not quite the same thing: one is

primarily for shelter (a night-watchman's hut, for instance), while the other is primarily for storage: without the other, each would have to encompass both these meanings, and hence would be a different word. Likewise, a mansion can be defined as a dwelling which is bigger and grander than a mere house, but not as big and grand as a palace. Thus we define 'mansion' by explaining how its meaning relates to that of the two words on either side of it. This mutually defining characteristic of words becomes clearer if we take paired opposites as examples. Thus the terms 'male' and 'female' have meaning in relation to each other. Each designates the absence of the characteristics included in the other. Likewise, the meaning of 'day' is defined by linking it with the concept 'night'.

Saussure's conclusion is that, "... in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system."

FROM LINGUISTICS TO OTHER CULTURAL ARTEFACTS

As has already been mentioned, the structuralist movement proper originates in France in the 1950's. It is nothing but an extension or application of the methods of contemporary linguistics started by Saussure and developed further by Troubetzkoy and others to the study of all cultural and social phenomena. The foremost theoreticians and practitioners of structuralism are Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Lévi-Strauss applied it to study such phenomena as kinship relations in societies, mythologies etc. Roland Barthes applied it to literary texts and such cultural artifacts as fashion, advertisement, wrestling etc.

Both Barthes and Lévi-Strauss have acknowledged that the basis of structuralism lies in contemporary linguistics. Thus, Barthes defines structuralism as a method for the study of cultural artifacts, which originates in the methods of contemporary linguistics. Lévi-Strauss argues that by following the linguist's example the anthropologist might reproduce in his own discipline the "phonological revolution" effected in that discipline by Saussure and Troubetzkoy.

Saussure himself had foreseen the possibility of such an extension of the methods of linguistics beyond that science to the study of all cultural phenomena. This is borne out by his discussion on the need for a science of 'semiology,' or a general science of signs. Such a science would study all sign-systems.

At this point one may ask: what is common between language and other cultural phenomena that justifies the application of the methods of studying one to the study of the other? In other words: why should linguistics be relevant for the study of other cultural and social phenomena?

The extension of the methods of analyzing language to the analysis of other cultural phenomena is based on two insights: (a) that social and cultural phenomena are signs, and (b) that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations, both internal and external.

Social and Cultural Phenomena as Signs

To be able to see how methods of studying languages are applicable to the study of cultural and social phenomena, one must first see the latter as signs. Of course this is not at first obvious, unlike the case of language where it is easily seen that in it we are dealing with signs. How can the cultural institution of the game of football, for instance, be seen as a sign-system? How can the kinship relations be seen as a sign-system? For societies in which such institutions exist, they are so much part of their life that they do not even see it as institutions constructed by them. They are simply there for them just like any natural object. To borrow words from Heidegger, we often think that "they are proximally present-at-hand; that is to say, (we think that) we come across them just as we come across Things." However, in fact they are not natural objects. A natural object like a tree can be known in a set of descriptions that set forth its objective and intrinsic (essential) qualities. A tree is known fully in natural sciences when all its intrinsic qualities are known. However, a game of football is not understood in a purely objective description of the actions that take place on the football field. Confronted with a game of football an observer with no knowledge of the culture in question could present an objective description of the actions that take place; but he would not be able to grasp their meaning, the meaning that these actions have for a member of a culture that has in it football game as an institution. In other

words for a member of this culture the game of football is a system of signification. The external actions that take place on the field function as signifiers through which they relate to something that is signified, the meaning. The entire cultural domain of a society can be seen as consisting of human productions that have a certain meaning for the members of that culture, whether it be its mythologies, marriage rites, social mores, games, rituals, literary creations (like poetry, novel, etc.), advertisements and so on.

Meaning and Network of Relations

The second insight that enables the application of methods of linguistics to all social and cultural phenomena is that the meanings they have for a cultural group is a function of the network of relations (or structure) into which they enter. In other words, if human actions or productions have a meaning there must be an underlying system of conventions which make this meaning possible. The various objectively describable actions on the football field during a game become or constitute themselves into the meaningful institution of football game because of the rules and conventions according to which they are organized. The actions are meaningful only with respect to some institutional conventions. Wherever there are two posts one can kick a ball between them, but one can score a goal only within the particular institutionalized framework called football. The action of kicking a ball between two posts assumes the meaning of “scoring a goal” only because this action has entered into a network of relations with other actions which are constituents of the football game and which are regulated or “arranged” (“structured”) according to certain conventions. Thus, “the cultural meaning of any particular act or object is determined by a whole system of constitutive rules- rules which do not so much regulate behaviour as create the possibility of particular forms of behaviour. The rules of English enable sequences of sound to have meaning; they make it possible to utter grammatical or ungrammatical sentences. And, analogously, various social rules make it possible to marry, to score a goal, to write a poem, to be impolite. It is in this sense a culture is composed of a set of symbolic systems.”

