
Transition from Phenomenology to Structuralism

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Abstract

The intersection of phenomenology and structuralism, often perceived as opposing theories, reveals a nuanced relationship between the internal realm of consciousness and the external structures of language. While structuralism has been labelled as 'anti-phenomenology' due to its emphasis on language structures, a deeper examination suggests a gradual transition rather than outright opposition. This evolution is rooted in the philosophical discourse of key thinkers. Edmund Husserl, a foundational figure in phenomenology, acknowledged external social forces in the interpretation of human acts, paving the way for a broader understanding of subjectivity. Martin Heidegger, departing from Husserl's consciousness-centric approach, introduced the existential concept of 'dasien,' emphasizing the differential and relational nature of the self-world relation. Heidegger's later works, particularly "The Origin of the Work of Art," underscored the centrality of language, aligning with structuralist perspectives. Hans-Georg Gadamer extended Heidegger's ideas, asserting that being in the world is primordial and linguistic, connecting language to historical traditions. This concept resonates with Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist framework, where language's structure (langue) exists independently of individual minds, manifested through speech (parole). Saussure's emphasis on the arbitrariness of language aligns with Heidegger's relational and differential nature of meaning.

Keywords: Phenomenology, structuralism, Dasien

Introduction

Phenomenology and structuralism are two opposite theories, and very often has the latter been considered 'anti-phenomenology' because phenomenology is said to be the 'science of consciousness' while the main focus of structuralism remains on the external independent structure of language (langue). Yet, at a philosophical level, this shift from the internal to external or from consciousness to language does not seem to be based on opposition; it rather appears to be the end-product of a gradual transition. This transition makes sense to be understood because phenomenology is not completely blind to what structuralism takes into consideration later on. The external independent structure or social forces that structuralism deals with are discussed considerably by Husserl in his debate about the human acts that the individual 'subject' perceives to be similar to his or her own. This subject-world or self-world (the world

Includes acts of the other as well) relation that Husserl explains is later conceptualized by Heidegger who declares that the understanding of the world becomes possible only through

relations, differences and contrasts between objects. Then the latter Heidegger propounds that this being there in the world is being there in signs and language. He remarks that 'language is the house of being'. But it is Gadamer who takes this view further and declares that 'being-there-in-the-world is primordially linguistic'. Meaning becomes possible through relations and differences between words. It is this relational and differential nature of language that leads Saussure to remark that 'language is not substance but form'. Based on this view Saussure renders forth certain concepts and categories that give birth to Structuralism and post-structuralism.

Edmund Husserl

Although meaning, according to Husserl, lies neither in the mind nor in objects but in the intentional relationship between the two, his main focus remains on subjective consciousness. The mind intuitively perceives the object as it appears to it. This awareness of the appearance of something is transcendental. The self is not only conscious of this appearance but of itself too. Owing to this subjectiveness in his phenomenology, Husserl was charged with solipsism. To answer this charge Husserl explains the 'natural surrounding world' in his book *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. He says "this world is there for me not only as a world of mere things but also with the same immediacy as a world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world." (53) He goes on to explain that the laws of making sense of the natural world are common among 'subjects'. His main aim here is to reach after this objectivity that he claims is there among all 'subjects'. The mind observes the acts of others, and again intuitively perceives that these acts are similar to its own. Thus he says "All that holds for me myself holds, I know, for all other human beings.... I do this in such a way that I take their surrounding world and mine objectively as one and the same world of which we all are conscious" (p. 55). So Husserl seems to be implying that the objectivity of the nature of the subject is dependent upon the individual subject's relation with all other minds. At this stage of Husserl's phenomenology, we understand that there appears a gradual extension of the mind or self to social reality. In his paper *Phenomenology and Structuralism*, John Kultgen argues that these acts the individual subject interprets as well as the subject's own actions are social because "the agent interprets others anticipates how they will interpret and react to his action. Reciprocal responses, cooperative and conflictive, are what bind agents (subjects) into social units. Consciousness of such relations constitutes situations as social and objects as cultural." (p. 373). So, this cultural and social factor in Husserl's phenomenology provides us with an insight into the deep inscriptions between phenomenology and structuralism. We can well say

that this is a move away from the centre of phenomenology, that is consciousness, self or mind, towards a social phenomenon which is a gradual move towards structuralism.

