

Structuralism from the Viewpoint of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Propp, and Traces of Structuralistic Thinking in Contemporary Translation Theories

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The present paper is a theoretical research with a view to explicating *structuralism* as a major intellectual paradigm of the twentieth century still influencing much of the research and thinking which runs through numerous areas of science. Through presenting a brief account of the fundamentals of structuralism, an attempt has been made to explore its relationship with translation, and to identify traces of structuralist thought in two of the most important contemporary translation theories proposed. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable inclination towards specialization of the sciences – in its Aristotelian sense – marked by ‘scientism’ and ‘positivism’. This positivistic scientism saw an unprecedented boom and flourishing, which is reflected very well in the scale and magnitude of technological improvements characteristic of modern life. Such an approach, however, did not remain confined within the territory of ‘objective’, ‘concrete’, ‘hard’ science (e.g. physics, chemistry, mathematics, etc.), but found its way into more ‘subjective’, ‘abstract’ realms of man’s intellectual endeavors, such fields as literature, sociology, psychology, anthropology and the like. The field of translation was no exception to this rule. The twentieth century witnessed a more ‘scientific’ approach towards the study of translation. Many scholars have investigated the phenomenon of translation, as an act of interlingual, intercultural mediation, from a variety of perspectives. Among them are many whose works have, knowingly or unknowingly, been influenced by structuralistic thinking. The present study was an

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attempt to investigate the basic principles and foundations of Structuralistic thinking and its reflection, as an intellectual paradigm, in the approaches to and theories of translation prevailing in the twentieth century. It is worth mentioning that structuralism primarily deals with breaking down and analyzing complex systems into their constituents, and discovering the interrelations between these constituents that tie them together in order to maintain the system as a coherent whole. On this very basis, a structuralist's response to the question "what is water?" would be "a number of molecules each comprising one atom of oxygen plus two atoms of hydrogen stuck together in a certain manner." However, it is known for a fact that the water in one region might be totally different from that found in another in terms of smell, taste or other features. What structuralism strives to uncover is those basic elements common to a structure throughout the world, rather than the specific nuances contributing to the uniqueness of the individual items. This, underlies structuralism's claim to 'universality'. Bearing these features in mind, it would be only natural to see that linguistics was the field within which structuralist thinking could best flourish. Ferdinand De Saussure, the renowned Swiss linguist of the twentieth century, is considered one of the most outstanding figures who have contributed to structuralism. Of the three levels of analysis he proposes for investigating language, he is most concerned with '*langue*', which seeks to break down language to its building blocks, and to discover the rules that regulate the relation between those building blocks. He also believes that no idea or thought can ever exist outside of language. Thinking can only take place within language, and it is (the structure of) language that forms thoughts. The question of (in)separability of meaning from linguistic form is directly related to, and has important implications for, the concept of (un)translatability in translation studies. Another key figure among the pioneers of structuralist thinking is Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, who is, more often than not, considered the founding father of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss was interested in discovering 'eternal', 'universal' facts about human beings. He extensively studied kinship relationships in different human societies in the hope of finding the commonalities. Here, the individuals (father, mother, son...) are the components of the kinship system, the regulation of which dictates who can or cannot marry who, who does or does not inherit from whom, and so on. Another important tenet is the existence of 'binary opposites' throughout the world. Lévi-Strauss believes that if there is only one thing common to all human

societies, it is the fact that people always tend to think in terms of binary opposites such as good/bad, light/dark, male/female, strong/weak, big/small, and so forth. More interestingly, there always seems to exist a bias within these binary opposites; one is always preferred to the other. This feature of structuralist thinking came under severer attack by post-structuralists towards the end of the 20th century. Lévi-Strauss also studied the myths of different peoples and discovered that the myths belonging to different societies and cultures are not only similar, but also identical.

The Russian formalist, Vladimir Propp, was another outstanding scholar who studied folk-tales in a similar manner, and discovered that although the characters were different, the functions they served were limited and almost fixed.

In considering, the second issue (research question), the concepts of '(un)translatability' and 'equivalence' can be very useful. On the question of (un)translatability, there have been three major stances: the rationalist approach which implies that meaning and form are completely independent and separable from each other; the relativist approach which posits that meaning and form are completely inseparable; and the in-between approach, represented best by Schleiermacher, which can be located between the previous two extremes. On this issue, the approaches adopted by Catford and Nida, as two outstanding translation scholars, can be categorized under the rationalist approach, which favors translatability. On the whole, they believe that anything that can be said in one language, can be said in another language as well. This can be seen in Nida's explanations on dynamic equivalence and Catford's conception of equivalence in an explicitly mathematical sense. From a linguistic perspective, both Catford and Nida base their theories of translation on linguistic concepts which are structural in nature: Catford's theory of translation is based on Firth's linguistic ideas while Nida utilizes certain concepts from Chomskyan linguistics to propose his three-stage process for translation. They also both entail some sort of componential analysis, characteristic of structuralist thinking.

Keywords: Structuralism, Scientism, (Un)Translatability, Equivalence, Catford, Nida.