Language, the Signifier, and the “Point de Caption”: From Saussure to Lacan and Žižek

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Abstract. The paper aims to return to the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure to examine the application of the structural linguistic terminologies in Lacanian psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology by Slavoj Žižek. First, the author examines Saussure’s structural linguistics terminologies in his book Course in General Linguistics. Then, the differences between its original definitions and their application in Lacanian psychoanalysis and the critique of the ideology of Slavoj Žižek are compared. The author found that although the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan used various linguistic terminologies that are initially from Saussure’s structural linguistics, he radically rewrote those concepts and perfectly “quilt” them into his theory of psychoanalysis. Besides, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek carefully examined the Lacanian linguistic view and applied it to the critique of ideology. Indeed, many correlations between Lacanian linguistic terminologies and Saussure’s terminologies in his structural linguistics have been fully concerned by scholars around the world. Nevertheless, from the author’s point of view, it is essential for people nowadays who would like to examine contemporary philosophy deeply, psychoanalysis as well as the critique of ideology to return to Saussure’s book and carefully examine the original forms of the linguistic terms. Thus, this paper mainly focuses on the idea of Sassure’s structural linguistics to give readers some new inspiration by tracing the origin of structural linguistic terms or less affected by the structuralist methodology and epistemology.

1. Introduction

In the 1910s, the shadow of structuralism comes quietly with the publication of the General Course in Linguistics which reflects the idea of structural linguistics of the Swiss linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure [1]. This book deeply influenced not only the development of linguistics and semiotics but also many other fields like literary criticism, anthropology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan integrated Freudian psychoanalysis and Saussure’s structural linguistics to “return to Freud” in his way. He also radically rewrote some of Saussure’s concepts such as the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the formation of linguistic value, and so on, and used them in his psychoanalytic theory. Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian continental philosopher and cultural theorist who uses the theory of Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine Hegelian works and Marxism and uses them to carry out the critique of ideology.

This article aims to go back to Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics and examine the application of structural linguistic terms in Lacan’s psychoanalysis and Slavoj Žižek’s critique of ideology. Although there were many comparative papers about the relationship between Saussure and Žižek that have been done by scholars worldwide, the author would like to re-emphasize the significance of Saussure’s structural linguistics, and see it as “another entry” to the gate of contemporary philosophy, psychoanalysis and cultural criticism that have been more influenced and almost or less affected by the structuralist methodology and epistemology.

2. Saussure’s Structural Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure is a Swiss linguist who is well known as one of the pioneers of 20th-century linguistics. He pointed out several key concepts for general linguistics and then made the objectives and methodology of linguistics very different from philology in the past. Also, because of his statements about the necessity for linguistics to be differentiated into synchronic and diachronic dimensions, a new way of the study of language in addition to the past comparative linguistics was created [1]. His linguistic theory indeed not only change the linguistic field but also deeply affected many other fields of social science and humanity, such as philosophy, semiotics (this is often seen as a field started by Saussure), anthropology, and psychoanalysis. This paper will explain and discuss the key concepts that have been put forward in his most famous book named Course in General Linguistics [1].

2.1. Langage, Langue and Parole

Saussure classified human speech (that is, so-called ‘langage’ in French) into two different objects: langue and parole (in most cases in this paper, the author will use the word “language” to refer to the concept of the “langue”,
and “speech” for “parole”). The langue is the basic part of the study of speech, which is exclusively social and psychological. The parole, correspondingly, is a secondary part and its object is on the individual side of speech [1]. The division of langue and parole is significant since it shows that the task of linguistics should specifically focus on the linguistics of langue, the semiotic system, rather than the living examples of the use of language, that is, the parole. In this case, the division coincidentally corresponds to the division of consciousness and unconsciousness which will be discussed later in the next chapter.

2.2. The Nature of the Sign

Saussure illustrated that there are two parts to a linguistic sign: signifier and signified. A signifier refers to a sound image, and a signified refers to the concept of the linguistic unit [1]. It is inappropriate to believe that Saussure was describing a linguistic system that is a set of names for the concepts, as it sounds at first. Saussure meant something opposite. He believed that it is wrong to think that concepts are before language. In contrast, from Saussure’s perspective, there are no concepts before the language is formed [1]. Only after the combination of the signifier and the signified can the concepts be born. The process of creating linguistic units can be called “articulation”[1].

A key nature of the sign is the arbitrariness of the bond between the signifier and the signified. Although it has been claimed that some signs can be relatively arbitrary, rather than arbitrary, the arbitrariness is nonetheless effective for describing all combinations of the signifier and the signified. It meant that the signs are not motivated [1]. For instance, a signifier for the concept of the dog can either be “dog” in English or ‘chien’ in French. It can not be proved which signifier fits the concept better.

However, it does not mean that the choice of the signifier is free for the speaker. Instead, for the linguistic community, it is said to be fixed and immutable. Only when the action of the force is combined with the action of change in time can the language be mutable. The language change always results in a shift in the relationship between the signifier and the signified. This indicates the constraints on the language of the society, which will be similar to the Lacanian opinion that will be discussed later.

