Looking for a Breakthrough from Linguistics: Saussure and Structuralism Methodology

Jingyi Wang[*]

School of Literature, Northwest Normal University (NWNU), Lanzhou, China
wangjingyi2405@163.com
[*]*Corresponding author*

Abstract: Saussure's thoughts in A Course of General Linguistics profoundly influenced the emergence and development of structuralism in the 20th century. Many concepts put forward by Saussure, such as "signifier and signified", "language and speech", "synchronicity and diachrony" and "combination and aggregation", have a profound influence on structuralism. The structuralist Saussure's linguistic concepts are widely used in literature, anthropology, sociology and other fields. The structuralist methodology influenced by Saussure provides a third path for the humanities and social sciences besides positivism and hermeneutics. From the perspective of humanities and social sciences, the structuralist methodology based on linguistics has had an important impact, but it also left some problems and promoted the transformation from structuralism to deconstruction.

1. Introduction

Ferdi Nan de Saussure was a Swiss linguist, who published few works before his death. After his death, his students compiled and published a book "A Course in General Linguistics" according to the lecture notes. A Course in General Linguistics shows many concepts and propositions put forward by Saussure. Saussure's thought not only opened up a new path for linguistic research, but also had an important influence in other fields of humanities and social sciences. In the development of western literary theory in the twentieth century, structuralism under the influence of Saussure's theory and its post-structuralism or structuralism have exerted far-reaching influence in the social and humanistic fields. Language involves a wide range, and the problems involved in language are also extremely diverse. To explore the core research problems of linguistics, Saussure, starting from the Indo-European language family, grasped the general rules that play a central role in language in numerous language realities and language practices. Later researchers summarized Saussure's view as a structuralist language view.

Saussure put forward many important concepts in A Course of General Linguistics, among which four groups of concepts, namely, signifier and signified, language and speech, synchronicity and diachrony, and combination and aggregation, played an important role in the formation of structuralism, and influenced the formation of the concepts of surface structure and deep structure in structuralism. Although Saussure didn't combine "structuralism" with his linguistic view before his death, his basic thought caters to structuralism and the application of basic important concepts in

structural view all show that the core of his linguistic thought is closely related to structuralism, just like his analysis of language phenomena. Under all kinds of correspondence and profound influence, Saussure is considered as the originator of structuralism in the 20th century.[1]

The prosperity of historicism in Europe is the historical background of Saussure's A Course in General Linguistics and its theory. Historicism from the end of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century involves all aspects of humanities and social sciences. The philosophy of natural science has carried out a "revolution" to the society in its own way. Dilthey, a representative of historicism, advocates "historical relativism", which closely combines historicism with philosophy. He thinks that the central issue of philosophy is life, and the characteristics of life phenomenon are always changing. When it extends to the social field, culture is always innovating and never repeating. Therefore, social science, as opposed to natural science, should also find appropriate methods at the methodological level in order to better solve the problems arising in the field of humanities and social sciences. Therefore, Dilthey advocated that people should be self-centered and have subjective purpose and value pursuit. This method was summarized as the method of interpretation. Then, Dilthey's methodology of spiritual science hermeneutics was further developed, combined with phenomenology, and paid attention to people's subjective initiative.

The study of linguistics has also been further expanded in the methodology of historicism. Before Saussure's "A Course in General Linguistics" came out, comparative philology or "comparative grammar", that is, comparative linguistics in linguistics, was widely popular in linguistics. Comparative linguistics uses the method of interpretation to clarify language, and uses the form of formal interpretation to compare language, focusing on the investigation of the coherence and connection of language development. However, the investigation of the external content of linguistics, because of its shortcomings based on the methodology of spiritual science interpretation, makes comparative linguistics not really become a science, does not touch on the core issues of linguistics, and does not study the nature of linguistic research objects. "Saussure wants to put aside the influence of external factors of language for the time being and go straight into the language to study its own operation and even the laws of development and change."[2]

Therefore, in his own linguistic logic system, Saussure clarified the task of linguistics, which is to sort out the history of each language family in a nutshell. After defining the research scope of linguistics, Saussure denied that language is a "classified naming set" in the Course of General Linguistics, and that language symbols are not a simple connection between things and names, but concepts and acoustic images. Although the term "sound image" is a bit narrow, and the word is confined to its sound representation, and there is no muscle image covering its pronunciation representation and pronunciation behavior. However, in Saussure's theory, language is mainly accepted from the outside, and sound image is a potential language fact besides all words, and words are the best natural representation. The importance of language kinesthetic is self-evident, so the concept of sound is far more important than other components.

