

Study Material

Department of English

Name of the course: EM 18 LITERARY THEORIES-II

NAME OF THE MODULE: STRUCTURALISM LECTURE -3

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Today we will talk on the theory of the “Sign”, in parts.

- Language is not equal to reality. Had it been so, my mouth would burn when I utter “fire”. Rather, language *constructs* or makes reality for our thoughts, speeches, communications, and utterances. The minimum unit of such construction is called SIGN. For example, these two together—the sound or the written script of the word “fire”, and the image or meaning that such a sound/script evokes in the mind of the speaker/listener/reader, create the sign “fire” which conveys the actual substance called fire but is not equal to it.
- These two things [the sound or the scripted version of the sound, and the mental construct triggered by it] that make a SIGN are called the SIGNIFIER and the signified respectively.

SIGN = **SIGNIFIER** [the sound f-i-r-e] + **SIGNIFIED** [the image of fire that such a word evokes in our mind]

It is to be noted that the SIGNIFIED is not the object that it means, but a mental image of it.

The next diagram suggests the unity of sign, signifier and signified. Saussure said that signs were like pieces of paper; one side was the signifier, the other side was the signified, and the paper itself, the sign.



We cannot separate the signifier and signified from the sign itself. The signifier and signified *form* the sign.

There is one more point that is crucial. For Saussure the relationship between the signifier and signified is *arbitrary*, a matter of chance and convention. This does not mean, Saussure tells us, “that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker” but rather that it is “unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no *natural* connection with the signified” (1966:69) [my italics]*

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- **The connectedness of the SIGNIFIER and the SIGNIFIED is not natural. There is no reason for that particular sound f-i-r-e to evoke the mental idea of blazing fire. The connectedness is entirely conventional , not natural.**
- Language, after all, inheres not in ‘the material substance of words’ but in the larger and abstract ‘system of signs’ of which those words are the barest tip. The linguistic sign can be characterized in terms of the relationship, not in self-sufficient and autonomous foundation of words. Like any other signs as we commonly understand the word “sign” to be , it is based on a relation between the signal and the implied sense.
- The overall characteristic of this relationship is one that we have already encountered: it is arbitrary. There exists no necessary ‘fitness’ in the link between the sound-image, or signifier ‘tree’, the concept, or signified that it involves, and the actual physical tree growing in the earth. The word ‘tree’, in short, has no ‘natural’ or ‘tree-like’ qualities, and there is no appeal open to a ‘reality’ beyond the structure of the language in order to underwrite it.

Acknowledgement: parts of the study material is derived or taken from the following books:



