

Meaning and Structure

Structuralism of (Post)Analytic Philosophers

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Structuralism and Analytic Philosophy

If you open a book about language or about our knowledge of the world written by an analytic philosopher, it is quite probable that you will find repeated invoking of the concept of *structure*. The concept is essential not only for such classical works as Carnap's *Logical Structure of the World* (1928) or Russell's *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914), but also for writings of many contemporary (post)analytic philosophers, like Quine (see especially his 'Structure and Nature', 1992b). If the term 'structuralism' were up for grabs, it would be, I think, not too far-fetched to speak about a 'structuralism of (a part of) analytic philosophy'. No wonder: the concept of *structure* is of course intimately related to that of *analysis* – we reveal structures by analyzing wholes into parts.

However, the fact is that the term is *not* up for grabs: it has already been claimed by a philosophical stream stemming from the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, flowing through all of this century's philosophy, especially in France, and deeply influencing contemporary philosophical atmosphere on the European continent. Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze figure as the key names. Is then this French structuralism in some way similar or parallel to analytic philosophy? Surprisingly, the contrary seems to be the case: these two philosophical movements are often taken as almost paradigmatic antipodes: French structuralism appears to be the exemplary example of the kind of 'irrational' philosophy which analytic philosophy was devised to extirpate.

It is beyond doubt that the way philosophy is done by Foucault or Derrida is so different from that in which it is pursued by Russell or Quine that the two enterprises are almost incommensurable (Richard Rorty's and others' attempts to confront them notwithstanding). However, is this true also for de Saussure? Is *his* way of viewing language so different from the way language is usually viewed by analytic philosophers? In fact, it does not seem so: de Saussure's principal work, *Cours de linguistique générale*, is an austere written scientific treatise, worlds apart from Derrida's stylistic jugglery.¹

¹ This fact has caused Pavel (1989, p. vii) to accuse the French structuralists of completely misreading de Saussure: "They mistook the results of a specialized science for a collection of

In view of this, I think it is interesting to confront de Saussure's own kind of structuralism with the ideas put forward by analytic philosophers. Given what we have just said, could it not be that some of the analytic philosophers are really closer to him than his avowed followers? In this book I will argue that this is indeed the case; namely that contemporary (post)analytic philosophy, particularly in the vein of Quine, Davidson, Sellars and Brandom, is in many respects congenial to de Saussure's teaching.

1.2 Why not the French Structuralism?

Is the aversion of analytic philosophers to the French structuralists substantiated, or is it the result of their inability to appreciate a different style of philosophical thinking? In developing an 'analytical structuralism', should we attempt to incorporate the results of continental structuralism?

It is well known that the opinion of many analytic philosophers is stringent: the work of Derrida and company is sheer rubbish and has nothing to do with real philosophy. Recently this attitude has gained further support from the analyses of Sokal and Bricmont (1998), which demonstrate that the manner in which many of the French philosophers employ scientific concepts is often suspiciously close to the way such concepts are used by people who do not understand them but want to look learned. However, on the other hand, there are analytically minded philosophers who appear to take their French colleagues seriously, and even try to adumbrate points of convergence between them and the major exponents of analytic philosophy (see esp. Wheeler, 2000).

It seems that what lies behind the elusiveness of a great deal of continental philosophy and what so irritates analytic philosophers is the implicit conviction of its exponents that truly philosophical questions are only those which do not allow for a rigorous, explicit answer; those which can be attacked only indirectly, 'metaphorically'. Here I am not going to argue that this attitude is misguided or capricious. Perhaps philosophy *should* attempt at attacking questions which are not answerable in the way required by the standards usually presupposed by analytic philosophers; perhaps sticking uncompromisingly to these standards we indeed rid ourselves of the possibility to deal with *some* problems with which we, as philosophers, *should* deal. (From the history of this century's philosophy we know that the reasonable demand that we should only use clear

speculative generalities. They believed that breathtaking metaphysical pronouncements could be inferred from simple-minded descriptive statements."

concepts can be easily turned into the unreasonable demand to use only concepts which are explicitly defined in a way concepts can be really defined only within mathematics). However, what I *am* going to argue for is the converse thesis: that there are interesting philosophical questions which are answerable more or less explicitly and with respect to which the ‘continental attitude’ is simply inadequate. And one cluster of such questions is, in my opinion, precisely that which is centered around the concept of structure, especially of the structure of language.

It is not the purpose of this book to give a systematic critique of French structuralism, but perhaps I should explain in greater detail why I think these philosophers fail to cope with the problem adequately. Let me, therefore, briefly discuss general principles of structuralism as envisaged by one of the key figures of the movement, Gilles Deleuze (1974). In the seven chapters of his text, Deleuze offers what he claims to be seven criteria definitive of structuralism. In the introduction he explicitly states that what he is after are “*formal* criteria of recognition” (p. 259). Unfortunately though, as I see it, the book actually contains no criteria worth the name altogether (let alone *formal* criteria). Let us look at Deleuze’s account more closely.

In the first chapter Deleuze claims: “The first criterion of structuralism ... is the discovery and recognition of a third order, a third reign: that of the symbolic. The refusal to confuse the symbolic with the imaginary, as much as with the real, constitutes the first dimension of structuralism” (p. 260). Well, this may seem to resemble a criterion – but only at first sight. Could the claim that besides the realm of the real and the realm of the imaginary there exists a third realm of the symbolic be taken as a criterion? Certainly; however, only as long as it is clear what characterizes such a ‘world of the symbolic’; and this is what Deleuze fails to clarify. The point is that the existence of *some* ‘third reign’ would be accepted by the great majority of philosophers of all times (with the exceptions of those who, like William Ockham, made their philosophical living out of its rejection). Many of them, from Plato to those inspired by modern mathematics, would even defend its existence with a vengeance. Are all of them supposed to be structuralists? And if not, what distinguishes the structuralistic acceptance of ‘the symbolic’ from the wide acceptance of something like ‘objective abstracts’? Of course that *symbols* are supposed to symbolize *something*; so does Deleuze implicitly assume that a structuralist not only accepts a ‘third reign of being’, but also takes its elements to be somehow related to some other entities? Or is he characterized merely by the fact that he *calls* his ‘third reign’ the ‘reign of the symbolic’? These are questions the answers to which I find nowhere in the chapter.

In the second chapter Deleuze attempts to explain what it is to be a “symbolic element of a structure.” (p. 262) He states that “the elements of a structure have neither extrinsic designation, nor intrinsic signification”, that they “have nothing other than a *sense* [...]: a sense that is necessarily and uniquely ‘positional’” (*ibid.*). Of course it can be intuited what he is after: however until he explains what makes the difference between his “designation” and “signification”, on the one hand, and “sense”, on the other, his pronouncements are unclear to the point of uselessness. And this is again something he never does. Neither of the further formulations to be found in the chapter offer much help in promoting a novice’s understanding the concept of structuralism. “Structuralism cannot be separated from a new transcendental philosophy, in which the sites prevail over whatever fills them. Father, mother, etc., are first of all sites in a structure ...” It seems to be evident that philosophy is not to aspire to deal with individual fathers and mothers, but at most with the corresponding ‘abstract’ roles (or concepts). It seems also evident that such roles are in multiple ways inseparably interconnected (thus the role of *father* clearly involves, e.g., that of *man* and is unthinkable without the roles of *mother* and *child*), i.e. constitute a certain structure. However, this by itself does not seem to be something which would appreciably enhance the common way of thinking about relationships among people and social structures, and what would thus be capable of grounding a new, path-breaking philosophical direction. And what does it mean that “sites prevail over whatever fills them”? Does it mean simply that for an individual to be, e.g., a father, there must exist the role or the property or the concept of father? If so, then it is clearly again nothing original; if not, then it remains unclear *what* more it is supposed to mean.

I fear that an adherent of Deleuze would call my objections pedantic or uncharitable, and say that my criticism stems from my taking Deleuze’s pronouncements out of context – simply that the problem is my inability to tune myself to the author’s frequency. Perhaps there is some truth in this; maybe my objections to the first two chapters are indeed somewhat dogmatic. However, I would be very unwilling to concede this for the objections I am now going to raise against what the author writes in the third chapter: there Deleuze invokes examples from mathematics, and he does so in a way which does not seem to me to make any intelligible sense.

Let me quote: “We can distinguish three types of relations. A first type is established between elements that enjoy independence or autonomy: for example, $3 + 2$ or $2/3$. These elements are real and these relations must themselves be said to be real” (p. 264). What kind of relations is meant? “ $3+2$ ” is a numeric expression, in a certain sense it can be seen as the name of the number 5, in a different sense as the expression of something as a

‘construction’ of the number out of the numbers two and three² – however, in no sense is it an expression of a relation – at least if we stick to how we normally talk in mathematics. (A relation in which 3 and 2 stand would be, e.g., *greater than*; the corresponding statement would be “3>2”). I see only two possible alternative explanations of what Deleuze could mean by the term “relation” here. It seems that either

(1) he uses the term “relation” for what is normally called *operation* (i.e. addition, subtraction, multiplication etc.) and says “relations obtain among elements” instead of the usual “operations are applied to elements”; or

(2) he talks not about numbers, but rather about *numerals* and means the relation *to be connected by the symbol “+” or “/”*.

To find out which of the two hypotheses would be more adequate, let us look at how he continues: “A second type of relationship, for example, $x^2 + y^2 - R^2 = 0$, is established between terms for which the value is not specified, but that, *in each case*, must however have a determined value” (p. 265). An equation, such as “ $x^2 + y^2 - R^2 = 0$ ”, can indeed be seen as a delimitation of a certain relation, in this concrete example the relation which holds among three numbers if and only if the difference between the sum of the quadrates of the first two of them and the third one is zero.³ However, this is a relation among *numbers*, and we have just concluded that this is not what Deleuze could possibly have in mind. What he says now, though, seems to pre-empt also the possibility that his talk about relations is to be understood as a talk about operations; for there seems to be no substantiation for saying that the second case involves *different* operations. Equations are designedly built up from the very same operations which can be encountered within numerical expressions. So we seem to be left with my interpretation (2), i.e. the idea that Deleuze speaks about *symbols*: now he explicitly invokes “*terms* for which the value is not specified”. The problem, however, is that if what is in question are relations among symbols, then it is utterly unclear what constitutes the difference between the two types of relationships. The symbols “*x*”, “*y*” and “*R*” within “ $x^2 + y^2 - R^2 = 0$ ” are in the same relationship (i.e. in the relation *to be connected by a symbol of an arithmetical operation*) as the symbols “3” and “2” within “3 + 2”.

The upshot is that before I can move to what, according to Deleuze, is the third type of relations, I am already lost – for what he says does not make any sense to me. I suspect that here the only available conclusion is

² See Tichý (1986).

³ It is the relation in which the coordinates of a point on a circle (with center in the origin of the coordinate system) are to the radius of the circle.

that Deleuze's way of treating mathematical concepts is merely another case of the kind of "abuse" diagnosed by Sokal and Bricmont. The difference between "3 + 2" and " $x^2 + y^2 - R^2 = 0$ " is twofold, neither of which seems to be a matter of "two kinds of relations". The first difference concerns the grammatical category of the expressions: "3 + 2" is, grammatically, a *name* (a *term*, in the jargon of logic); whereas " $x^2 + y^2 - R^2 = 0$ " is a *sentence* (*formula*). The second difference is a matter of the fact that the expression "3 + 2" is *closed*, that it is a 'fully-fledged' expression (we can see it as yielding a definite number, namely 5), whereas the expression " $x^2 + y^2 - R^2 = 0$ " is *open*, it is thus in fact a *schema* (it does not express anything about any particular numbers and is, by itself, neither true nor false). Hence it seems misleading to say that in the latter case we have "terms for which the value is not specified"; it is a relation among *numbers*, and this relation is specified by means of certain "terms for which the value is not specified" (if we want to introduce such a new name for what is usually called *variable*). The corresponding relation can be seen as a set of triples of numbers and the equation in question as the specification, the delimitation of the set: it specifies it as the set of all such triples which satisfy the equation.

And in this way I could proceed all through Deleuze's book. Is my analysis, along with those of Sokal and Bricmont, inadequate in the sense of taking at face value something which has only an indirect, metaphoric meaning? Perhaps – though it is *always* possible to counter *any* arguments of the kind of those I have presented above by saying: "What you call 'abuse' is actually an enlightening metaphor". There is, to be sure, no criterion for what is, or what is not, a good metaphor; so there can be no knock-down argument to prove that something is a real instance of 'abuse'. (And the fact that Deleuze and his colleagues are so widely read and discussed corroborates the view that calling what they do an "abuse" would be at the very least an oversimplification). In view of this, I do not want to press my protests against what Deleuze says; what I protest against is what he does *not* say. What I miss is a more explicit clarification of the crucial concepts and a consequent formulation of satisfactory *criteria* of structuralism. My opinion is that his attitude does not provide for the kind of theory which is needed, and for which we will search in this book.