The word "symbol" is reserved to represent the whole, and the concepts of signified and signifier are used to replace the concept and sound system respectively to reflect their differences and the opposition between the whole to which they belong. The signifier refers to the concrete manifestation that when the abstract concept of a thing is spoken, different people's brains will have acoustic images in different languages. Saussure further defined the relationship between signifier and signified from the semiotics perspective. Each symbol is composed of "concept" that is, signified and "acoustic image" that is, signifier. Each symbol must be two sides of a whole, and signifier and signified are the basic characteristics of symbols. Saussure believes that symbols are arbitrary, that is, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, which is formed by arbitrary combination in the process of language development, such as one signifier can correspond to multiple signifiers.

In Saussure's view, language is a product of history. As a heritage, its change is not necessarily

related to the alternation of generations. Although it changes, it is slow and cannot be changed at will. Finally, a set of established grammar systems and language rules in people's minds is continuous. The principle of change is based on the principle of continuity, that is, the concept of speech covers the concrete application of fixed grammar system and language rules, which is "personal will and intelligent behavior" Language and speech are closely related, and language and speech are interdependent and prerequisite for each other. The practice of speech must be based on the premise that language is the grammatical system and language rules, and the perception of the existence of language must be embodied through specific speech activities. But language and speech cannot be confused. "He (Saussure) thinks that words are difficult to understand and describe and heterogeneous, while language is real and homogeneous, and its symbols can be understood and grasped."[2]

Saussure divided linguistics into static linguistics and evolutionary linguistics. According to the internal characteristics of language, he named them synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics respectively, with the same connotation and extension. On the basis of this concept, the synchronic principle and diachronic principle with universal significance are summarized. It can be seen that synchronicity has static characteristics, and diachronic is evolutionary and dynamic relative to synchronicity. Synchronic linguistics refers to the study of the relationship between different parts of a language and their respective characteristics at the same time. Diachronic linguistics is the study of the changes that have taken place in language during the long period of diachronic evolution. Synchronism shows the vertical relationship at a certain moment, while diachronic shows the linear horizontal relationship. According to the horizontal and vertical relationship, Saussure further summarizes the combination and aggregation relationship.

In the Course of General Linguistics, the combination relationship and the aggregation relationship are the sentence relationship and the association relationship. The relationship between combination and aggregation is closely related to synchronicity and diachrony, and its basic characteristics, as can be seen in Saussure's diagram, are expressed as the cross combination of horizontal axis and vertical axis. Combinatorial relation and aggregation relation are the basis of language state. In discourse, the line relationship between words is formed and combined to form sentence segments, while the aggregation relationship is manifested in the combination of words in human memory, which constitutes a collection of various relationships. This vertically arranged relationship is called association relationship, that is, aggregation relationship. Combinatorial relationship and aggregation relationship are Saussure's further exploration of the deep structure of language, the expansion of linguistics in time and space, and the fundamental law that endows language with internal nature.[1]

2. Saussure's four concepts and structuralist methodology

Although the four concepts put forward by Saussure are based on linguistics, their confirmation of the relationship between time and things can also be applied to the clarification of the relationship between social and cultural phenomena. In the process of the development of structuralist philosophy, Saussure's theory had an important influence on it. Structuralism began to rise in the 1950s. "Although structuralist linguistics, post-structuralist literature and philosophical thoughts are related and contradictory to each other, the initial motivation and ultimate goal of the thoughts are the same, that is, to get rid of the control of the humanistic thinking mode of metaphysical records, which has been dominant in western culture for a long time."[5]Influenced by Saussure, thinkers applied linguistic knowledge and concepts to explain social and cultural phenomena out of necessity. It can be said that the ideological source of structuralism can be traced back to Saussure. The core purpose of structuralism is to determine the basic frame structure that makes the experience in life possible.