The Task of the Structuralist

The task of the structuralists, whatever their field, is not a mere collection of data; he has also to examine the set of underlying relations through which things can function as signs. The goal is to make explicit the implicitly used knowledge by competent persons of a culture in the recognition and reading of signs.

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

He applied the structural analysis to such phenomena as mythologies, kinship relations, totems etc. His method may be illustrated by examining his treatment of the Oedipus myth. He placed the individual story of Oedipus within the context of the whole cycle of tales connected with the city of Thebes. He then began to look for repeated motifs and contrasts in them, and he used these as the basis of his interpretation. Thus the story and the cycle it is part of are reconstituted in terms of a number of basic oppositions: animal/human, relation/stranger, husband/son and so on. Concrete details from the story are seen in the context of a larger structure, and the larger structure is then seen as an overall network of basic “dyadic pairs” which have obviously symbolic, thematic, and archetypal resonance.

ROLAND BARTHES

Barthes’s discussion of wrestling in *Mythologies* is a good example of how institutions of popular culture can be subjected to structural analysis. Normally one thinks that wrestling is objectively different from boxing and therefore quite naturally has different meanings associated with it. But one can easily imagine a culture in which the two sports shared a single myth and were watched in the same way. In the contemporary French culture, however, there is clearly a difference in ethos of the two sports, which requires explanation. For instance, why does one bet on boxing but not on wrestling? Why would it be odd for a boxer to scream and writhe in agony when hit, as wrestlers do? Why are rules consistently broken in wrestling but not in boxing? These differences are to be explained by a complex set of cultural conventions which make wrestling a spectacle rather than a contest. Boxing, Barthes says, is a Jansenist sport based on the demonstration of excellence: interest is directed towards the final outcome and visible suffering would be read only as a sign of imminent defeat. Wrestling, on the other hand, is drama in which each moment must be immediately intelligible as spectacle; the wrestlers themselves are physical

caricatures cast in moral roles, and the outcome is of interest only for that reason. And thus while in boxing rules are external to the match, designating limits beyond which it must not go, in wrestling they are very much within it, as conventions which increase the range of meanings that can be produced. Rules exist to be violated, so that the 'evil character' may be more violently characterized and the audience engaged in revengeful fury. They are broken visibly (though the referee's back may be turned): a violation hidden from the audience would be pointless. Suffering must be exaggerated, but it must also be intelligible; and indeed, as Barthes shows, particular notions of intelligibility and of justice are the major factors which separate wrestling from boxing and make it the grandiloquent and fundamentally reassuring spectacle that it is.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What is meant by morphology?

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2) Explain briefly the perception of madness in classical age.

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1.3 POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Poststructuralism represents a wide variety of philosophical perspectives and critical procedures that came to prominence in the 1970s, challenging some positions and radicalizing others of structuralism regarding language and other signifying systems. Roland Barthes (in his later phase of thought), Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva are the prominent poststructuralist thinkers. There are also a number of other intellectuals in whom poststructuralist tendencies and themes are identifiable such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari. Though the terms “postmodern” and “poststructural” are sometimes used interchangeably as synonyms, it is useful to follow those scholars who propose that “postmodern” refer to recent developments in literature and other arts, and reserve “poststructural” to recent theories of criticism and of intellectual inquiries in general.

COMMON THEMES

The poststructuralist philosophers come from diverse backgrounds and are occupied with apparently unconnected intellectual domains; for instance, Derrida was groomed in the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan was a psychoanalyst in the Freudian tradition and Michel Foucault was a historian of social institutions and constructions. In spite of their different interests and preoccupations their thought shares certain common concerns which are typically poststructuralist.

The Decentering of the Subject

Structuralism had already implicitly shifted focus from the self or the subject. Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis were characterized by investiture of a central place to the human self. For these movements the human subject was a free and purposive agent who was the centre of operative initiative and control. Structuralisms instead focused in the supra-individual structures of language, ritual, and kinship which make the individual what he or

she is. For the structuralists it is not the self that creates culture but culture that creates the self. The study of abstract relations within systems or “codes” of cultural signs is the key to the understanding of the human existence. In this sense, it dislodged the subject from the centre and divested it of all operative initiative and originary nature.

