PAUL RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICAL
THEORY OF DISCOURSE

In this paper, I propose to discuss Ricoeur's theory of discourse which fits into his philosophical search and shapes his theory of language. First, I will examine his confrontation with structuralism and how structuralists exclude some important aspects of language and also how they are transcended in Ricoeur's theory of discourse. Secondly, I will also examine how he develops this theory of discourse on the basis of : (a) the relation between discourse and reference, (b) symbol and its interpretation, and (c) hermeneutics of distanciation. This examination will prove that he has produced one of the finest theories of discourse in which all the aspects of language are taken into account.

I

In Ricoeur's theory of discourse, we find a stronger influence of structuralism. His confrontation with structuralism on number of points, but at the same time, not rejecting the role of structural analysis in different modes of signification proves that he was aware of the need for structural analysis in the understanding of discourse. He undertakes the study of the structuralists like Roland Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Althusser and also analyses how structuralism proceeds by applying a linguistic model to Saussure, Trubetskay, Jakobson and others. The structuralists, according to Ricoeur, starts with some operational and foundational presuppositions. First, in structuralism, language is an object for an empirical science. This notion that language can be investigated scientifically was introduced by Saussure in his distinction between language (langue) and speech (parole). It is the distinction between "what is social from what is individual" and "What is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental."[1] For Saussure, language is homogenous whereas speech is heterogeneous.[2] Secondly, in

structuralism, there is always a distinction between a science of states of the system or synchronic linguistics and a science of changes or diachronic linguistics. This distinction according to Saussure, is absolute and allows no compromise. Only synchrony allows us to grasp the nature of language, whereas diachrony operates on the level of the event, of the modifications of language brought about through speaking. Thirdly, in a state of system, there are no absolute terms, but only relations of mutual dependence, according to structuralism. "In language, the identity of linguistic units depend on the difference or opposites that separate them from one another" says Saussure.[3] Finally, in structuralism, the collection of signs must be maintained as a closed system in order to submit it to analysis.[4] Signs as closed and autonomous system of internal dependence, have no relation to the external. All these presuppositions of the structuralists imply that a language is a system of signs and a sign must be defined not in terms of some object for which it stands, but rather in terms of its relation to all other signs of the same level with the system of which it is a part.[5]

Ricoeur points out that the above approach of the structuralists have limitations and excludes number of aspects. For example, the act of speaking is excluded not only as an individual performance, but as the free creation of new expressions. Similarly, history is also excluded and "not simply the change from one state of system to another but the production of culture and of man in the production of his language."[6] The primary intention of language, which is to say something about something, is also excluded in structuralism. Both speaker and hearer must understand the intention immediately. Language has a double direction : an ideal direction (to say something) and a real reference (to say about something).[7]

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that for the structuralists signs are the basic unit of a language. Against this, Ricoeur emphasises the need to think language as discourse where sentences are the basic unit. For him a sentence is a new reality. Though it is made up of words, it is not a derivative function of the words. A sentence is made up of signs, but it is not itself a sign.[8] In short, language as discourse creates the possibility of a genuine semantics of the sentence as distinct from a semiotics of the sign.

II

In *The Rule of Metaphor,* (1975), Ricoeur develops a theory of discourse. Though the seed for it was already contained in some of his articles like "Structure, Word, Event", (1967). "What is a Text" (1970), "Metaphor and the main problem of Hermeneutics" (1972), it took a definite shape in *The Rule of Methphor.* For a theory of discourse, the sentence is important rather than words because discourse is a manifestation of language in textual form. It is only at the level of the sentence that language can refer to something. The sentence is no longer the unit of a language (or system), but of speech or discourse.[9] Ricoeur's theory of discourse rests upon : (a) the relation between discourse and reference, (b) symbol and its interpretation and (c) the hermeneutics of distanciation. Discourse always occurs as an event and at the same time can be understood as meaning.[10] Because of this aspect (*i.e.,* the event being meaningful), one can talk about it, learn from it, evaluate it and also interpret it. Discourse allows all these. Language exists only when a speaker takes it in his possession and actualises it whereas, as the event of discourse, it can be identified and reidentified as "the same." There is meaning because there is a sameness of meaning.[11]