Structuralism constructs its own core theory by analyzing the language structure, spiritual structure and social structure that work unconsciously. Although Saussure's Course of General Linguistics is a textbook used in his linguistics teaching, four groups of concepts in it play an important role in the development of structuralism. The relationship between the two is not a simple misappropriation, and the relationship between influence and affected is not limited to the four groups of symbolic concepts in the Course of General Linguistics. How to construct the relationship between the two and what kind of relationship is needed to expand the linguistic concept within the scope of philosophy and literary theory is a problem that needs to be discussed.

From the perspective of linguistics, Saussure regards language as the unity of concept and acoustic image, and pays attention to the structural relationship between them within the language. The two-sided thinking of signifier and signified is closely related to Husserl's viewpoint. Husserl believes that language is the symbol of meaning and the content of language, while character-sound is the material shell of language, which is unified by people's conscious activities. However, their concerns are not the same. Saussure focuses on the interior of the language and pays attention to the relationship between the two, while Husserl returns to the level of subjective intentionality, which is the decisive meaning of language meaning and material level. Husserl believes that the subject not only gives meaning to the language expression through intentional behavior, but also points to the object through the meaning contained in the language expression. In the process of understanding the object, the subject constitutes the essence of the concept and the cognitive category. "[4]Husserl's phenomenology regards consciousness as the essence of language activities. Sartre and other existential philosophers continue to pay attention to the role of intention, and think that subject is the source of all consciousness, which is in sharp contrast with the third path generated by structuralism, besides positivism and hermeneutics.

The relationship between synchronicity and diachronism provides a new way of thinking for structuralism. In addition to positivism and hermeneutics, structuralism has found a third way. Positivism has been successfully applied in the field of natural science, but it has had an important impact in the field of humanities and social sciences with people's subjective will as the core. People's independent consciousness will not and cannot be proved by the methodology pursued by positivism, so interpreting people's spiritual world is the second path. Structuralists see from here that it is far from enough to explain the value of spirit only from the perspective of human spiritual development history. The emergence of Saussure's synchronic and diachronic views provides a reasonable explanation for structuralists. The reasonable explanation of synchronicity and diachrony in linguistics can also be applied to the humanities and social sciences, which is not only to investigate the complicated changes of history, but also the constant structure in the development process is an important component. The synchronicity and diachrony do not conflict in relationship, and the coordinate framework formed provides an important theoretical guarantee for structuralists to study literature, art, society and other fields.

Structuralists proceed from the link formed by combinatorial relationship and aggregation relationship, and draw two important conclusions: first, why is the constructive ability of language association universally owned by human beings? Secondly, the combinatorial relationship and the aggregation relationship exist not only in language phenomena, but also in all human activities. Therefore, structuralists should find out the structure with universal significance from the diachronic history. Different from phenomenology and existentialism, which attach importance to intentionality, structuralism's human consciousness comes down to the surface, and what really affects people's consciousness activities is the structure in the deep level.

Roman jakobson put forward the word "structuralism" for the first time at the linguistic seminar in 1929. As for the ideological program of the Prague School initiated by it, the name of structuralism was used, and the structure was considered as a dynamic whole.[4]

