

Language, Man and World in Tzvetan Todorov's Poetics

Abstract

The article is dedicated to the early research by Tzvetan Todorov. The early studies of the author are usually defined as structuralist. However, this definition is not accepted in the article, which instead connects them to the performative tradition in the interpretation of language. It is precisely this tradition that explains Todorov's later shift toward social and political issues. This is because it questions Saussure's boundary between sign and meaning, language and the world, in order to unite words and things through an understanding of language as action.

Keywords

language, action, narrative, world, sign

Typologically, two main directions can be distinguished in 20th-century thought about language. The first, most clearly demonstrated in Saussure's views and further developed by the traditions of structuralism and deconstruction, focuses on the sign nature of language. A sign emerges when that which it signifies is not present. It represents something absent, a lack (this absence is emphasized even more strongly where it seems to be missing – in the case of indexical signs; being to some extent physically connected to the referent, they actually highlight its non-presence). Viewed as a sign, language reveals itself as a system that stands in place of its referent – the world. It comes into play when we do not have direct contact with the world.

The other direction, argued in the views of Austin and Searle, does not emphasize the sign-based nature of language as insistently¹. Instead of drawing a boundary between words and the world, it seeks unity between them. This unity becomes evident when we think of

¹ See Austin, John L. 1975. *How to Do Things with Words: Second Edition* (The William James Lectures). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press and Searle, John. 1970. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

language as action – when we do not claim that by speaking we signify things, but rather that we perform things, that language projects and constitutes a world. The performative dimension of language is best revealed in statements that John Austin calls “performatives”. Expressions like “You are appointed” or “You are fired” do not merely designate the phenomena of “appointment” and “dismissal”; rather, they enact them. The moment I am told, “You are appointed” or “You are fired,” I am indeed appointed or fired. Words here bring about change; they create a transition from one situation to another. The important discourses in society, such as the discourses of decisions – laws and contracts, for example – are of a performative nature.

Until the 1980s, Tzvetan Todorov’s primary interest is literature. After that, his focus shifts to philosophical, cultural, moral, and political themes. Some literary scholars tend to see this change as an abandonment of literature, even as a “betrayal” of it. Such an interpretation, which carries a moral judgment, is not entirely justified. Literature continues to be present in Todorov’s books even after the 1980s. What is absent, however, is the systematic engagement with the question that defines the horizon of literary studies: “What is literature?”.

Literature is not a self-sufficient phenomenon and cannot be studied in isolation, as something that exists solely by itself. Any discourse about it inevitably involves other realities. In literary studies, we can typologically distinguish three such realities: the human being, society, and language. Like many literary scholars of the 20th century, Todorov connects literature with natural language. This approach is justified by the fact that, empirically, literature is absolutely impossible without language – it is created through it. Language is the medium through which connections can emerge between literature and the other two realities considered by literary studies: the human being and society. No relation between literature and the human being – whether in the modes of author, character, or reader – nor between literature and social contexts, can unfold without the presence of a literary text expressed in natural language.

In Todorov’s conception of the relationship between language and literature, the influence of Roman Jakobson is evident. In Jakobson’s famous work “Linguistics and Poetics” (1987) the “poetic function” of language is a tool of language, but also something more than a function – it is directed toward the message itself, meaning its

object is language as such.² The “poetic function” is a synecdoche of language. For both Jakobson and Todorov, this relationship between language and literature is bidirectional. Not only does language serve as a path to understanding literary works, but literature itself provides an opportunity to explore the linguistic system. “We will understand narrative better,” Todorov writes in *The Poetics of Prose*, “if we recognize that the character is a noun and the action is a verb. But we will understand nouns and verbs even better if we consider their role in narrative. Ultimately, linguistic activity can only be truly understood if we learn to grasp its most essential manifestation – literature. The reverse is also true: combining a noun and a verb is the first step toward storytelling. In a certain sense, the writer does nothing but read language” (Todorov 1978, 57, translation is mine).³ For Todorov, literature is inseparable from natural language. It is a necessary consequence of language’s development and, together with it, forms a unified whole.

The period in Todorov’s work dominated by his interest in literature is generally placed within the context of structuralism. Structuralism applies a view of language that emphasizes its sign-based nature and, as a result of this approach, draws a dividing line between language and the world. This line is outlined in Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, where the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign is affirmed, and it is underlined that the signifier of the sign is a mental image of the referent, not the referent itself. “The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses,” says Saussure (Saussure 1959, 66).

A closer reading of Todorov’s literary theoretical texts, however, would lead to the conclusion that they are not that influenced by this view, as they develop under the influence of another understanding of language – the one that sees it as action and seeks a unifying point with the world.

² See Jakobson 1987.

³ On comprendra mieux le récit si l’on sait que le personnage est un nom, l’action, un verbe. Mais on comprendra mieux le nom et le verbe en pensant au rôle qu’ils assument dans le récit. En définitive, le langage ne pourra être compris que si l’on apprend à penser sa manifestation essentielle, la littérature. L’inverse est aussi vrai : combiner un nom et un verbe, c’est faire le premier pas vers le récit. En quelque sorte, l’écrivain ne fait que lire le langage.