1.3 Contemporary (Post)Analytic Philosophy and Structuralism

What, then, if not the French way? Does analytic philosophy offer us a better lead? The thesis of this book is that it does, although couched in a

jargon so different from the Saussurean one that it is not easy to see that it is a kind of structuralism.

The only explicit discussion of Saussurean structuralism within the context of contemporary analytic philosophy of which I am aware is given by Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny in their *Language and Reality* (1987, Chapter 7).⁴ In their brief exposition of the Saussurean approach to language, the authors make two points which are important for our current project.

First, they point out that the structuralistic approach is essentially *holistic*. “The meaning of each term,” as they put it (*ibid.*, p. 213), “is defined by its place in the entire structure; it has no identity except in that structure. ... We cannot coin a term, giving it a meaning, and simply add it with its meaning to the language.” This is an aspect which differentiates de Saussure from *some* analytic philosophers, but by far not from all of them. In fact, it constitutes the affinity between de Saussure’s teaching and the views of that part of contemporary analytic philosophy which draws on the writings of Quine (and, also, Sellars): needless to say that holism is one of the pillars of Quine’s view of language. And as holism and a certain kind of structuralism are indeed two sides of the same coin (as we will try to show later), Quine’s structuralistic inclinations are not so surprising.

However, Devitt and Sterelny object to de Saussure’s version of holism for the reason that it is part and parcel of a counterintuitive view of language as a self-contained game, isolated from the extralinguistic world, and “to be explained entirely in its own terms without any reference to anything outside its structure” (*ibid.*, p. 214). They point out that the favorite analogy of de Saussure, the comparison of language to chess, itself invites this view of language: chess *is* self-contained; but language, according to Devitt and Sterelny, is not.

I think Devitt and Sterelny are correct here. However, what is the consequence of this for a theory of language? Devitt and Sterelny diagnose the source of the counterintuitive Saussurean ‘autonomy of language’ as the failure of de Saussure and his followers to recognize that the central function of language is to refer to objects. “The rejection of reference,” they write (*ibid.*, p. 215), “is central to the relational, holistic and autonomous view of language that is definitive of structuralism.” And their verdict is unambiguous (*ibid.*, p. 218): “structuralism’s rejection of reference is not well based and is thoroughly implausible”.

Whereas I agree that the ‘self-containedness’ of language which looms from de Saussure’s picture is implausible, I do not think that the only

⁴ It was pointed out to me by Kevin Mulligan.

response is the rejection of holism and the (re)installment of the concept of reference in the center of language theory. What is the basic difference between language and chess? While the moves of chess aim only at each other (a chess move ‘makes sense’ only conceived of as a response to other chess moves or as prompting further moves), ‘language games’ are somehow ‘open to the world’. Frequently we either make an utterance in response to something non-linguistic or we respond to an utterance by a non-linguistic act. Language indeed is no self-contained game, it is one of our means of coping with the rest of the world. However, I think we can account for this kind of ‘openness’ of language without abandoning the basic holistic and structuralistic insights. One version of such a theory was proffered by the late Wittgenstein;⁵ however, in this book I would like to examine another (although in many respects parallel) approach, the approach opened by Quine and Sellars and continued by Davidson, Brandom and others.

1.4 Plan of the Book

The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of three chapters.

In the first part I introduce those aspects of the Saussurean legacy which I find crucial and which can be seen as congenial to the views of language entertained by the ‘postanalytic’ philosophers of the kind just mentioned. In this part’s opening chapter, *What is Meaning?*, I sketch my reasons for being interested in the perhaps *prima facie* implausible structuralist view of meaning. I briefly review the standard, non-structuralist accounts of meaning and indicate how problematic they become on closer examination; and I suggest that structuralism might be a viable alternative.

In the following chapter, called *What is Structuralism?*, I outline the crucial theses of de Saussure’s structuralism and indicate that his insights need not be incompatible with those constitutive of analytic philosophy. In particular, I compare de Saussure’s account of what he calls “linguistic reality” with Gottlob Frege’s account of the nature of abstract entities and I conclude that these two theories exhibit surprising similarities. I suggest that what de Saussure lacked and what prevented him from entirely disentangling his structuralist theory of language from the snares of pre-structuralistic mentalism was a theory of abstract objects of the kind proposed by Frege and later developed by the twentieth century logic and mathematics.

