

## THEORIZING LANGUAGE: THE POSTMODERNIST PROJECT

**Minu Susan Koshy**

Ph. D Student

The English and Foreign Languages University,  
Hyderabad

**Raj Kumar**

M. Phil. Student

Central University of Haryana,  
Mahendergarh, Haryana

### ABSTRACT

Language has long been considered primarily as a medium of communication. In the wake of contemporary theoretical paradigms like postmodernism, we have to wonder whether language has functions other than mere communication of ideas. This paper attempts to explore what role language plays in this era of post-postmodernism, as signs and signifiers and signifieds assume varied meanings with the varied theoretical paradigms. The contributions of prominent postmodern thinkers like Derrida, Lyotard, Baudillard as also Wittgenstein, Helene Cixous etc would be re-examined in the context of the modern capitalist societies and the renewed significance of language as more than a means of communication and the impact of the linguistic turn on this particular idea would be explored.

“The limits of my language are the limits of my world”-

**Wittgenstein**

Language has long been considered primarily as a medium of communication. In the wake of contemporary theoretical paradigms like postmodernism, we have to wonder whether language has functions other than mere communication of ideas. This paper attempts to explore what role language plays in this era of post-postmodernism, as signs and signifiers and signifieds assume varied meanings with the varied theoretical paradigms.

First, let's look into what generally is associated with language other than communication, before exploring what function it has as per postmodernism. Language is perhaps the most important marker of ethnicity and identity. Language is an indicator of cultural distinctiveness. It forms a significant aspect of the culture and identity of a person and

acomunity. Language plays a very important role in the life of each human being and every ethnic community. It determines the way people view the world around them. Language and culture are interrelated. Language determines culture and vice versa. In his book *Language*, Sapir puts forward what is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: “Human beings ... are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society ... the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because certain choices of interpretation” (207). Whorf goes on to add that “we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages” (Carroll 212). Thus, our world view is influenced by our language. Similarly, language reflects our culture and identity.

Saussure is one among the most prominent structuralists who theorized on language and its functions. For him, “Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world” (Harris ix). Derrida followed up on Saussure’s views on language. He argued that meaning in language is constituted by difference and that words are polysemic. In his essay ‘Contemporary Literary Theory’, John Lye argues that contemporary theoretical paradigms rest on several premises about language, one of them being that “Language use is a much more complex, elusive phenomenon than we ordinarily suspect, and what we take normally to be our meanings are only the surface of a much more substantial theatre of linguistic, psychic and cultural operations, of which operations we are not fully aware. It is language itself, not some essential humanness or timeless truth, that is central to culture, meaning and identity. As Heidegger remarked, man does not speak language, language speaks man. Humans ‘are’ their sign systems, they are constituted through them, and those systems and their meanings are contingent, patch-work, relational. Consequently there is no foundational ‘truth’ or reality” (2) Here, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis assumes significance. Language constitutes reality in that what we perceive as the ‘real’ exists because it can be names through language.

In analyzing the relevance of language in contemporary theoretical paradigms, it is important to understand the concept of ‘linguistic turn’, which centers philosophy on the paradigm of language and argues that knowledge depends on language. Also there is no reality that is outside the range of language. Wittgenstein, one of the proponents of the linguistic turn introduced the concept of language games, which refers to the simple ways in which language is used. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he says “the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity or of a form of life” (23). It consists of “language and the actions into which it is woven” (7). Language games include fictional use of language, the language that children use and specific, simple languages with their own set of interrelations and rules.

Wittgenstein’s concept of language games was taken up by Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. In fact, the work is basically concerned with language, linguistics and phonology, and the role they play in cybernetics, legitimation etc. Lyotard says that with the credibility and legitimating function of grand narratives no longer present, we have to fall back on “little narratives”, which are, in actuality, Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’, which are limited and self-contained with specific and limited sets of rules. He makes three observations about language games: “The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own

legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players. The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a “move” or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define. The third remark is suggested by ...every utterance should be thought of as a “move” in a game. This last observation brings us to the first principle underlying our method as a whole: to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics” ( Lyotard 14). He analyses various types of utterances or language games (as for example, denotative, performative and descriptive utterances) and argues that each utterance in itself establishes a relationship, mostly hierarchical, between the sender, the addressee and the referent. With each type of utterance, given by senders in different positions in the hierarchical social order, the relationship undergoes shifts. The moves in one utterance cannot be used in another utterance, as the network will be destabilized. Lyotard goes on to say that language games play a major role in the formation of social bonds. The human child is born into a system of language. Even before he is born, he comes to exist as a result of language in that he/she is referred to in concrete terms because language and its games exist. Hence, “the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course” (14). When we deal with the question of the relationship between language and social bond, this itself becomes a language game, by virtue of it being a question. This question places the person who asks in a relationship with the addressee and the referent, thereby establishing a social bond. Thus, when language games themselves get fragmented, social bonds also undergo a process of dissolution.

