

**Prof. Dr. Ewald Mengel,**

**“Introduction to the Study of Literatures in English”**

### **The Structuralist Approach**

searching for oppositions within the text: text-immanent interpretation

hot/cold; black/white; man/woman; centre/periphery; we/they; sun/moon;  
day/night;...and what have you

Disadvantage: although it describes structure, it stays on the surface, leaves reader with  
pairs of oppositions

### **The Structuralist and the Poststructuralist Concept of Meaning:**

sign (the whole) :           signifier/signified

signifier (the form of the sign)

signified (content, meaning of the sign):

Ferdinand de Saussure: Arbitrary relation between signifier and signified: the form is  
not identical with the content, the meaning is not reflected by the form of the sign

Examples:

German: Hund; English: dog; French: chien; Spanish: perro; Portugese: cachorro;  
Swedish: hund, and so on!

different (phonetic and written) signs for one and the same thing!

**So, where can the meaning of a word be located, if not in the similarity of signifier and signified?**

According to Saussure and the structuralists, it lies in the difference between similar signs, for example:

Cat, hat, rat, chat, bat, mat, ....

Cam, ham, bam, ram, mam....

Cut, hut, rut, but, rum, mum... and so on!

If this were correct, the poststructuralists argue, we would have to arrive at the last word in the chain, in order to really find out the meaning of a word.

But: this is impossible.

Because: texts do not only consist of chains of words, but of sentences, and paragraphs, and whole books, .. the meaning of which can only be fathomed if we know all the other books in the sea of texts! (And texts here also means: the texts produced by the media).

But this is impossible!!

Which means: 'meaning' is forever on the run!! 'Meaning' can never be arrived at,

Jacques Derrida coined the word 'différance' = which is 'difference' and 'deferment' at one and the same time. (to defer = to postpone: 'aufschieben')

'I love you...not'

(The meaning of this sentence is deferred to the last word spoken: 'not')

'I love you...not. I wouldn't say this unless there were grave circumstances that induced me to hold this opinion.'

(The meaning of this speech is deferred to the end of the second sentence)

'I love you...not. I wouldn't say this unless there were grave circumstances that induced me to hold this opinion. But there aren't. I do love you, you can rely on me.'

(The meaning of this speech is deferred to the end of the paragraph)

And so on: to the end of the whole text (book)... to the end of all texts, the media included!!

Meaning is forever on the run, escaping, 'deferred'.

Texts can no longer refer to reality, but only to other texts. Texts do not imitate reality but construct a reality of their own.

'Death of the author' (Roland Barthes); 'Decentring' (Althusser); Intertextuality, Intermediality; 'floating signifiers'