An Iconic Mapping of Linguistics Into Literary Criticism—On the Linguistic Roots of Structuralist Literary Criticism

Liang-lin Zhang

Changshu Institute of Technology, China

Abstract

Peirce's concept of icon sheds light on the iconic mapping relationship between structural linguistics and structuralist literary criticism, and the failure of the latter. As a revolt against the traditional extrinsic approaches to literature, structuralist literary criticism flourished as an important literary movement in the 1950s and 1960s. However, its difficulties cannot be ignored. The failure of structuralist literary criticism can be found deeply rooted in structural linguistics. Guided by the spirit of iconic mapping and semiotic interdisciplinarity, the present paper makes an interdisciplinary investigation into the linguistic roots of structuralist literary criticism. First of all, it examines the concept of "a closed system," initially established by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*, which occupies a predominant position in sructuralist criticism. Secondly, it looks at how structuralist literary criticism borrows the principle of digging various levels of structures from structural linguistics; and thirdly, how the typical notion of relations in structural linguistics is also widely used in structuralist literary analysis. By probing into the linguistic roots of structuralist criticism, this paper aims to clarify the cause of the failure of structuralist criticism.

Keywords: iconic mapping, structuralist literary criticism, structural linguistics, difficulties

1. Introduction

It is well-known that one of Peircean trichotomies of the classifications of signs is that of index, icon, and symbol, based on the relationship between the representamen and its object. Peirce's study of signs is intended to illustrate the process of reasoning, and

so in all reasoning human beings can be said to be using a mixture of icons, indices and symbols. These three kinds of signs can be considered as three modes of thinking, as well as three types of signs. Particularly, "An icon is a sign which stands for its object because as a thing perceived it excites and an idea naturally allied to the idea that object would excite" (Peirce, 1998, p. 13). According to this definition, a sign is an icon not simply because there might be physical likeness between the representamen and its object, but more importantly because there is a parallel iconic mapping between the idea-arousing processes caused by the representamen and its object. Therefore, not only is a photograph an icon, but also are diagrams and figures of geometry. Peirce (1998, p. 13) cites an algebraic array as a typical icon:

$$a_1x+b_1=n_1$$
$$a_2x+b_2=n_2$$

This array establishes itself on the recognition of the analogous relations and iconic mapping between the two equations. This thinking mode of iconicity is pervasive in our life. In the present paper, we will analyze, in the light of iconicity, structuralist literary criticism as a mapped icon of structural linguistics.

In the 1950s and 1960s, in revolt against the traditional extrinsic approaches to literature, structuralist literary criticism flourished as an important literary movement by cutting off all extrinsic studies and focusing only on text itself. Structuralist literary criticism has undoubtedly made its contributions to literary criticism by providing a new method of analyzing text, but with the publication of Barthes' *S/Z*, it finds itself in a dead end. In that book, Barthes points out that the structuralist process of pursuing a deep structure in all stories is tiresome, and at last receives no welcome, because texts lose their differences in this process. Moreover, structuralists keep the outside world out of the analysis of texts, which is acknowledged as the weakest point of structuralist criticism. Its failure can be attributed to logocentrism, for it is influenced by linguistic methods. In other words, the fatal weakness of structuralist criticism can be found deeply rooted in structural linguistics. The roots of structuralist criticism in linguistics are explicated in the following three aspects.

2. The Iconic Mapping of a Closed System

Structuralist criticism has its root in structural linguistics. The concept of "a closed system", for example, was initially established by Ferdinand de Saussure, whose *Course in General Linguistics* provides an important foundation for structuralism. In this book, he contends that language should be studied as a sign system from a synchronic perspective. After making a comparison between language and human speech, Saussure gives us a definition of language: "language … is a self-contained whole" (Saussure, 1959, p. 9) which "is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of

meanings and sound-images" (Saussure, 1959, p. 15) whose "combination produces a form, not a substance" (Saussure, 1959, p. 12). It is this system of forms that determines the meanings of linguistic elements within the system. Saussure's definition of language cuts off the connection of language with both the subject and the world by further stating that it presupposes the exclusion of everything outside its organism or system. So, for Saussure, language is a kind of auto-effective spirit which can decompose itself into various components.

Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, who calls himself a faithful follower of Saussure, is also a radical structural linguist. He sees four strata in language: content-substance, content-form, expression-form, and expression-substance, though he regards only the two in the middle as language proper: "a language consists purely of relationships…" (Ding, 1994, p. 71) Like Saussure, Hjelmslev also defines language as an autonomous entity of inner dependences (ibid.).

Not surprisingly, the notion of the "system" occupies a predominant position in sructuralist criticism. It must be acknowledged that the purely formal description of literary systems is an important part of the structuralist methodology, and as such, structuralists always seek to establish a model of the system of literature itself. This system is also a closed one. Like Russian formalists who insist on "the autonomy of literary scholarship" (Erlich, 1955, p. 171), structuralists cannot tolerate, in their literary work as well as in cultural systems beyond the literary. In other words, they stick to the idea that certain aspects of the material be isolated and studied in their literary analysis.

The closedness of literary systems is typically illustrated by Barthes' belief that the author is dead. Literary critics need not take into consideration the author's intentions, for "writers only have the power to mix already existing writings, to reassemble or redeploy them; writers cannot use writing to 'express' themselves, but only to draw upon that immense dictionary of language and culture which is 'always already written'" (Selden, 1985, p. 52). Critics, according to structuralists, should take literary works as independent entities. For Barthes, literature should be treated as a system of units and functions excluding all the so-called "extrinsic approaches" to literary studies.

In brief, as soon as a literary text comes into being, it becomes an independent entity, a closed and self-sufficient system. All other forms of literary criticism in which the world beyond literature and the human subject are the source and origin of literary meaning are objectionable to structuralists. In other words, a literary text or the whole of literature is taken by structuralist criticism as an independent and complete entity, very much in the same way as language is treated in structural linguistics.

3. The Iconic Mapping of Levels of Structures

Both structural linguistics and structuralist criticism emphasize the wholeness of a system. This means they put great emphasis on structuralness, for the notion of structure, as Jean Piaget defines it, is comprised of the idea of wholeness. Structural linguistics has

structures at various levels: the structure of language and the structure of human speech; the structure of signifier and the structure of signified; deep structure and surface structure; diachronic structure and synchronic structure; syntagmatic structure paradigmatic structure, all of which have corresponding roles in structuralist literary analyses.

To define the object of his study in the structure of the whole linguistic system, Saussure makes in his book the distinction between language and speech. Language is a system of signs, a social institution, a set of rules and norms governing our speaking and writing behavior, while speech is the personal actualization of language. Saussure regards human speech as a mass which is governed by and has meaning only within the language system and language as "a natural order into a mass that lends itself to no other classification" (Saussure, 1959, p. 9). So, he reasons that language should be the object of his study.

This principle is borrowed by structuralist criticism. Though, according to Scholes, the notion of structure can be applied to a specific literary text (see his analysis of *Ulysses,* Scholes, 1974, pp. 180-200); structuralists regard individual literary texts as manifestations of literature, namely, "paroles" in Saussurean terminology. On the other hand, they consider literature as a whole to be a self-regulating system. Without the knowledge of the structure "langue" of literature, no individual text can be understood at all. To pursue a universal structure of literature or a type of literary work becomes one of the structuralists' tasks. An obvious example is Todorov, with his advocation of a new poetics which establishes a general "grammar" of literature.

