

ISSN-2249 5460

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES,
TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANITIES

www.internationalejournals.com

Available online at www.internationalejournals.com

International eJournals

International Journal of Mathematical Sciences, Technology
and Humanities 7 (2016) Vol. 6, Issue 3, pp: 63 – 66

Critical Theory: Meaning, Engagement and the Influence of Language with a focus on Structuralism and Deconstruction

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Abstract: In Philosophy and Social Sciences, Critical Theory has both a narrow and a broad meaning. “Critical Theory” in its narrowest sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. According to these theorists, a “critical” theory may be distinguished from a “traditional” theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer 1982). As these theories in its narrowest form seek to transform, alter and change all the practical purposes, new theories in its broadest form have been formulated.

Key Terms: Critical Theory, Language, Traditional, Structuralism, Deconstructionism

In philosophy and Social Sciences, Critical Theory has both a narrow and a broad meaning. In both the broad and the narrow senses, a critical theory provides descriptive and normative bases (Newton 24). Descriptive in the sense that it aims at decreasing the domination of social inquiry in all its forms; and normative in the sense that it aims at increasing the freedom of social thought. “Critical Theory” in its narrowest sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School.

According to these theorists, a “critical” theory may be distinguished from a “traditional” theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer 1982). As these theories in its narrowest form seek to transform, alter and change all the practical purposes, new theories in its broadest form have been formulated.

It is quite evident from Horkheimer's definition that a critical theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria: it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. This in turn means that critical theory must explain the nuances of social inquiry and thought, give a very rational and practical approach to explain it and also lay down a few norms and structures for its applicability and usability.

Since the 1950's, critical theory has been incessantly attacked by many theorists and discourses (Habib, 632). A major challenge came from Structuralism and later on from Deconstructionism. In protecting itself from the barbs of Structuralism, critical theory thus inaugurates twentieth century's obsession and engagement with language. It was during this time when linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Structuralists like Claude Levi Strauss came to the fore and heavily explained “language” not only as bearing signs and symbols but also as having a structure. Language took an entirely new form under the realm of these theorists.

Cultural systems thus, may be treated as “languages”, which means that they can be understood better when discussed in the light of linguistics. The distinctive feature common to both linguistic phenomena and structuralist enterprise, is Saussure's isolation of *langue* and *parole* (Culler 1975). The former is a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms, while the latter comprises the actual manifestations of the system in speech and writing.

Such distinctions do not concern the Structuralists so far as they indicate that structure can be defined at various levels.

Formalists had a long relation with language. Instead of content they were interested in form and structure. Roman Jakobson, an ideal figure in both Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism, developed a theory of language that had its bases in linguistics. Roger Fowler, on the other hand, criticized Jakobson's theory due to lack of social dimension and formalist bias. Tzvetan Todorov in his work 'Definition of Poetics' initially states that a literary text in itself is a sufficient object of knowledge; and that each text is the manifestation of an abstract structure (Newton 86). Gerard Genette states that literature is a work of language and structuralism its linguistic method; any encounter among them should be based on linguistic terrain. According to Roland Barthes, language is simply an instrument and to Jonathan Culler it is treated as mode of signification and communication.

In Post- structuralism, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan play an eminent role in explaining the importance of language. Derrida emphasizes on 'logocentrism', i.e. meaning is seen as existing independently of language (Newton 112). Derrida accepts Saussure's arguments about language, but goes on further to explain that language is also a never-ending chain of words. Foucault treated '*langues*' in the Saussurian sense, but language or literature according to him was not an individual creation but an emanation of a cultural system. Lacan too said that the unconscious was linguistic in its construct.

Likewise, we see that the twentieth century has an engagement and an overriding obsession with language, which is primarily heralded by the critical theory. Not only do Formalists and Structuralists engage themselves with language; Post- structuralists, Feminists

and Marxists too had a wide and varied exegesis about language. Language thus not only becomes an idea of great importance in the twentieth century, but it also forms the bases of almost all the theories developed in the twentieth century.

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