

De Saussure's Linguistic Theories

Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualized language as a system of differences. Each element of a language, according to de Saussure, is defined by its difference from other elements within the same language. For example, the primary manner of recognizing the letter "A" is through recognizing its differences from all the other letters in the same alphabet. Language, according to de Saussure, is a system of signs, and each sign, then, can be understood as a combination of a form (which is the "signifier") and a particular meaning (which is the "signified"). The relationship which occurs between the signified and the signifier, then, is based upon an agreed on convention, rather than some sort of natural resemblance. For example, I am writing this piece on de Saussure's theories of linguistics on what is called a "computer," but which might as easily have been called a "car." It is only because of an agreed upon convention of language that I call this object a "computer." You understand just what I mean when I offer the word "computer" to you. A language, then, according to de Saussure can be best understood as a system of signs that organizes the world and renders it comprehensible to us. Different languages, however, divide the world in different ways.

Literary theorists have taken a particular interest in de Saussure's notions and theories of language. Recent linguistically-focused literary theorists have identified a difference between what is termed "poetics" and "hermeneutics." The study of "poetics" offers a conception of how meaning is generated. "Hermeneutics," however, takes the opposite approach and explores questions of what a text means and different meanings which can be applied to it. The study of poetics and linguistics can be understood as being similar, though they are in fact quite different: the meaning of a piece of poetry written in a particular language would be far more relative and open to interpretation than a simple declarative statement written in the same language. In that respect, modern literary theory is far more similar to the practice of hermeneutics, for literary theory seems not to understand the function of literature but, instead, understands what a literary text means or suggests. Literary theorists, interpreting through the lens of linguistics, tend to examine the experience of reading the literature and interpreting the various systems of signs which are presented throughout it.

Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

A Saussurean linguistic approach to *Hamlet* would focus upon a close study of the language of the play and the ways in which the play's language serves to structure the play. Such a reading would focus not quite on the motivations of characters and various psychological elements of the play. In fact, most any theoretical approach to the play that seeks to come to some understanding of the play's meaning would be grounded, to



some measure, in the practice of “hermeneutics.” This method of approach would focus not on how Hamlet functions as a structured linguistic text but, instead, upon what meanings the play embodies and generates. However, an interpretation of the play that focuses on the play’s linguistic structures—the various signs and symbols that serve to structure the play—would be an act of “poetics” rather “hermeneutics.”

Study Questions:

1. What is the difference between poetics and hermeneutics?
2. Modern literary theory is more akin to which: poetics or hermeneutics?

Roland Barthes’s Semiotics

Roland Barthes was a French literary critic and semiotician. Barthes’s major critical concern was with exploring how a culture’s system of values and various ideologies are encoded in the culture’s languages and other social interactions. Barthes contended that these values and ideologies were spread throughout cultures through stereotypes or “mythologies.” Barthes believed that language was a powerful force that served to influence the way people understood the world around them. Language, according to Barthes, is always controlled by various cultural, social, and political ideologies and serves to structure the way we conceptualize the world in which we reside. Barthes’s theoretical work, then, served to challenge institutions and languages that allowed for one group of people to govern and control another. What Barthes was ultimately contending, then, was that most of what we consider to be natural within a culture is, in fact, based upon relative and subjective historical social, political, and cultural constructs. Barthes’s later work in semiotics (which is the study of signs and symbols), developed out of conception of the relativity of language. Through his study of signs and symbols, Barthes concluded that unlikely objects are signs and always function as part of a larger systems of signs in which the true meaning and intention of the signs themselves.

Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

A theorist approaching Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* through the perspective of Barthes’s notions of semiotics would focus on the ways in which the play enacts and critiques particular mythologies and stereotypes of Elizabethan England, such as rights of succession, phallogocentric ideological rule, and conflicts between the arising Protestant faith and Catholicism.



Study Questions:

1. What is semiotics?
2. How does language shape how we understand the world according to Barthes?

