



The Spell of Language: Poststructuralism and Speculation

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Pavel, Thomas; Jordan, Linda (Trans.)
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Info**

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Can methodology that was created for a specific discipline be applied uniformly to other, unrelated disciplines? Should academic approaches to research change solely for the sake of “modernization”? Does a small group of scholars have authority to dismiss traditional views of society and the human sciences without allowing for reasonable dissent? And if all these things happen briefly during an unstable period in French history, how important is it that the rest of us understand what took place? These are some of the questions Thomas Pavel, a professor of Romance languages, attempts to answer.

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In *The Spell of Language: Poststructuralism and Speculation*, Pavel presents a detailed critique of the French structuralism/post-structuralism phenomenon. He presents his historical commentary in this book, which is essentially an indictment against unsupported claims, irresponsible scholarship, and needless innovation. The critical reader is expected to know Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Derrida, Hjelmslev, Foucault, Gombrich, Goodman, and Lacan; as well as Hegel, Parain, Althusser, and Heidegger; and ideally Saussure, Chomsky, Meade, Flaubert, and Kant. Plus the French riots of 1968.

The text consists of six chapters plus a post-scriptum. In Chapter One, "The Order of Language," Pavel concisely states his easily missed thesis, which is that structuralism and post-structuralism erred in basing their methodology on linguistic models. He explains that even though structuralism is not currently popular, the strengths and weaknesses of its salient ideas must be recorded if future scholars are to benefit. Pavel then sets out to define structuralism and, frankly, fails. But he does manage to categorize advocates of structuralism into three camps: moderate (nominal), scientific (committed), and speculative (radicals who didn't realize it was supposed to be a methodology and not a philosophy - eventually led to riots and demonstrations by millions of students and workers which paralyzed France in May of 1968). Following this section, the author provides a very interesting and important description of the “Rhetoric of the End,” language used by would-be revolutionaries who desire to promote any new idea as the ultimate solution without bothering to answer the objections of “backward” thinkers or anticipate future developments. Subsequent chapters dissect specific proponents of the structuralist/post-structuralist movement. The text ends with an attempt to answer the question, “Why did it all happen? (‘On Discretionary Intellectual Behavior’)” and a “Post-Scriptum” in which the reader is admonished to separate philosophy from political affiliation (“The Heidegger Affair”).

Relative time references in the text are obscure because this is the third printing; it was originally published in French as *Le Mirage Linguistique* (1988), in English as *The Feud of Language* (1989), and now as *The Spell of Language* (2001). Thus, for example, when Pavel writes of French thought “today,” the reader wonders whether the author means 2001, 1988, or some earlier time when he began researching the subject, and this is important when considering an issue that quickly grew to prominence and then quickly faded. The structuralist/poststructuralist gun was still hot when Pavel first picked it up, but the issues may seem irrelevant to modern communication professionals who have never studied structuralism.

Pavel's erudite writing style is also a challenge, and I feel the translator could have helped make the text more accessible to non-philosophers and professors in fields other than Romance languages, if such was the intent. While scholarly readers enjoy references to folklore, and an occasional Latin phrase adds interest, allusions to German mythology for the purpose of illustrating an important point may result in obscuring rather than elucidating. I found the author's style interesting, often amusing, and generally satisfying, but his quasi-poetic approach to a subject that was nebulous even at its peak in the 1960s, demands much patience and time.

[Back to Top](#)

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