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## Poststructuralism.

Post-structuralism can be defined as a theory which is concerned with the relations between human beings, the world, and the process of making and reproducing meanings. (Belsey: *Post-structuralism. A very short introduction*, 2002). There are at least two historical narratives which relate to this definition, offering different routes leading to the intellectual position which became dominant in France in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and, by extension, globally significant through the translations into English of the work, in particular, of **Roland Barthes**, **Julia Kristeva**, **Louis Althusser**, **Michel Foucault**, Derrida, **Pierre Bourdieu**, **Jean-François Lyotard**, and **Jean Baudrillard**. One route tends to locate poststructuralism in the context of language and literature, whereas the other associates with philosophy and the social sciences.

The first account takes the work of **Ferdinand de Saussure** in linguistics as the main starting-point. In analysing 'signs', Saussure distinguished between the 'signifier', which is the sound or appearance of words being deployed, and the 'signified' which is their meaning. Linguistic signs are arbitrary. Particular combinations of signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary entities. There is no natural correspondence between signifiers and what they signify (the signified). To analyse language, one has to analyse the relations between signs rather than the relation between those signs and any prior reality which they might be thought, fixedly, to represent. Language is not a nomenclature but a relational system of signs. But Saussure also distinguished between 'langue' and 'parole', between the systemic structure of language and contingent speech-acts. It was his contention that the primary purpose of linguistic science was to understand the structure of the non-contingent system of non-referential signs. In this account of the origins of poststructuralism, the work of Barthes was critical in following Saussure's notion of signification whilst rejecting his attempt to generate an universal analysis of signs. At the beginning of his *S/Z* (1970), Barthes writes: 'There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean' and he argues that the first analysts of narrative operated on this assumption, attempting what is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference.'

Barthes's science of signs, semiology, was poststructuralist in emphasizing 'difference' rather than structural uniformity, but for a poststructuralist social scientist like Bourdieu, Barthes persisted in operating with the fundamentally structuralist assumption that an a priori, systemic 'langue' regulates speech practice. Bourdieu wanted to de-regulate 'langue' as well as liberate signs from referential constraint. The second account of the development of poststructuralism incorporates the influence of Edmund Husserl's **Phenomenology** and Martin Heidegger's **ontology**. These influences from philosophy pushed the social sciences towards a recognition of the primacy of agency, towards the recognition of difference at the level of signifying actions rather than at the level of objectivated signs. There is a close relationship between the development of poststructuralism and **postmodernism**. One could say provocatively that postmodernism exposed the extent to which poststructuralism remained parasitic on structuralist assumptions.

491 words.

Derek Robbins.