Then, structuralism developed further in the fields of literature, anthropology, ethnology and comparative mythology. Levi-Strauss extended Saussure's structuralism in linguistics to anthropology and other fields, challenging phenomenology and hermeneutics with consciousness as the core. In Levi-Strauss's Structural Anthropology, "structure" is borrowed as the basic concept of scientific methodology model, and it is proposed that structure shows the characteristics of a system, which consists of several elements, and no element in such a system can change without affecting the changes of all other elements. Second, for a given personality model, it should be possible to produce a group of models of the same type by arranging a series of transformations. Thirdly, these attributes make it possible for us to predict how a model will react when one or more elements in the model are modified. Finally, such a model should be established to make all the observed facts understandable. Levi-Strauss's theory is the application of Saussure's combination and aggregation in anthropology and mythology. Usually, when we interpret a myth, we mainly read it in chronological order, but this only stays at the horizontal connection level of the myth. If we further analyze the narrative in myth, we need to vertically analyze the structure of myth and investigate the fundamental operation mode of myth. Levi-Strauss's most classic analysis is about the characters in King Oedipus, and according to the four columns of the same type of narrative, he finally gets the deep structure hidden in the myth, such as the opposition between nature and culture, the opposition between god and man, and the opposition between life and death. However, Levi-Strauss's myth analysis method, especially the confirmation of the basic contents of the four columns in fairy tales, is obviously subjective, which makes structuralist anthropologists inevitably subjective when they investigate social phenomena. Although the classification method is based on a sufficient number of cases and finds similarities, it is based on Levi-Strauss's fundamental subjective will in terms of fundamental classification method and classification logic. Levi-Strauss himself admitted that not only structuralism, but also Freud of psychoanalysis had a great influence on it. This also shows from the side that structuralists inevitably choose to use Saussure's synchronicity and diachrony, combination and aggregation in the process of seeking deep level, but when investigating human history and literature works with enough quantity and rich content, they will inevitably fall into the trap of subjective analysis. While avoiding consciousness and positivism, it will also be influenced by them at all levels, and there are problems at both subjective and objective levels.

3. After the wave: the problem of structuralism

"Literature is the art of language, which is one of the rare synchronic understandings of the essence of literature in academic circles."[6]Structuralism, which started with Saussure, played an important role in the 20th century, enabling people to acquire their own methods in the fields of humanities and social sciences, and to develop them in the fields of literature, ethnology, anthropology and sociology.

However, the method borrowed by structuralism, in the final analysis, originated from linguistics, which is divided more carefully and originated from phonetics under the branch of linguistics. In phonetics, the number of characters and the correlation between them constitute the possibility of the development and change of language phonemes. However, with the development of linguistics, linguists find that the composition of language can be changed. Deconstruction, which developed on the basis of structuralism, found this problem. Derrida pointed out that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified, and the concept will change in the process of human practice. In this way, the structure sought by structuralism at a deep level will shift under the influence of consciousness, that is, the most fundamental structure sought by structuralism will also change, while looking for a "dynamic" structure in the complicated appearance is the same as the shallow understanding of the content, and structuralism will never reach the other side of the

structure.

Secondly, the author's subjective initiative is also an important topic in the discussion of structuralism. It is meaningful for structuralism to criticize "author-centered theory" because it is "structure" that plays the most important role in the works. The basic viewpoint of the author-centered theory needs to make readers feel the author's psychology when he is creating through hermeneutics, and this subject-centered theory is the object of criticism by structuralism. When analyzing the relationship between works and writers, the semiotic theory of structuralism puts forward that the confirmation of thoughts can be expressed and maintained through the association of symbol systems, and identity is established through symbols, which are not created at will, but the symbol systems that existed before us. Although we seem to use these symbol systems subjectively on the surface, we are actually shaped by the text, and the subconscious plays an important role in the social framework.

4. Conclusion

In this way, structuralism introduces the theory of subject to the other extreme, putting text form before life form, using text structure to understand social structure and subconsciously controlling people's lives. The rules of language continue to develop diachronically. While we understand the rules of language, we should not clarify them subconsciously, but analyze them from practice to understand the rules of language, stories and society through the participation of the subject.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement

References

[1] Jiang Qiaohan, The Influence of Four Concepts of Saussure's Linguistic Theory on Structuralism, Youth Literator, vol. 12, 2015.
[2] Yang Life, Saussure's Linguistics and Derrida's Philosophical Change, Philosophical Studies, vol. 11, pp. 39, 2006.
[3] Zheng Min, Deconstruction and Literary Criticism, Foreign Literature Review, vol. 2, pp. 12, 1990.
[4] Zhang Qingxiong, Linguistics and Structuralism Methodology: An Investigation from Saussure, Social Science, vol. 5, 2020.
[5] Han Jiangling: Saussure's View of Language and Structuralism School, Modern Chinese, vol. 10, 2008.
[6] Li Hengtian, On the Linguistic Dimension of Literary Criticism, Literary Theory and Criticism, vol. 1, pp.116, 2009.