The referential relation is the characteristic of discourse. Discourse has both identifying as well as predicative function.[12] For Ricoeur, correctness and error belong to discourse alone. He quotes Plato's *Cratylus, Theaetetus* and *Sophist,* to show how the "interlacing" of the noun and the verb is important and also how at the level of the word "there is no solution."[13] In the *Sophist,* for example, Plato maintains that there are two kinds of words that are expressions of reality, i.e. nouns and verbs; the latter expressing the action and inaction and the former, the agent or what is and what is not so - and - so. A statement cannot consist of nouns alone or verbs alone; the very simplest must have one of each. And also, every statement must be "of someone or something."[14] Discourse as a structured act has both locutionary as well as illocutionary aspects.[15] Discourse is realised as a statement and at the same time as a doing. By showing Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary aspects, Ricoeur argues that in the act of saying, we

bring both the predicative and identifying function together.

The distinction between sense and reference is a necessary and pervasive characteristic of discourse.[16] Discourse has sense as well as reference. This distinction says Ricoeur, marks the fundamental difference between semantics and semiotics.[17] He fully utilises the distinction between the sense and reference made by Frege to explain the opposition between the semantics and semiotics and further argues that the semantics of discourse is irreducible to semiotics of lexical entities. By showing the limitations of semiotics, Ricoeur argues that it is aware only of intra-linguistic relationships whereas semantics takes up the relationship between the sign and the things denoted, *i.e.*, the relationship between the language and world.[18] Ricoeur's claim that reference is linked up with the notion of the intended by discourse has certain advantages. For example, the intended goes outside the language. It points to an extra-linguistic reality which is its referent. In the words of Ricoeur:

> What is intended by discourse, the correlate of the entire sentence is irreducible to what semiotics calls the signified which is nothing but the counterpart of the signifier of a sign within language code.[19]

For Ricoeur, hermeneutics is the "art of deciphering indirect meaning." It is committed to the primacy of the symbol. Through symbol, myth, text and narrative, he deals with the interpretation of the multiple "mediation" of meaning. Starting from *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), to the *Time and Narrative* (1984), one can see the role of symbols as cultural-religious phenomena, standing for the expression of multiple meaning. It is the symbols which invite thought, says Ricoeur. The most general delineation of the symbol is that it is a sign. A symbol is a sign but not vice-versa. Ricoeur makes it clear that what makes a sign as a symbol is the "double meaning or the double intentionality." While every sign aims at something beyond itself, it is only in symbols that the first literal, patent meaning analogically intends a second meaning which is not given otherwise than in the first.[20] Intentionality is very much

essential to explain his theory of interpretation. The literal or first intentionality serves as the basis for second and the relation between the first and the second cannot be neglected. The symbolic meaning is constituted in and through the literal meaning and there is always a movement from the first to the second. Ricoeur writes :

> I define "symbol" as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.[21]

The symbol opens onto a domain of experience that transcends the boundaries of language. "It testifies to the primordial rootedness of Discourse in Life," says Ricoeur.[22] For him, interpretation belonging to the symbol and it is because symbol allows interpretation. This means that interpretation of the double sense of the symbol is very much there in the nature of the symbol. A symbol requires an interpretation because it is based on a specific semantic structure, i.e., structure of double meaning expressions. Ricoeur says :

> The field of symbolic expressions and the field of the operations of interpretation have in fact been defined in terms of each other. The problems posed by the symbol are consequently reflected in the methodology of interpretation .... each interpretation "translates" the symbol according to its own frame of reference. [23]

Ricoeur undertakes the study of common structure of symbols and its double meaning in his book on Freud. In the *Freud and Philosophy : An Essay of Interpretation* (1965), he explains how the double intentionality manifests itself in three domains : The three domains wherein the symbols emerge are : (1) the cosmic, (2) the oneiric and (3) the poetic. These three domains are closely connected in a unified symbolic structure. The first manifestation is the phenomenology of religion such as van der Leeuw, Leenhardt and Mircea Eliade. The symbols that are spoken here are heaven, earth,

water, life etc., which explain man's relation to the sacred.

The second manifestation of the symbol is that the oneiric, *i.e.*, the dreams of our days and of nights. The dream symbolism revealed by psychoanalysis is interpreted with its double sense. The hidden sense is made explicit after being awakened. The third manifestation of the symbol is that of the poetic imagination. This is best understood by way of a "detour" through cosmic and oneiric symbols. It refers to a word-image instead of a representation - image. Here, language does not have hieratic stability under the protection of rites and myths," but "it puts language in a state of emergence."[24] In all the three zones of emergence, the double meaning is the common structure because of the symbols. For Ricoeur all these symbolism find their expression in the element of language.