In his article, “Choderlos de Laclos et la théorie du récit” Todorov, connected with his first book *Littérature et signification* (1967), draws attention to performative expressions. He problematizes the distinction between them and constatives proposed by Austin:

...The notion that constative utterances lack action accounts only for the subject of the statement, not for the subject of enunciation. ...From the perspective of the subject of enunciation, every sentence, every utterance is simultaneously an action, an action that consists in producing that utterance. From this fact, we can draw the following conclusion: there are no utterances that are not performative; in this sense, we can define performativity as the presence of the act of enunciation in the utterance (Todorov 1991, 36, translation is mine).

Here, the concept of the “performative” is expanded and radicalized. While for Austin, it designates a specific type of utterance, for Todorov, it encompasses all our utterances and becomes a fundamental characteristic of language as a whole. At the same time, the understanding of the performative itself is transformed. In Austin, performatives are defined from the perspective of the purpose of enunciation. Performatives occur when we aim not to inform or communicate but to perform a specific action through our words. In Todorov, purpose does not play a role in defining the performative. Being “the presence of the act of enunciation in the utterance,” performativity is an immanent feature of enunciation. Therefore, the nature of language is dynamic, making it difficult to study. And since the performative does not distinguish between language and the world, we could say that, for the early Todorov, the world is also thought of through performativity – as a system with an active, processual character.

It is difficult to notice the fact that performativity is at the center of the early Todorov’s interest because he employs the vocabulary of structuralism. The early Todorov is an opponent of structuralism, disguised as a diligent structuralist. Creating the impression that he is a follower of the movement, he calls his studies “grammar” (as seen in his 1969 book *Grammaire du Décaméron*). However, in his “grammar”, the leading role is not played by the noun (or names in general) but by the verb, by action. Todorov does not prefer to analyze (and we can

conclude that he does not like) works in which the character system and the psychology of the heroes are defining. He is interested in “non-psychological” texts such as *The Decameron* and Scheherazade’s tales, where it is not human experience but human behavior that drives the narrative.

Another “performative” feature of his “grammar” is the understanding that grammar is not a self-contained structure but mediates the relationship between language, man, and the world. “The modes of language are the same everywhere *because* they represent the modes of thought; these, in turn, exist *because* they represent those of the universe,”⁴ we read in *Grammaire du Décaméron* (Todorov 1969, 15, translation is mine). These words refer to the idea of a universal grammar, but they also reveal a clear attachment to this idea.

The view of language as performative allows Todorov to reach the dynamic specificity of literature. Unlike the analyses of formalism and early structuralism, Todorov’s reading in *Choderlos de Laclos et la théorie du récit* and *Littérature et signification* of Choderlos de Laclos’ novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* presents the text not as a static structure but as a whole in which each component changes in relation to others – a structure where nothing remains stable or identical to itself throughout the work but instead transforms, shaping different narrative situations.

The understanding of the dynamic nature of language and literature is further developed in *Poétique de la prose*, one of Todorov’s most popular books. Its concept is guided by the idea of the bidirectional relationship between language and literature, which we outlined earlier. For Todorov, literature is not an accidental phenomenon. It is a stage in the development of language. There is no natural language in which literature has not been created, whether in authored texts, myths, or anonymous folklore works. It is significant that literature is created only within natural language. Literary texts do not emerge in other languages, such as the language of mathematics or computer programming.

Todorov’s interpretation of prose follows from this position. Prose, or “narrative” (*récit*), as Todorov prefers to call it, arises at the level of the sentence and mirrors its structure. The sentence is a type of narrative, and the narrative follows the model of the sentence. For Todorov, the union between language and literature is necessary.

⁴ Les modes de la langue sont les mêmes partout *parce qu’ils* représentent les modes de la pensée ; ceux-ci sont aussi *parce qu’ils* représentent ceux de l’univers.

The performative side of literature is convincingly presented in the famous chapter of *Poétique de la prose* “*Les hommes-récits: les Mille et une nuits*” (“People-Stories: One Thousand and One Nights). Scheherazade’s tales (as well as other texts analyzed in the book: The Odyssey, Holy Grail, and The Decameron) are chosen not only because they belong to “non-psychological literature,” where the emphasis is on action rather than character, but also because they follow the direction set by Vladimir Propp to avoid analyzing works that deal with the psychology of the characters, as such works appear overloaded with content and divert attention away from the formal organization of the text. Furthermore, from a historical perspective, “psychological literature” is a late phenomenon, unique to the development of Western literature. It does not demonstrate as clearly the general laws of literature, which formalists and structuralists prefer to seek in ancient texts such as myths, folklore, and early literary works.