⁵ It is not without interest that the chess metaphor was central for Wittgenstein no less than for de Saussure (see Peregrin, 1995a, §8.3).

In view of this I make an attempt to reconstruct de Saussure's key theses in mathematical terms. This constitutes the last chapter of the first part of the book, called *Parts, Wholes and Structures: Prolegomena to Formal Theory*. I claim that as structure is a way in which some parts are organized into a whole, we need a theory of systems of parts and wholes; and I consider the theory proposed for this purpose by Stanisław Leśniewski and elaborated by his followers. I conclude that this theory is not exactly what we would need and offer a sketch of a more suitable mathematical theory. With its help I try to make a mathematical sense of the Saussurean idea of the birth of 'the structural' out of oppositions.

In the second part of the book I turn my attention to the postanalytic philosophers whose views of language I want to portray as continuous with de Saussure's teaching. The first of its chapters, *Translation and Structure*, is devoted to the views of Willard Van Orman Quine. I argue that Quine's widely discussed indeterminacy theses can be read as simply pointing out the structural nature of language. In general, I claim that Quine's holism, with which he replaces the atomism of his analytic predecessors, is nothing else than a form of structuralism.

In the next chapter, *Truth and Structure*, I discuss the views of Donald Davidson. I argue that Davidson can be seen as complementing the Quinean variety of structuralism with an important new insight revealing – couched in Saussurean terms – that the opposition which is crucial from the viewpoint of meaning is that between truth and falsity. I review the way in which, on Davidson's account, truth gets projected into individual meanings and I consider consequences which this picture of language has for Davidson's philosophical views.

The last chapter of this part of the book is called *Inference and Structure* and deals with the view of language originally put forward by Wilfrid Sellars and recently developed by Robert Brandom. I argue that this view can be seen as elucidating the *rationale* behind the structural character of language. According to Brandom, language is first and foremost our means of engaging in the practice of *giving and asking for reasons*; and hence its statements are useful only insofar as they are interrelated with other statements, as they can be used as reasons for other statements or be justified by means of other statements.

The third part of the book is devoted to the discussion of some consequences of the acknowledgement of the structural nature of language. In the first chapter of this part, *Meaning and Inferential Role*, I summarize the outcome of the previous considerations by claiming that the structure of language that is constitutive of its semantics is the *inferential structure*, and that the meaning of an expression, as Sellars suggested, is most adequately

identified with its ‘inferential role’. (And I indicate that this is compatible with the claim that semantics is grounded in the truth/falsity opposition, for inferential role is what the truth/falsity opposition becomes when it is ‘compositionally projected’ to the elements of language). However, I also try to show that this construal of meaning does not necessarily imply the rejection of ‘formal semantics’. Formal semantics, I claim, is not to be dispensed with, but rather only understood as the means of envisaging the inferential structure.

In the chapter, *The ‘Natural’ and the ‘Formal’*, I consider the general relationship between the realm of formal structures and models (such as those dealt with by formal semantics) and that of real phenomena (such as our natural language). I suggest that the situation is best seen in terms of our using the former as a prism to perceive (and to ‘make sense’ of) the latter. This, in my view, leads to a certain kind of ‘dialectics’: formal structures which we study when we do formal logic or formal semantics are non-empirical entities which are to be handled by mathematical means, but the question which of them are relevant for our understanding non-formal entities (which of them are structures *of* these entities) is an empirical question.

The last chapter of this part, *Semantic Structure of Language and of its Expressions*, challenges some common wisdoms regarding ‘semantic structures’ or ‘logical forms’ of expressions. I try to show that from the vantage point presented in the book, both the concept of ‘logical form’ as developed by Chomsky and his followers, and that as developed by the logicians following Russell, are problematic.

1.5 Acknowledgements

This book is a completely reworked version of a text which appeared in Czech under the same title (*Význam a struktura*, OIKOYMENH, Prague, 2000). The revisions stem from two sources: they partly reflect the fact that the Czech edition had to be much more explicit on many points which for an ‘international reader’ are a matter of course; and partly hopefully also from a better grip I have gotten on the subject matter since finishing the Czech version. In any case, the work can be seen as a synthesis of various projects I have pursued during recent years, so in this sense it is indebted to the institutions sponsoring the individual projects: *Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung*, *Research Support Scheme* and especially the *Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic*, which directly sponsored my work on the Czech text. I am grateful to the colleagues and friends who commented on various parts of earlier versions of the manuscript and thus

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