Poststructuralism radicalized this theme. They directed this theme against the scientific pretensions of structuralism itself. In the absence of any “centre” language has become for them an unregulatable play of purely relational elements. The subject, author or narrator of a text becomes itself a purely linguistic product. In the words of Paul de Man we reduce the subject to the status of “a mere grammatical pronoun.” Thus Barthes proclaimed the “death of the author” in an article he published in 1968, with the same title. And Michel Foucault in a 1969 article “What is an Author,” announced the “disappearance of the author.” By such pronouncements they did not mean to deny that a human individual is a necessary link in the chain of events that results in a *parole* or text. What they denied was the validity of the “function,” or “role” hitherto assigned in Western thought to a uniquely individual and purposive author, who is conceived as the originator, purposive planner (by his or her intentions) the determiner of the form and meaning of a text. Author is in a sense the construct of the culture. He is a “site” traversed by the “cultural constructs” and the “discursive formations” engendered by the conceptual and power configurations in a given era.

“Reading Reads Texts”

With the author dead, the reader or interpreter becomes a focal figure in poststructuralist treatments of signifying systems. The reader, however, is stripped of the traditional attributes of purposiveness and initiative and is converted into an impersonal process of reading. What does this reading read? It is no longer a literary “work”; this term implies a purposive human maker of the product. It is, instead, the “text”, which is nothing but a structure of signifiers regarded merely as a given for the reading process.

A characteristic poststructuralist view about the text is that it does not have a fixed meaning. The death of the author frees the reader to enter the literary text in whatever way he or she chooses.

The intensity of pleasure yielded by the text becomes proportionate to the reader's abandonment of limits on its signifying possibilities.

Critique of Metaphysics of Presence

Poststructuralism raises a rebellion against what it considers to be the prejudices of Western thinking. One such prejudice is the preference for presence over absence. In fact the Western thinking is so much pervaded by this prejudice that Derrida calls it simply the metaphysics of presence. Thus we see Plato investing all being (*ousia*) in ideas on the ground that they are immediately present to the mind; he also prefers speech over writing on the ground that in speech the meaning is immediately present to the speaker and that the auditor has the possibility of making it present. Descartes accepts the "cogito" as the first principle of all sure and certain knowledge because it is claimed to be immediately and luminously present to every individual. Again Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenological movement distinguishes linguistic signs from indicative signs on the basis of the claim that in linguistic signs their meanings are immediately present to us, while in the case of indicative signs like smoke indicating fire, there is a "distance" between the signifier and the signified.

Poststructuralism trains its guns against such claims of immediate presence. According to them no meaning or concept can be immediately present to the thinker. It is always mediated through a sign, a signifier. In other words, meanings are never "presentified" (made present) but always re-presented. Every attempt to make it completely present is a "deferring" or a postponement, since new signifiers keep coming into play every time we do it.

Critique of Origins

Inquiry into origins is an attempt to see behind or beyond phenomena to their ultimate foundation. For modern philosophers of the self (e.g existentialists, psychoanalysts and phenomenologists) the attempt to discover the origin of the self is the road to authenticity. Poststructuralism denies the possibility of recapturing the origins of phenomena.

JACQUES DERRIDA (1931-2004)

Derrida first made his name as a Husserl scholar and critic. His translation of Husserl's "Origin of Geometry" with a long introductory essay, and *Speech and Phenomenon* which was a close study of Husserl's theory of signs propounded in his first *Logical Investigation* were applauded by the French University establishment. His name today is almost synonymous with "deconstruction;" he is its most prominent theoretician as well as practitioner.

Derrida's structuralist roots are evident in his writings. Yet he radicalizes and goes beyond structuralism. His "radicalized structuralism" (poststructuralism) is set forth and elaborated in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," a paper he read in 1966 at an International Colloquium at John Hopkins University, USA, and which was subsequently included in his *Writing and Difference*. In this paper Derrida showed that structuralism while proclaiming that everything is structural, did put certain things beyond structurality. He attacked the quasi scientific pretensions of structuralism, derived from Saussure's concept of the structure of language and represented by Levi-Strauss. He asserted that the notions of system and structure, whether linguistic, cultural or social, presuppose the idea of a "centre" around which everything is structured and yet "escapes structurality." In Saussure's theory of language for example this centre is assigned the function of controlling the endless differential play of internal relationships, while remaining itself outside of and immune from, that play. Derrida regards this incoherent and unrealizable notion of an ever-active yet always absent centre as only one of the many ways in which all Western thinking is logocentric or dependent on the notion of a self-certifying foundation, or absolute or essence or ground which is ever needed but never present.