For Lyotard Language games are related, to "speech communities" or "forms (or ways) of life, the communities within which language is used. The discussion of this crisis reflects rather a new approach. This new attention to language appeals to a new set of authority figures. In doing so it typically reflects one of two rather different sets of beliefs, although they are not always distinguishable.

The first is the belief that the inquiry into language is necessary because some combination of modern communication, advertising, and corporate culture has rendered the meanings of words much more slippery than they once were; this accompanies the view that language at one time was more meaningful than it now is. The second, rather different belief is that we were always mistaken in thinking that language is "connected" with the world in a simple, unproblematic way. Where it is argued that the nature of language has until now been fundamentally misunderstood, there have been two looming presences-Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. In the way in rejects the modernist orthodoxy, this latter view that we were always too trusting of language is echoed in Dear's assertion that "language lies at the heart of all knowledge" (1988, 266). Dear echoes the work of Rorty, for whom the notion that there can be discourse that is truly about the level of that which exists makes no sense. Both argue that this view, which they term "modernist," needs to be replaced by one where language is thought of as "going all the way down" to and, indeed, becoming inter-mingled with, reality. Indeed, for Rorty, and other like-minded philosophers, language is it- self taken to be an activity and language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist.

Lyotard argues that language has functions beyond communication. It is not a mere instrument for carrying information. The utterances have different meanings, functions and effects, depending on their form. He says:

...what is important is not simply the fact that they communicate information. Reducing them to this function is to adopt an outlook which unduly privileges the system's own interest and point of view. A cybernetic machine does indeed run on information, but the goals programmed into it, for example, originate in prescriptive and evaluative statements it has no way to correct in the course of its functioning- for example, maximizing its own performance. How can one guarantee that performance maximization is the best goal for the social system in every case? In any case, the "atoms" forming its matter are competent to handle statements such as these- and this question in particular. Second, the trivial cybernetic version of information theory misses something of decisive importance: the agonistic aspect of society. (15-16)

When changes are made in the form of language, there are consequent changes in the relationship between the sender, addressee and referent. And what Lyotard calls "countermoves" are initiated.

In his work *The Differend: Phrases In Dispute*, Lyotard attempts to develop his views on language. "A differend is a case of conflict between parties that cannot be equitably resolved for a lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both" (Woodward 1). He focuses on how injustice takes place with the consent of language, as in the case of the marginalized sections of the society, wherein explicit or implicit suppression of voices takes place. Woodward says:

Lyotard's ontology of events is developed here in terms of the phrase as event, and the limits of representation are seen in the indeterminacy involved in the linking of phrases. Lyotard calls the way phrases are linked together in series, one after the other, the concatenation of phrases. The law of concatenation states that these linkages must be made – that is, a phrase must be followed by another phrase – but that how to link is never determinate. There are many possible ways of linking on to a phrase, and no way is the right way. In order to characterize phrases as events which are beyond full understanding and accurate representation, Lyotard undermines the common view that the meanings of phrases can be determined by what they refer to (the referent). That is, for Lyotard the meaning of a phrase as event cannot be fixed by appealing to reality. Lyotard then defines reality as this complex of possible senses attached to a referent through a name. The correct sense of a phrase cannot be determined by a reference to reality, since the referent itself does not fix sense and reality itself is defined as the complex of competing senses attached to a referent. The phrase event remains indeterminate (1).

The linguistic turn has been very influential in asserting the idea that language is the center of the world- that our knowledge of the world is constituted by language alone. Saussure argued that "language is not a function of the speaking subject" (quoted in Zerzan 1). That is, it is language that constitutes the subject and not the other way round. Roland Barthes remarked that "It is language that speaks, not the author," and Althusser considered history as "process without a subject." All these point to the downfall of the subject and the rise to prominence of language. Language has thus come to exert an overpowering influence on the text as well as the subject. The text becomes a set of codes that the reader interprets according to the power

structures of his/her language. There is a constant play of language as a result of which terms and metaphors are given different interpretations according to the context in which they are used. As this play continues, layers of meanings are unearthed and buried again. The word becomes just a container, with no concrete and fixed content. It gradually becomes devoid of any specific meaning. With this view comes the argument that nothing is concrete. Nothing is inherently good or bad, right or wrong. It is the casing of the idea in language that matters.