However, these circumstances alone do not fully justify Todorov’s choice of “non-psychological literature.” At the beginning of his analysis of “One Thousand and One Nights”, he disputes Henry James’ claim:

“What is a character if he does not determine the action? What is action if not an illustration of character? What is a picture or a novel if not a description of characters? What else can we seek and find in them?” (Todorov 1978, 33, translation is mine)⁵

Todorov criticizes this view as “egocentrism mistaken for universalism,” as it generalizes the principle of so-called “psychological literature” – placing the character at the center of the narrative. To counter this principle, Todorov turns to Scheherazade’s tales, where, according to him, the opposite is true: it is not the character that determines the narrative but their actions. “One could say,” he writes, “that *One Thousand and One Nights* belongs to the predicate literature: the emphasis is always on the predicate, not the subject of the sentence” (Todorov 1978, 34, translation is mine).⁶

Here we see something characteristic of Todorov’s views on action. He does not see it as a consequence but as a cause. It is constitutive

⁵ “Qu’est-ce qu’un personnage sinon la détermination de l’action? Qu’est-ce que l’action sinon l’illustration du personnage? Qu’est-ce qu’un tableau ou un roman qui n’est pas une description de caractères? Quoi d’autre y cherchons-nous, y trouvons-nous?”

⁶ *Les Mille et une nuits* relèvent, peut-on dire, d’une littérature *prédicative*: l’accent tombera toujours sur le prédicat et non sur le sujet de la proposition.

for the subject. The characters of *One Thousand and One Nights* exist insofar as and while their actions are present. This observation, besides its literary dimension, also has anthropological implications. The early Todorov is critical of contemplation, which is a basic principle of traditional metaphysical constructions. For him, man relates to the world through action. Action, as stated in the analysis of Scheherazade's tales, is "meaningful only in itself" (*"l'action importe en elle-même"*). One action is a reaction to another and generates a subsequent action. The human world is a series of actions. According to Todorov, action itself cannot be defined because it is not a concept, an idea. It is demonstrated through its own unfolding.

The linguistic and literary expression of this view of action is narration. Todorov sees *One Thousand and One Nights* as a structure of stories generating other stories. The characters are present in the narrative through their act of storytelling – this is the meaning of the famous formula "people-stories" applied to them. Their existence is defined by this act. "The tale means life; the absence of the tale – death," Todorov insists, illustrating his statement with two opposite examples: Scheherazade, who must tell stories to avoid being killed, and Duban, who dies because he is not allowed to tell the story of the crocodile (Todorov 1978, 41, translation is mine).⁷ The unity between the tale and life that Todorov postulates is a continuation of the type of connection between language and the world found in Austin's performative utterances. It is not the result of the naïve belief that language objectively represents life or the world, that it is a transparent membrane reflecting them, but arises from the understanding that all three realities are facets of the same process.

The idea of the necessary nature of the relationship between language and literature, which defines Todorov's literary studies, is not sufficient to explain the specificity of literature. It does not provide an answer to the question "What is literature itself?". Many parts of Todorov's studies point towards this answer. I would like to focus on one of them, which seems to me to be a good basis for clarifying the question. "Works such as those by Laclos or Proust simply explicate a truth that underlies every literary creation. They make evident the futility of seeking the final meaning of a given novel or drama; the meaning of a work consists in its saying, in the fact that it speaks to us

⁷ Le récit égale la vie ; l'absence de récit, la mort.

about its own existence,” Todorov writes in “Choderlos de Laclos et la théorie du récit” (Todorov 1991, 49, translation is mine).

We would not be wrong if we place these sentences in the context of the formalist and early structuralist framework of the self-referential and iconic nature of the literary sign. However, this interpretation is overly general. It does not take into account the individual meaning of the quoted sentences. They define literature as speech turned inward. Unlike our other uses of language, where it serves to represent extralinguistic realities, in literature, we turn toward the language itself: it is language directed toward language.

If we connect this view with Todorov’s definition of performativity as “the presence of the act of utterance in the utterance,” we will see that what is meant here by performativity is precisely literature. In the “presence of the act of utterance in the utterance,” we recognize the characteristic of literature, according to Todorov, where language is directed at itself. Equated with performativity, literature is presented as the linguistic act itself.

Todorov insists that “the presence of the act of utterance in the utterance” is characteristic of all our uses of language. This circumstance highlights a broad understanding of literature. According to Todorov, it is not limited to the texts we call “literary”. These texts only reveal what is inherent in all our utterances: “the presence of the act of utterance in the utterance.”

A strict distinction must be made. Todorov’s poetics, some of the basic points of which we have tried to sketch, is not aesthetics. In saying this, we firmly distinguish it from structuralist poetics, which seeks to separate itself from aesthetics, yet remains connected to it. An inseparable part of aesthetics is representation. The classification of an object through the category “beautiful” – a basic aesthetic category – depends on whether this object appears to us as beautiful or not. The structuralist conception of literature does not relinquish the idea of representation. Grounded in Saussure’s distinction between language and the world, literature, according to the structuralists, like Saussure’s sign, must represent an absent world. For Todorov, literature has neither an aesthetic nor a representational character. It does not represent at all but acts; it is pure linguistic action.

It will not be easy to connect Todorov’s early ideas with his later theories, such as those on the Other or cultural difference. However, even here we notice a trace that could lead us to the later

Todorov – Todorov the moralist and philosopher of society. The unity between language, man, and the world, which he postulates in the understanding of language as action, moves him away from “purely” literary texts, their dynamics, and uncertainty, toward the dynamics and uncertainty in the reality he inhabits.

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