What gives unity to Derrida's work is his consistent attempt to question the fundamental presupposition that underlie Western philosophy and culture: the presupposition of logocentrism and foundationalism. So he does not consider his work properly philosophical; it is anti-philosophy. He writes, "But I am not sure that the 'site' of my work, reading philosophical texts and posing philosophical questions, is itself properly philosophical. Indeed I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy."

'Difference'

One of the key terms in Derrida's thought is 'difference'. It is a word coined by him to evoke the instability of the binary oppositions fundamental to logical systems or logocentric discourse. It suggests that binary oppositions reverse and slide into one another.

"Differance" is a translation of the French neologism *différance*. He has intended the term to have two connotations: difference and deferral or delaying. The first connotation corresponds to the way in which any pair of binary opposites always fails to match exactly the domain to which it is supposed to apply. There are always irreducible differences between the structure of the actual phenomenon (a historical event, a text, or a personality) and the binary divisions required by a logical system. For instance, Plato wants to make a sharp division between speech and writing. But the phenomena referred to by these words do not correspond exactly to the division. He wants to separate them clearly as binary opposites and privilege speech over writing. But he ends up by saying that 'thought which is expressed in speech, is a writing in the soul'; speech, in other words, becomes a writing, thus erasing the difference that he wanted to set up between them. The second connotation is meant to bring home the fact that in the face of the unstable and recalcitrant phenomena the effort to impose the strict opposition should always be "put off" (deferred). For instance, when we see that the sharp opposition that we want to make between speech/writing does not obtain as we characterize thought expressed in speech as writing in the soul, we may try to secure the opposition by distinguishing between "good writing" (which is like speech) and "bad writing." In other words we think that even if the distinction fails in one level it can be revived at another. But Derrida maintains that even this distinction will fail; then we may try another and so on. A truly sharp distinction will always remain elusive; it is indefinitely deferred or put off.

MICHEL FOUCAULT (1926-84)

The major project that he executed was the study of the history of some important institutions and social constructions like madness, clinic, sexuality, knowledge etc. His philosophical

positions are derived from these studies. One of his basic positions is that the ways in which we think of madness, sickness, sexuality, knowledge etc. though appear to us as objectively given facts, are in fact, social constructions.

We may illustrate this point by examining his account of the evolution of the social perception of madness. The concept of madness is not an objective, non-historical given, but is merely a contingent social construct which has a genealogy. Foucault identifies three distinct stages in the development of the concept of madness. The first stage is seen in the Middle Ages. In this period madness was seen as an integrally human phenomenon. Madness was opposed to reason, but it was recognized as an alternative mode of human existence. Consequently, though abhorred and disdained, it was seen as a meaningful challenge to reason. It could engage in ironic dialogue with reason or claim to be a domain of human experience and insight not available to reason.

Classical Age (17th and 18th centuries) represents the second stage. In this period the perception of madness changed. It was seen as the negation of the characteristic human attribute of reason. It was nothing but unreason, a plunge into animality. It had no human significance. Accordingly there was a conceptual exclusion of the mad from human society. Corresponding to this conceptual exclusion they were also physically excluded from human society by confinement in institutions. The conceptual and physical exclusion also led to a moral condemnation. The moral fault was not of the ordinary kind. While ordinary moral fault is the violation of one or more norms of human community, madness is a more radical moral fault, where one makes a radical choice of rejecting humanity and the human community *in toto* in favour of a life of sheer animality.

In the Modern Age the perception of madness changes again. In this period once again the mad are regarded as being within the human community, not as animals outside human community. They are within human community; however, they are now seen as moral offenders, violators of specific social norms, who should feel guilt at their condition and who need reform of their attitudes and behaviour. Correspondingly, in the modern age there are ways of treating the mad, not merely isolating them but by making them the objects of a moral therapy that subjects them to social norms. There is a move from the merely custodial confinement of the Classical Age to

the modern therapeutic asylum. Though this institution was widely regarded as an advance in humanitarianism, Foucault sees it as merely a more subtle and thorough method of controlling the mad. It is a “gigantic moral imprisonment”. It may seem natural to us that the doctors should rule the mad, because we see the latter as “mentally ill”. But Foucault claims that in the asylum the rule is not really so much by medical as by moral authority. Doctors have authority not because they have knowledge to cure, but because they represent the moral demands of society. This is evident today in the psychiatric practices such as psychoanalysis. The practice is accompanied by the trappings of medical science, but the key to the therapy remains the personal moral authority of the therapist, who serves as an instrument of social values.