Philosophers like Whitehead have also argued that language functions as the mediator between present and past experiences. Also, it is only through language that thought can emerge. Derrida also argues that language has an interpretive activity and that meaning emerges as a result of the position of the signifier in the network of several other signifiers which marks it as different from the other signifiers in the system. He also considered language as separate from the ‘reality’ outside.

Later, Jean Baudrillard argued in *Simulacra and Simulation* that language is ideological and hence, since we understand ‘reality’ in terms of language, there is nothing that is not ideological in what we perceive as reality. Hence, when we represent ‘reality’, it is always loaded with ideology and always shaped by simulacra. Again, language is the carrier of the ideology of a culture/ community. Different words have different connotations in different cultures/ registers. For example, while in the jargon of Christianity, the dichotomy Black/White may signify the opposition between goodness and evil, in a usage with political overtones, it can refer to the racial divide. In his essay “The Ideology of Modernism”, George Lukacs also argues that any language and text is influenced by the ideology of the speaker/writer and also that there should not be any hierarchy of signification, precisely because ideologies are prone to change. Thus, although reality is formed by language, it cannot be an objective reality sans prejudices or ideologies.

Postmodernists—particularly those affiliated with the theory of *poststructuralism*—argue that human experience (including that of the self and the body) is never direct, pure, or immediate. Instead, it is always-already structured by language. This is because the structure of language (e.g., syntax and semantics) creates a cultural technology that is utilized by institutions to shape the processes of human development.

In this process, *potential* human subjectivity is structured through discursive operations as an *actual* orientation (or *interpellation*) of the knowing subject toward Self, Other, and the World *as objects*. Because language is the medium for the reproduction of ideology, this process also means that the particular identities (or *subject positions*) we are “hailed” to assume by organizational discourses are prestructured to facilitate actions that are ideologically productive.

Julia Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, links language and psychoanalysis. She says:

Poetic language is dominated by certain features which are also found in the echolalias of children. That is, the rhythm, the music. Poetic language is musical and the music can often dominate the meaning. This dominance of music led me to recognize a resurgence of pre-language, of the music of infant echolalias in poetic language. In Freudian terms, infantile language can mean two things. First, it refers to what we call the pre-Oedipal phase—an important phase since it involves the whole issue of narcissism....So if poetic language displays pre-linguistic musicality, it’s because it also bears witness to our fragile narcissism and to the mother-child

relationship. This is clearly shown by the claims made by poets concerning their feminine, maternal nature, or homosexuality....Take Joyce, for instance. ...Thus contemporary literature has thrown itself into this exploration which deals with the archaic phases of language: the pre-Oedipal phase and maternal dependency. (32)

She argues that poetic language functions as a signifying system, i.e., “as a semiotic system generated by a speaking subject within a social historical field” (1). The semiotic chora, i.e., the rupture generated to reach a signifying stage, becomes the centre point over which discourses revolve. Chora is “a modality of signification in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of the object and as the distinction between the real and the symbolic” (217). The mother’s body becomes the stand-in between the semiotic chora and the symbolic order. Signifying processes work themselves out in texts. She argues that “the semiotic is associated with the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices” (122).

Again, in “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Helene Cixous argues that women’s “composition” (2) language has been hitherto suppressed by the patriarchal symbolic system. She says that women’s language has been so oppressed that women find it difficult to speak in a group of men. Again,

There is not that scission, that division made by the common man between the logic of oral speech and the logic of the text, bound as he is by his antiquated relation-servile, calculating-to mastery. ...In women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us—that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. Why this privileged relationship with the voice? Because no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man. (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 875-893).

The woman’s role as the procreator definitely has an impact on her language as well. Cixous asserts that women do and must use feminine symbols in their texts and that they should ‘speak’ out, that they should ‘voice’ themselves.

Postmodernism rejects so-called “reference” theories of language that assume symbols have naturally corresponding and preexisting objects. Instead, it focuses on how knowledge is produced as *an effect* of discourse’s ability to constitute *relationships* between subjects and objects—for example, in oral storytelling, written memos, or theatrical skits enacted at staff retreats.