Besides, the signifier also has a linear nature. It represents a measurable span in a single dimension. This can be seen as the basis of the concept of syntagmatic relation that will be discussed soon.

2.3. Synchronic Linguistics and Language as a Structure

Saussure delimited two axes of the linguistic science: (1) the axis of simultaneities that refers to the relationship among the coexisting things when the intervention of time is not considered, and (2) the axis of successions on which only a single thing can be studied at a time [1]. The synchronic law in general, and the study of the semiotic system of a language is on the synchronic dimension [1]. Nevertheless, the synchronic law is not imperative, which means that there are no such obligations for the speakers to follow. This opinion can explain why a general synchronic law does not limit language change.

Since the paper is specifically focusing on the concept of the synchronic language structure, the description of diachronic linguistics may not be unfolded in this paper.

2.3.1. The Entities of Language

Saussure pointed out that the linguistic entity only exists when the signifier and the signified are combined. Also, the linguistic entity is not accurate as a definition until it is delimited [1]. These two statements give us two clues about the entities of language: (1) Any kind of separation of the signifier and the signified will make the concepts abstract or confused, or lead to a non-linguistic subject. Thus, the delimitation process should involve both the signified and the signifier. (2) Only when the linguistic entity is delimited, making it different from anything that surrounds it in the chain of speech, can it become certain. Most importantly, the significance of the role of “differences” is first mentioned. Although the delimitation of a specific unit can be difficult for a language, the feature of a language structure is based on the opposition of the units. These conclusions can lead us to the value of language which will be discussed soon.

2.3.2. The Value of Language

First, Saussure pointed out that language is organized thought coupled with sound [1]. The role of language is not to create a phonic material for expressing ideas, but it acts as a medium of thought and sound, making it inevitable that the delimitations of units are brought about [1]. This statement also presupposes a pre-linguistic era when thought and sound are both chaotic and unclear. Only when the language appears can the units be born, and can concepts and meaning be clarified and delimited. Then, Saussure also illustrated that setting up the values that depend on usage and general acceptance needs a linguistic community [1]. These are preconditions for the value of language.

Saussure first explained the linguistic value from two viewpoints: conceptual viewpoint and material viewpoint. From the perspective of the concepts, what creates value is the opposition of the concepts with each other only; from the perspective of the signifier, its essence is not the sound, but the difference between sound-images. Thus, from either viewpoint, the value of language is always negatively composed. This is closely associated with the arbitrariness of the language. As the signifier for the signified is not motivated, the only thing to present the value of a linguistic unit is its difference from other ones. However, from the viewpoint of the unit as a whole, the combination of the signifier and the signified is nonetheless positive[1]. For instance, when the netizens start to use and spread a new expression, it can be at first their active choice to choose a signifier to correspond to a signified, but only the negative differential system can
make the combination work and have its position in the system.

Saussure’s descriptions of the value of language represented a structuralist perspective. He saw the language (langue) as a whole system, and only the differences between linguistic units make every unit valuable. Saussure is one of the founders of this general theory that deeply affected many scholars including Jacques Lacan.

2.4. Syntagmatic and Associative Relations

Saussure claimed that on the one hand, words have their relations based on the linear nature of the language; on the other hand, those that have something in common are associated in the memory, so various relations can also be created. The syntagmatic relations are said to be “in praesentia”, on the chain of speaking, while the associated relations are “in absentia” in latent series in the memory. The two kinds of relations are associated with the concept of the signifying chain of Jacques Lacan which will be discussed later.

3. Linguistic Terminologies, from Psychoanalysis to the Critique of Ideology

Jacques Marie Émile Lacan is a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist born in 1901 in Paris who annually held seminars in Paris from 1953 to 1981. He promoted the “return to Freud”, studied Freudian psychoanalysis, and gave his explanation with the tools of structural linguistics and anthropology, and topology, forming his theoretical system that has influenced various domains of humanities. In this section, some basic concepts that were originally linguistic will be discussed.

The ideas of the famous Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek will also be discussed in this section. He did a lot of work on integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian philosophy, as well as Marxism, and develop his theory of the critique of ideology through them.

3.1. The Re-delimitation of the Signifier and the Signified

The delimitation of the two aspects of the linguistic sign, the signifier and the signified, is a key point of Saussure’s structural linguistics. As mentioned in section 2, in Saussure’s opinion, the two aspects cannot be studied separately in the study of language. Lacan radically rewrote the relationship between the signified and the signifier.

For Lacan, the signified does not refer to the signified. As it has been summarized in Read Your Symptoms written by Wu Qiong, a philosopher and researcher of Lacanian psychoanalysis: Lacanian signified is only a meaningful effect of the functioning of the signifier[2]. Although Lacan accepted the perspective of Saussure that the signifying function of the signs is by the differences, he denied the view that the signifier represents the signified, but gave the signifier a predominance. A famous example of the doors of the toilet at a train station. There are two twin doors of toilets next to each other, one is for males and one is for females, and there are the words ‘Gentlemen’ and ‘Ladies’ on each separately. A brother and a sister sit across from each other. From the brother’s view, he told that the train stopped right at the Ladies, while the sister blamed him stupid and told him that they are the Gentlemen. The twin doors originally looked identical, but with the signified on them, unexpected meanings: the Gentlemen and the Ladies became diverged into two homelands [3]. From this example, it is obvious that the symbolizing value is created purely by the difference of the signified, and the effect can be called the signifier.