In *The Order of Things* as well as in *Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault shows that each epoch has its own underlying ‘episteme’ (the *langue*) which constrains and conditions the explicit discourses (the *parole*) of that age. Thus there is nothing absolute about the modern episteme, and its peculiar conceptions of truth, science, man etc.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What is meant by ‘differance’?

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2) Explain briefly the perception of madness in classical age.

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1.4. Let Us Sum Up

We have examined above the main concepts of two very important and related intellectual movements of contemporary times. For an understanding of both structuralism and poststructuralism their roots in contemporary linguistics should be explored. Therefore we have started by giving a brief account of the main concepts of Saussurean linguistics. Then we examined the structuralist movement, especially as expounded and practiced by two of its most prominent adherents: Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Then we examined poststructuralism as a radicalization of certain motifs of structuralism. After looking at some common themes of the movement we examined the central concepts of two prominent poststructuralists: Derrida and Foucault.

1.5. Key Words

Phenomenon: Phenomenon is any observable occurrence.

Deconstruction: Deconstruction generally attempts to demonstrate that any text is not a discrete whole but contains several irreconcilable and contradictory meanings with multiple interpretative possibilities.

1.6. Further Readings and References

David Robey (ed.). *Structuralism: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1973.

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1.7. Answers to Check Your Progress

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. Morphology is the study of ‘morphemes.’ A morpheme is defined as the smallest meaningful unit of speech sounds within any one language; that is, a morpheme is composed of one or more phonemes, and is a unit that recurs in a language with the same or at least similar meaning. Some morphemes constitute complete words, e.g., “man” “open” etc. Others occur as parts of words e.g., “dis-” in “disgrace, and ‘-ful’ in “disgraceful”. Morphology studies how phonemes combine to form words and other morphemes.

2. Levi Strauss applied the structural analysis to such phenomena as mythologies, kinship relations, totems etc. His method may be illustrated by examining his treatment of the Oedipus myth. He placed the individual story of Oedipus within the context of the whole cycle of tales connected with the city of Thebes. He then began to look for repeated motifs and contrasts in them, and he used these as the basis of his interpretation. Thus the story and the cycle it is part of are reconstituted in terms of a number of basic oppositions: animal/human, relation/stranger, husband/son and so on. Concrete details from the story are seen in the context of a larger structure, and the larger structure is then seen as an overall network of basic “dyadic pairs” which have obviously symbolic, thematic, and archetypal resonance.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. One of the key terms in Derrida's thought is 'difference'. It is a word coined by him to evoke the instability of the binary oppositions fundamental to logical systems or logocentric discourse. It suggests that binary oppositions reverse and slide into one another. "Difference" is a translation of the French neologism *différance*. He has intended the term to have two connotations: difference and deferral or delaying. The first connotation corresponds to the way in which any pair of binary opposites always fails to match exactly the domain to which it is supposed to apply. There are always irreducible differences between the structure of the actual phenomenon (a historical event, a text, or a personality) and the binary divisions required by a logical system. For instance, Plato wants to make a sharp division between speech and writing. But the phenomena referred to by these words do not correspond exactly to the division. He wants to separate them clearly as binary opposites and privilege speech over writing. But he ends up by saying that 'thought which is expressed in speech, is a writing in the soul'; speech, in other words, becomes a writing, thus erasing the difference that he wanted to set up between them. The second connotation is meant to bring home the fact that in the face of the unstable and recalcitrant phenomena the effort to impose the strict opposition should always be "put off" (deferred).

2. Classical Age (17th and 18th centuries) represents the second stage. In this period the perception of madness changed. It was seen as the negation of the characteristic human attribute of reason. It was nothing but unreason, a plunge into animality. It had no human significance. Accordingly there was a conceptual exclusion of the mad from human society. Corresponding to this conceptual exclusion they were also physically excluded from human society by confinement in institutions. The conceptual and physical exclusion also led to a moral condemnation. The moral fault was not of the ordinary kind. While ordinary moral fault is the violation of one or more norms of human community, madness is a more radical moral fault, where one makes a radical choice of rejecting humanity and the human community *in toto* in favour of a life of sheer animality.