How can "langue" be related to "parole"? Noam Chomsky gives us an answer in his T. G. grammar. To distinguish himself from Saussure, he replaces "langue" and "parole" with "competence" and "performance", respectively. He thinks linguistic study should start from performance, "to account for facts about language by constructing a formal representation of what is involved in knowing a language" (Culler, 1975, p. 269). For example, at the sentence level, what we utter or write is called the surface structure while that which is in the human mind before it is spoken out is called the deep structure. Deep structure is transformed from surface structure by a set of transformational rules. Not coincidentally, Piaget also introduces the idea of transformation into the notion of structure: "By transformational rule Piaget means the ability of parts of a structure to be interchanged or modified according to certain rules, and he specifically cites transformational linguistics as an illustration of such processes" (Scholes, 1974, p. 185). What structuralists try to do is transform literary texts into schematic models of literature. In other words, such studies aim to define the general principles of literary structures or "transformational rules".

Another important concept borrowed by structuralist criticism is Saussure's notion of sign. Saussure regards language as a system of signs that express ideas. Any sign consists of a signifier and a signified, which are, roughly speaking, sound, image, and concept. The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. By arbitrary, Saussure means that the signifier actually has no natural connection with the signified, and the relations

between the two can only be the result of the accidental cutting of signifiers within a system. Hjelmslev goes even further to drive the meaning or the signified out of the language system by contending that a language consists exclusively of relationships.

Similarly, since literary texts are a specific kind of linguistic phenomena, literature is also a sign system in which texts are signifiers and the meanings those texts convey are signifieds. Though in literature, "an organized surface of signifiers insistently promises meaning" (Culler, 1975, p. 19), yet what structuralists pursue is not the meaning, but the structure or grammar of literature because "the notion of a full and determinate original meaning that the text 'expresses' is highly problematic" (ibid.). "Poetry offers the best example of a series of signifiers whose signified is an empty… space" (ibid.). So, the signifiers lead our attention to themselves, which is the self-reflexity of literary signs, while structuralists work on the conditions of meaning, namely regulating the rules of literary signs.

Another feature of the linguistic sign is the linear nature of the signifier. In other words, the signifier "is unfolded solely in time…; it is a line" (Saussure, 1959, p. 70). It is this linearity that supports what Saussure calls "syntagms", which are combinations of linguistic elements arranged in sequence. There are also paradigmatic or associative structures or relations in which words "that have something in common are associated in the memory" (Saussure, 1959, p. 123). The notions of syntagms and paradigms are successfully applied by Jakobson in his analysis of poetry, in which he replaces syntagm and paradigm with the concepts of combination and selection. He argues that the basic feature of poetic language is its "unexpected, striking symmetries and antisymmetries, balanced structures, efficient accumulations of equivalent forms and salient contrasts…" ('Poetry of grammar and grammar of poetry', p. 602, in Culler, p. 57). In highly patterned language such as poetic language, similarity is superimposed on contiguity. Hence, "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" ('Linguistics and Poetics', p. 358, in Culler, p. 56).

All these linguistic structures, according to structural linguistics, should be discussed at given points in language development, namely within the synchronic structure of language. The 19th century was concerned with the diachronic structure of language, which focused on external factors, not language itself. Saussure reversed this emphasis in linguistic studies—following Saussure, structuralist criticism paid little attention to the history of literature. Levi-Strauss, for example, in *The Savage Mind*, attacked Sartre's emphasis on history in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Instead, structuralists emphasize the synchronic aspect of literature, since the laws of narrative discovered by the French structuralists are not temporal laws showing causations, but "transformational" rules indicating a topological relationship, which is different from succession.

4. The Iconic Mapping of Relations

There exist different relations among and within the structure discussed above.