Modern society has misplaced its assurance in the metanarratives of the past. As a result, Jean Lyotard recognizes that the modern collective is organized around 'language games' that are used primarily to authenticate people's behaviour. In these games a person attempts to persuade others to recognize his or her point of view as being valid. Each avowal takes on the appearance of the movement of a knight or pawn within a complicated game of chess. Jean Lyotard comprehends these games as having developed from the narrative itself, first through such things as passing along folk tales and legends and then toward the scientific language that developed over the last few hundred years. This scientific language became a game because it was dependent upon evidence used to challenge arguments raised against them.

As the social order penetrated into the post-modern era, however, faith went missing somewhere in the denotative language games, to be replaced by language games that utilized more technical jargon. Truth itself is no longer the overriding component; it has been replaced by a competition to discover if the game is actually useful within the human arena. This has resulted in the knowledge essentially being held hostage by capitalist ideology to the point that it has been transformed into little more than just another commodity to be bought, sold or bartered. Lyotard associates the increase in the significance of knowledge to the permeation of computers throughout all levels of society.

While Lyotard welcomes this democratization of knowledge as a movement toward opening up choice and freedom, Baudrillard has viewed it in terms of a darker comment on postmodern society. Jean Baudrillard judges society as having progressed to an entirely new epoch and he relates this evolution to the ways in which language and knowledge have changed. Where Baudrillard differs substantially from Lyotard is in viewing the consequences of this revolution as creating an inescapable trap. Baudrillard considers society to be a construct that is no longer based upon the production of material goods, but rather upon the selling of signs and images that are cynically detached from the reality of the products they are meant to represent. Baudrillard views postmodern world as a market of the senses made up of a litany and never-ending exchange of reproductions he has defined as "simulacra". These simulacra are metaphors for ideals and objects rather than the objects or ideas themselves. Baudrillard has even dared to suggest that the world's political leaders are themselves mere simulacra, lacking any authentic power and ability to effect real lasting change for the oppressed.

Drawing on semiotics, Baudrillard uses the sign/ signifier technique to explain consumption so that what we purchase is not just a product, but also a piece of a "language" that creates a sense of who we are. For Baudrillard, our purchases reflect our innermost desires so that consumption is caught up with our psychological production of self. Postmodern consumers can never be fulfilled because the products they consume are only "sham objects, or characteristic signs of happiness" and do not have any real power to bestow happiness to the possessor. The empty, unhappy consumers have no choice but to consume more products with the hopes of finding fulfillment. This is the driving force behind the capitalist machine.

Thus, language has a huge significance in the postmodern capitalist society. Also, as mentioned before, language in the postmodern world plays a major role in establishing the ethnic identity of groups and communities. Language also endows certain groups with the power to exert their superiority over other groups. This is especially evident when we take into consideration the issue of dialects and 'standard language'. Groups which utilize dialects are often assigned inferior positions in the cultural hierarchy. The power of language to establish or 'de-establish' the postmodern subject is irrefutable. To quote Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "Language is power. It has power to upset, uproot and shackle ... if you name the world, you own it. If you are dominated, you see the world through the eyes of the conqueror, effectively burying your memory under the conqueror's memory" (quoted in Devy, Davis, Chakravarty. Ed. 125-126).

## Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Illinois: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print.

- Carroll, J.B. *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Boston: MIT Press.1956.Print.
- Cixous, Helene, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*. 1.4 (1976): 875-893. Web. 25 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.dwrl.utexas.edu/~davis/crs/e321/Cixous-Laugh.pdf>>.
- Devy G.N., Davis,Geoffree, Chakravarty K.K.ed. *Indigeneity:Culture and Representation*.Vol:I.Hyderabad:Orient Blackswan.2009.Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Colombia University Press, 1984. Print.
- Levin, David Michael. *Language Beyond Postmodernism: Saying and Thinking in Gendlin's Philosophy*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997.Print.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. UK: Manchester University Press, 1984. Print.
- *The Differend: Phrases In Dispute*. London: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. Print.
- Lukacs, George. "The Ideology of Modernism". *The Critical Tradition*. Ed. David Richter. 218-231. New York: St. Martin's, 1984. Print.
- Woodward, Ashley. "Jean Francois Lyotard." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Australia: <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/lyotard/>>.
- Zerzan, John. "The Catastrophe of Postmodernism." . N.p., 09 Mar 2013. Web. 08 Apr 2013. <<http://www.primitivism.com/postmodernism.htm>>.