> There is no symbolism before man speaks,
> even if the power of the symbol is grounded much
> deeper. It is in language that the cosmos, desire,
> and the imaginary reach expression; speech is
> always necessary if the world is to be recovered
> and made hierophany.[25]

Discourse as event is a necessary movement from language to discourse. For Ricoeur, there should be a movement from linguistics of language to discourse. It has been already shown that for him, discourse as event is realized temporally and is in the present, *i.e.*, it is not outside of time. It is self-referential also. All messages are exchanged only in discourse. There is always another person, a hearer to whom it is addressed. Speaking and writing are the legitimate modes of the realization of this discourse. This Ricoeur calls "distanciation." Distanciation is the dialectical counterpart of "belonging." The realization of discourse in writing distance the text from the conditions of spoken discourse. A text becomes the model for a belonging to communication in and through distance. "Distanciation" says Ricoeur, "is a constitutive phenomenon of the text as written."[26] A text, according to him, is much more than a particular case of interhuman communication; it is the paradigm of the distanciation in all communication. Thus it reveals a fundamental

character of the historicity of human experience, communication within and by means of distance.

Ricoeur's essay "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" elaborately deals with the notion of the text and the distinction between speaking and writing. Writing, he says, is the first problem posed by the notion of the text. "Writing only makes explicit some traits that are already present in oral discourse."[27] Ricoeur speaks of four forms of distanciation. The first is the distanciation of the "saying" in the said. Language in actualizing itself in discourse goes beyond itself in the speech event. Similarly, speech in entering into the process of understanding goes beyond itself in the meaning. Ricoeur notes that this surpassing of the event in the meaning is a characteristic of speech. In order to explain this, he makes use of the speech act theory of Austin and Searle. The propositional act, the illocutionary force and the perlocutionary action are necessary for "intentional exterior station." The locutionary act exteriorises itself in the propositional content. Similarly, the illocutionary act is also exteriorised due to grammatical devices like, indicative mood, imperatives etc., and the perlocutionary act is exteriorised by the emotive and affective dispositions.

The second form of distanciation is about the relation between the inscribed expression and the original speaker. In the case of the spoken discourse, there is always overlapping of the meaning of what is said and the intention of the speaker, whereas in writing, it is not so. Writing, according to Ricoeur, makes the text autonomous in relation to the author. What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author wanted to say.[28] The third form of distanciation which is similar to that of the second form is about the relation between the incribed expression and the original audience. In the spoken discourse, the hearer is specified in advance by the dialogical situation whereas writing is open to an audience virtually understood as made up of whoever knows how to read.[29] A text transcends the psycho-sociological conditions of production and opens itself to an unlimited series of readings. The text decontextualizes itself from its social and historical conditions and allows the possibility to "recontextualize" itself in new contexts.

The fourth and the final form of distanciation is about the emancipation of the text from the limits of reference. In the case of spoken discourse, there is a reality common to the interlocutors and also there is ostensive reference, but in writing, there is no common situation between the writer and the reader. A text frees its reference from the limits of ostensive reference, Ricoeur makes a distinction between a situational reference to an actual world *(Umwelt)* and non-situational reference to a symbolic world *(Welt)*. "It is this enlarging of the *Umwelt* into the *Welt* which permits us to speak of the references *opened up* by the text," says Ricoeur.[30]

III

Let me repeat some of the observations I have made so far : (1) The presuppositions of the structuralists which exclude important aspects of language, are avoided in Ricoeur's theory of discourse. (2) The basic distinction between the semiotics and semantics has to be maintained in order to understand the role of discourse in language. (3) What is intended by discourse always points to an extra-linguistic reality. All these explain that for Ricoeur, a theory of discourse provides a foundation for a general theory of interpretation. This implies that the meaning of a text is to be interpreted and every text of meaning refers to an historical context. Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory of discourse shows how the multiple meaning of words derives not just from the world of text itself but from a double historical reference both to the original conditions of utterance and to the conditions of interpretation. Interpretation thus becomes, "a process by which, the interlocutors collectively determine the contextual values which structure their conversation."

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