"Language", as Saussure argues, "is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (Saussure, 1959, p. 114). In other words, the existence of linguistic elements relies on that of other, different elements, and each linguistic element derives its significance from its difference from others. So, Saussure comes to his conclusion that there are only differences without positive terms in language. In fact, for Saussure, the language system is a series of combinations of sound differences and conceptual differences. Another way Saussure puts it is that language is a form and not a substance, and in a language, everything is based on relations. Hjelmslev proposes an even more radical idea in that there is nothing in a language but pure relationships. Two dominant relations discussed in the *Course in General Linguistics* are syntagmatic and associative relations. These two kinds of relations belong to what Benveniste calls "distributional relations", which are "the relations between elements of the same level" (Culler, 1975, pp. 12-13). Benveniste also offers another kind of relations called "integrative relations", which exist between elements of different levels. But the relations that are most important in structural analysis are the simplest: binary oppositions. No matter what else the linguistic model may have done, it has undoubtedly encouraged structuralists to think in binary terms, to search for functional oppositions in whatever material they are studying. Indeed, the notion of relations is so widely used in structuralist literary analysis that Terry Eagleton claims, in *Literary Theory*, that we become structuaralists only when we state that the meaning of each image is wholly a matter of its relation to the other because the images do not have a "substantial" meaning, but only a "relational" one. Greimas, for example, does a job on character analysis when he reduces Propp's seven spheres of action to three pairs of binary oppositions of six categories: subject/object, sender/receiver, helper/opponent. These six roles are related to one another in that the object is desired by the subject and situated between the sender and receiver, and the subject itself has projections: the helper and opponent.

Binary opposition also appears in the literary analyses of other structuralists, as is evidenced in the discussions of narrative by Genette and drama by Barthes. To dissolve the problems of narration, Genette explores three binary oppositions (Selden, 1985, p. 62). The first, narrative/representation, presupposes a distinction between simple narrative and direct imitation. In fact, what is imitated is included in narrative because imitation involves what someone actually utters. So, the first opposition does not exist at all for Genette. The second opposition, narration/description, is about the difference between an active narration of actions and events and the narration of objects or characters. Yet, what is narrated, as Genette points out, is also descriptive. The second opposition becomes dissolved in Genette's mind. The third binary opposition, narrative/discourse, is a distinction between a pure telling and a telling where the teller is known to us. This opposition is immediately cancelled by Genette, since even the purest narrative is subjective.

The notion of binarism also penetrates Barthes' works. In *S/Z,* Barthes draws

distinctions between readable and unreadable texts, between the traditional novel and the modern novel, between intelligible and unintelligible texts, and between the pleasure of the text and the rapture of the text. Barthes deals with Racinian tragedies in binary terms, too. The common structures derived from individual tragedies can serve as the functional oppositions and the rules of the combination of the system of tragedy. He believes he has found three oppositions or relations: "the relation of authority, the relation of rivalry and the relation of love" (Culler, 1975, pp. 99-100).

5. Conclusion

As is shown above, structuralist criticism not only takes structural linguistics as an iconic model, but also relies on many technical terms of structural linguistics in the study of literature, which proves that the former is deeply rooted in the latter. While writers use their works as their own language system to signify the world in their experience, structuralist critics use linguistic terms and models to explain only the universal structure of literary works. Although structural linguistics helps to provide a new perspective for literary studies, structuralist literary analysis, as has been discussed, fails to discover the meaning of literary texts. In fact, what structuralists analyse is not meaning, but these abstract structures of literary texts, i.e. the conditions of meaning. It is their extreme reliance on language and linguistic models that makes structuralist criticism trapped in the "prison-house of language".

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About the author

Liang-lin Zhang (zll_edward@163.com), PhD, is Professor and Vice Dean of the School of Foreign Languages, Changshu Institute of Technology, China. The recipient of several academic awards and the director of a National Social Science Foundation project in China, he is a research fellow at the Research Centre for Linguistic Semiotics, Tianjin Foreign Studies University, and a member of the Board of the Chinese Association for Language and Semiotic Studies. Professor Zhang has published *Search for the Meaning-producing Mechanism of Linguistic Signs* (Soochow University Press, 2008) and two dozen articles, notably on semiotics, Morris, Carnap, Mead, structuralist literary criticism, information communication, metaphor, arbitrariness, iconicity, and linguistic signs. He spent one year doing semiotic research at Peirce Edition Project, IUPUI, and has been appointed "International Scholar and Visiting Research Associate at the Institute for American Thought" by the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts. His major focus bears on the semiotic ideas of Charles S. Peirce and Charles W. Morris.