Martin Heidegger

Heidegger's influence on literary theory is enormous. Unlike Husserl who began with consciousness or mind, Heidegger's beginning is existential. In his book *Being and Time*, he gives the concept of 'dasien'. 'Dasien' he says means that we are thrown into the world meaning that we always find ourselves in immediate situations or surroundings. He explains the relation of 'dasien' with the surrounding world by saying that 'being' encounters the things in the world through relations, contrasts and differences. This relation of 'dasien' with the world or things is differential and relational. 'Being' sees a tree to be a tree because a tree is not any other thing. The concept of a tree is the product of these relations, differences, oppositions and contrasts of this tree with all other objects. This point is very significant because later on Saussure propounds the same concept in connection with language. So, concept formation is a negative factor with Heidegger. In his later works, Heidegger comes up with the concept of 'fallenness'. He says that man has fallen from his original Being, and is now lost in the concerns of the world. It has given birth to anxiety and dread, he says. He says in his later work *The Origin of the Work of Art* that in order to save himself from this danger, man must take recourse to art. Art he says does not only contain truth but creates it. There is nothing prior to art, he says. The origin of truth is art, whose origin is art itself. It is in this later work that Heidegger sounds more like a structuralist. After attributing and confining truth to art, he moves on to explain the very limits of human existence saying that there is nothing outside language:

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being *from out of* their being. Such saying is the projecting of the clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the Open. (p.73)

By giving priority to language, Heidegger paves the way for Saussure and structuralism. He concludes the debate of 'being' by propounding that being there in the world means being there in language. The world opens up only in language.

So Heidegger's development of phenomenology is not totally removed from Husserl's. It is the same self-world relation that Heidegger begins with. He differs from Husserl only in that his focus does not remain on consciousness. His concept of thrownness shows that his phenomenology is existentialist.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Gadamer takes Heidegger's position and elaborates on his concept of being in connection with language. For him, as for Heidegger, being and world-view are nothing beyond language. He argues in his book *Truth and Method* that though language is a human phenomenon, yet it is broader and vast than humans. He elaborates and analyses Humboldt's view of language. He says that Humboldt did agree that language has an independent life of its own but only on the condition that it embodies a worldview. Humboldt, according to Gadamer, is of the view "that language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it. Not only is the world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in" (p. 440). But Gadamer elaborates this point further and declares that the world views themselves are conditioned by history or tradition. By tradition, Gadamer seems to be implying that broader structure of language. Therefore, he says, even prejudice is a positive factor because it owes its existence to history and tradition. He does not reject Humboldt's view that language is primarily human, but questions Humboldt's proposition that language is nothing outside the world-view. He agrees with Plato that language is primarily a verbal phenomenon, and in this context argues:

Our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing. That language and world are related in a fundamental way does not mean, then, that world becomes the object of language. Rather, the object of knowledge and statements is always already enclosed within the world horizon of language (p. 447).

Since the object of knowledge is enclosed within the world horizon of language and since "being-there-in-the-world is primordially linguistic" we can quite easily understand that the focus has gradually shifted from self, mind or consciousness to language (p. 440). It draws us nearer to Saussure and structuralism. What structuralism draws on are these concepts about the world and language that have already been discussed in the longer development of phenomenology.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure is the founder of structuralism. He founded the science of semiology and linguistics. It was he who broke away from the traditional views about language. Before him, language was considered to be only a name-giving entity. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, lectures that he delivered to his students, he came up with certain concepts and categories or binaries that led to the theory of structuralism and post-structuralism. Though Saussure's views are actually a response to the traditional concepts about language, yet they

are not in sharp opposition to the views explained in phenomenology by Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. The most significant point in Saussure's analysis of sign is that he for the first time exposed the arbitrariness of language saying that there is no logical, permanent and natural relation between the signifier and signified. The signifier or the sound-image is in no correspondence with the signified or the concept (meaning). This led Saussure to remark that meaning lies in the relations and differences between the signified and other signifiers or in the chain of signifiers. We have already seen this contrasting, differential and relational aspect of language in the context of Heidegger's phenomenology. Saussure elaborates on the same view but, in a way, different from Heidegger. Heidegger was silent about the arbitrariness of language. His concern was not primarily with language but with being. Saussure's concern is primarily with the structure of language. Since, according to Saussure, meaning is relational and differential, language is not a substance but a form. This structure of language is not internal to human beings; rather it is an external phenomenon which lies in the community or society. This he calls 'langue'. This langue is independent of our minds and is manifested only through Parole. We have already discussed the social phenomenon in the context of Husserl's phenomenology and the independence of language in Gadamer's debate on language. Gadamer differs from Saussure only in that he considers language to be a verbal phenomenon; while Saussure differentiates the verbal manifestation of language from the actual external system of language (langue). Yet, the similarity between the two is of significant value, for Gadamer has already spoken of the priority and independent nature of language.

Conclusion

In a broader theoretical context, phenomenology and structuralism seem to be two completely different theories, but in the context of philosophy, phenomenology is not completely detached from structuralism. The focus on the external system of language in structuralism can be said to be the end product of the gradual shift from consciousness to external realities. In phenomenology, there was the debate of self-world relation which was gradually replaced by self-language and language-world relation. This intrusion of language in phenomenology provides us with the proposition that such a gradual shift eventually led to the theory of structuralism.

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