Moreover, Lacan claimed that the signifier has no such specific object; in contrast, it refers to the absence of the object[2][4]. The signifier itself has its meaningless material basis (the ‘letter’ for the Lanian terminology) that dissolves the relationship between the actual object that people suppose as a corresponding object and the signification. This brings us to the concept of the signifying chain.

3.2. The Signifying Chain and the “Point de Caption”

It is often believed that the concept of the signifying chain is correlated to syntagmatic and associative relations. Dylan Evins summarized that the signifying chain has two metaphors: linearity and circularity, and they can separately correspond to the syntagmatic relation and associative relation of Saussure’s structural linguistics [5]. It should be noticed that although it is believed by Lacan that linearity refers to the diachronic feature of the signifying chain, and circularity refers to its synchronic feature of it, the concept of ‘synchronic’ and ‘diachronic’ chains is very different from the distinctions made by Saussure of the two dimensions of linguistics. As mentioned above, for Saussure, the word ‘synchronic’ relates to the study of the language as a structure at a specific period, while the word ‘diachronic’ refers to the study of specific language units that change by history.

For Lacan, as the Sassure’s corresponding relationship of the signifier and the signified is dissolved, he claimed that there is a continuous slippage of the signified below the signifier [4]. At the “point de caption (often translated as ‘quitting point’ in English)”, the signifying chain temporarily stops its slipping and some fixed meaning can appear [4]. The relationship between Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Lacan is concerned by scholars of philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and other fields of humanism from different countries. [5-7].

From Žižek’s perspective, the quitting point (also known as the “nodal point”) is something that creates and maintains the identity of an ideological field [8]. For instance, the relationship between the word “feminism” and other ideological factors is not predetermined, so a socialist can have a different solution from that of a liberalist since there are different signifiers for them separately to ‘quilt’ the floating signifier of feminism [8].
According to Žižek, the quilting point is a so-called “rigid designator” of Kripkean theory that is about the pure signifier which refers to and constitutes the identity of the object simultaneously [8]. There is a key paradox that although the “rigid designator” integrates the ideology by preventing the metonymic sliding of the signified, it is not excluded and it cannot provide such a fixed and stable point; in contrast, it is only the pure difference, that is, the signifier without the signified.

3.3. The Emergence of the Subject and the Linguistic Value

Lacanian psychoanalysis did not only borrow the linguistic concepts from Saussure’s structural linguistics but there are also many similarities between some of the analytical features of their theories [1][3]. According to Lacan, the subject is split because it is a speaking being, and the subject can never fully express its self-consciousness, and the subject will never fully recognize itself [3][5]. Wu Qiong summarised that there is no such subject before the mediation of language, so the split of the subject is an in-built constituent of the subject; that is, only by the split, the inconsistency, and the mediation of language, can the subject be born [2][3].

This description of the emergence of the subject is very similar to Sassure’s description of the birth of concepts. As he has claimed, there is no such “pre-linguistic” era when the concepts are only self-beings. Inversely, the birth of language, the positive combination of the signifier and the signified, makes the birth of concepts possible [1]. They both illustrate that the constituents of a structure are sometimes created with the structure itself.

4. Conclusion

Slavoj Žižek is a philosopher who used Lacanian psychoanalysis as an angle of view to analyze ideology. The contribution of this paper is that it focuses more on the trace of Saussure’s terminologies in his structural linguistics in the ideas of Lacan and Žižek. This paper set off from the basic concepts of Saussure, including the delimitation of the signifier and the signified, the “langue” and “parole”, synchronic and diachronic viewpoints, the entity and value of language as well as the syntagmatic and associative relations. Then, the terminologies of structural linguistics originally are traced “from clinical to social”, from concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis that are associated with the linguistic terminologies to their use by Slavoj Žižek in the critique of ideology.

The author discussed not only the ones that have been concerned by other scholars [2][5-7][9-12], such as the re-delimitation of the signifier and the signified, and the concept of signifying chain that further overturns the corresponding relationship of Saussure’s signifier and signified, but also went a step further to discuss the “point de caption” and its application by Slavoj Žižek to the ideological field. Besides, some of the concepts of Saussure’s structural linguistics are rarely mentioned by the other comparative paper with the same topic, such as Saussure’s definitions of diachronic features and the entity of language that is closely associated with linguistic value. These features of this paper can demonstrate comprehensive dimensions of Saussure’s terminologies and their use in psychoanalysis and Slavoj Žižek. Overall, this paper generally re-emphasized the importance of the terminologies of structural linguistics and thus has reached its aim.

References