

The Origin of the Phonetical Opposition Theory in Linguistics

Khaitova Gulhayo Tovasharovna

Trainee Teacher of Termiz State Pedagogical Institute

Abstract

The notion of opposition has long been considered as the foundation of structuralism in modern semiotics and linguistics. It has continued to be an essential component in various fields as an analytical tool, where it can be used to recognize important clues in the physical form of indicators. This article examines opposition theory as a useful tool for establishing phonological system in linguistics by Trubetskoi.

Keywords: Dualism, opposition theory, phonological structure, gradient opposition, equipollent opposition, binary opposition, tenor opposition.

The notion of opposition is the cornerstone of structuralism in semiotics, linguistics, psychology, and anthropology. This principle's philosophical foundations may be found in the ancient notion of dualism. It was included in Saussure's own principle of difference but assumed. The principle was given its scientific articulation in the 1930s by linguists from the Prague School and several Gestalt psychologists. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was applied to extensive language analyses and the establishment of universal patterns in Marcel Danesi linguistic structure.

At the beginning of the 1990s a few capable defenses of opposition theory by Andrews and Battistella came forward to restore interest in it. Nonetheless, the crystallization and spread of another development in linguistics, known as cognitive linguistics. This research intends to return the opposition theory as a theory of dialect, intellect, and culture, expanding it as well to the domain of cognitive linguistic hypothesis.

As previously stated, the fundamental premise of opposition theory dates back to dualistic ideologies like Aristotle's logical dualism and the Chinese ying/yang mystical framework. In opposing terms, Saussure proposed the idea of difference as being especially helpful in understanding how humans create meaningful (or more precisely meaning-bearing) clues from the chain of speech. The theory of the phoneme as a distinguishable unit of sound resulted from his investigation. Subsequently, the opposition theory was embraced by the Prague School in the late 1920s as the foundation for their method of studying language structure. Charles Ogden's 1932 work, *Opposition: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis*, was the first comprehensive theoretical examination of opposition as a theory of mind. It built upon a number of important concepts that Ogden and Richards had explored in their 1923 book *The Meaning of Meaning*. According to Ogden, there is just a small amount of conceptual oppositions that seem to be universally binary in nature, such as right/left and yes/no. A "gradient" between the two poles was displayed by others. Gradient colors are distributed on the light spectrum, whereas white and black are not; instead, they form conceptual endpoints on a mental color scale. This means that, in an opposition like white/black, different color concepts, such as gray, red, etc., could be located between the white and black poles. This fact clearly has both referential and conceptual resonance. Similar to this, gradient concepts like twilight, dawn, noon, and afternoon can be put between the polar notions of day and night on the day/night oppositional scale; these concepts

are acceptable both philosophically and referentially. In other words, only so-called "polar concepts"—which cannot be combined with another hue to generate a binary opposition—have paradigmatic structure inside the conceptual system of a language, but "gradient concepts" do not. These ideas are "distributed concepts" on antagonistic scales that are currently in place. Stated a different way, they exhibit syntagmatic structure because of their referential connections to the polar notions. Ogden also made a distinction between cross-cultural oppositions (such as right/left and day/night) and culture-specific oppositions (such as town/country). This raises the possibility that human cognition consists of a "deep level" of oppositional structure, and that there is a "surface level" of oppositions that are formed and learned in certain cultural settings.

The linguists of the Prague School established a wide range of oppositional forms and levels. They employed a basic commutative method to do this. For instance, one may determine the phonemic state of a word's constituent sounds—in this case, starting /k/—by commuting a particular sound, like cat, to rat or another minimal form (bat, hat, etc.). Trubetzkoy defined a pair as a "minimal pair" as a cat and rat.

The Prague School linguists discovered many aspects of phonological structure with the use of this straightforward method. For example, they discovered that although some phonemes appeared often in minimum pairings, others did not. This was later referred to as a phoneme's "functional yield." Because it is unique in word-initial (pin/bin), word-internal (open/omen), and word-final (nap/nab) positions, as well as in contrast to almost all other consonant phonemes in the language, the English phoneme /p/ has a high functional yield. Additionally, studies showed that oppositions frequently disclosed what was called "symmetry".

The typical set of voiceless stops, for instance, is made up of the voiceless stops /p/-/t/-/k/. Every phoneme in that set can be arranged in binary opposition to every other phoneme, for example, /p/-/t/ (pin/tin), /p/-/k/ (pin/kin/), etc. In contrast, /b/-/d/-/g/ creates the matching natural set of voiced stops, /b/-/d/ (bin/din), /b/-/g/ (bet/get), with a similar "set-internal" oppositional structure.

Additionally, the consonants in the two sets—/p/-/b/ (pin/bin), /p/-/d/ (pen/den), etc.—can be arranged in opposition to one another. Of course, [\pm voice] is the opposition-signaling assets between the two sets. This gave linguists reason to believe that phonological systems were symmetrical. They also found asymmetries or gaps in these systems: for example, in English, the voiceless dental and palatal sibilants /s/-/ʃ/ (sip/ship) have an opposition; however, since the language lacks a voiced palatal consonant, the voiced dental sibilant /z/ (as in zip) has no corresponding oppositional partner.

The Prague School linguists began to recognize that there were particular articulatory triggers in phonemic contrasts by performing comprehensive investigations of this kind. For instance, a nasality/orality contrast in /m/-/p/ activated the opposition, whereas a bilabial/dental distinction in /m/-/n/ did the same. "Distant features" became the term for them. Therefore, the crucial differentiating characteristic in the "cross-set" oppositions /p/-/t/-/k/ and /b/-/d/-/g/ is, as previously said, [\pm voice]. Other distinguishing characteristics identified the oppositions within each set. For instance, [\pm labial] was the characteristic that maintained the distinction between /p/ and /t/ as well as /b/ and /d/. Early on, distinctive feature analysis established itself as a cornerstone; generative linguistics, influenced by Jakobson, embraced it somewhat later.

Trubetzkoy developed a typology of oppositions based on work on distinguishing traits. Here are a few that should be mentioned again:

- When the distinguishing characteristics shared by both phonemes also appear in other phonemes, this is referred to as a multidimensional opposition. For instance, /p/, /t/, and /k/ share the qualities [+stop] and [-voice], but they also share [+stop] with the [+voice] counterparts /b/, /d/, and /g/.
- A one-dimensional or bilateral opposition occurs when some characteristics shared by both phonemes are absent from other phonemes.

- An isolated opposition is one that only arises in the phonemic system between two particular phonemes.
- One that occurs in two phonemes and is repeated in additional phoneme pairings is called a proportionate opposition; for instance, /d/-/t/, /b/-/p/ = [+voice]/[-voice]
- When two pairs differ just by one characteristic, it's called a privative opposition; for instance, /p/-/b/ = [±voice].
- Gradient opposition refers to the presence or absence of a property in different degrees, such as the [open] characteristic of vowels.
- An equipollent opposition where pairings are identified by many characteristics; for example, /b/-/ð/ and /v/-/g/ are identified by [±labial] and [±stop].

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