

CLOTHING SPEAKS*

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本稿は、構造主義言語学者であるソシュールが衣服とファッションの理論を構築した方法を用い、服装を言語としてとらえ、論じる。

序論では、服装の学問的分析が比較的新しい分野であるのは何故か、また、服装に関する研究を取り入れているその他の分野について述べる。さらに本論では、まず構造主義者の観点から服装を言語としてとらえる。つまり、服装が言語と同様に *langue* (ラング) と *parole* (パロール) の側面を持ち、言語体系と同様にいかに規則性を持ってメッセージを伝えているかについて考察する。伝統的に、服装は社会的規範に従った、社会的管理の表れであり、地位や性別を分けるものである。服装が発達し文明が進むにつれて服装に対する考え方がどのように変化してきたかを、特に、社会的規範に反駁する人間が如何に否定的な扱いを受けるかを知ることによって、歴史的に遡って見る事が可能となる。セミオロジー (記号学) によって、社会がある特定の服装を好んで身に付ける場合、そこにどのようなことが生じているのか、また、システム (体系) としての衣服と、衣服を身に付けるという行為そのものとの違いについても理解することができる。最後に、現在の東京で人々が身に付けている衣服を例に取って、現代の衣服がいくつかの歴史的段階を経て今に至っていることを指摘したい。衣服には traditional、production、post-modern といった歴史的に定義づけられた変遷段階というものがあるが、現在の社会で身に付けられている服装には、いまだに重要な、これよりさらに古いシステム (体系) の側面が存在する。

INTRODUCTION

This introduction points to the reasons why academic analysis of clothing is a relatively new discipline, and will introduce the different academic disciplines that have begun to cover clothing research. The main body of the paper will look at clothing as a language, using a theory developed by Saussure, a prominent structural linguist. It will show how clothing, in the same way as language, has *langue and parole*, and how it is a rule

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governed system, which carries messages in the same way as other language systems. Clothing traditionally supports the social system and it is a form of social control and demarcation of status and gender. It is possible to trace a development in the history of clothing and a change in attitude towards clothing, as civilization develops. In particular, we can learn from how those who refuse to follow the system are stigmatized. Semiology, the study of signs, helps us to interpret what is happening when societies take up certain items of dress, and can help us understand the difference between dress, the system, and dressing, the act, and how the two interact. Finally, the paper will give examples, from the dress that is worn around us, in Tokyo today, to show that contemporary dress, can reveal several historical stages simultaneously. Although there are defined stages of dress in history; traditional, production, and post-modern, there are aspects of the older systems that are still important in the clothing we can observe being worn in society now.

In a speech at a college fashion show in Meguro. Hanae Mori said that clothing was the nearest culture to us. Of course it is, we wear it on our skin. It is not possible to get closer than that. The American comedienne Joan Rivers once said,

“Does fashion matter? Always, - though not quite as much after death.” 1.

The American writer, Alison Lurie said,

“We can lie in the language of dress, or we can tell the truth. But unless we are naked and bald, it is impossible to be silent.” 2.

It is important to ask ourselves ‘Why do we dress up?’ It has been said that there are three reasons for it: protection, modesty and ornamentation. The first reason is obviously concerned with the effects of the natural world on our bodies, the sun, snow, etc. The second reason, modesty, is born out of the development of society and human relations and has different implications in different societies. If reasons one or two were the most important reasons for dressing up, then fashion would never have emerged. The importance of fashion, in developed cultures, indicates that the last reason is by far the most important. Humans have, as many animals do, an innate desire to adorn themselves. It is thought that the origins of clothing are more mystical than anything else. This act of dressing up is paradoxical. Firstly, dressing is often to indicate membership of certain groups. Uniforms have this function. They indicate that we belong. However, we also dress up to stand out. We want to show our individuality and our good taste, when we dress up. It is paradoxical in other ways too. It is about both revealing and concealing. It seems preoccupied with life, but reveals an obsession with death, it appears to be about freedom of choice, but the definition of beauty becomes increasingly narrow and defined and more and more difficult to obtain. All this, in spite of the fact that cultural studies will show us that there is no one ideal type of beautiful body, and that

different cultures, admire different types of bodies.

Academic analysis of clothing has a very short history. In spite of being one of the main activities that all people in all societies are engaged in, it has not been seriously studied for very long. Before the mid eighteenth century, clothing was only studied by a few archeologists, and those who wanted to make authentic costumes for the theater, (Barthes. 2006.) There are probably several reasons why serious academic study about clothing was not considered important or valuable. Firstly, it is concerned with surface appearances, and those have been considered superficial. Secondly, clothing, and to an even greater extent fashion, have been considered frivolous, being, as they are, so much a part of the world of the female, and also representing the bourgeois, consumerist culture. Thirdly, clothing is temporal. It is worn and it falls apart. Unlike pottery, tools, furniture or architecture, it does not last for a long time. Clothing vanishes and remains only in the world of art or painting. Lastly, and this is related to the third point, there is a serious problem with dating items of clothing. When items emerge, become part of the clothing system, evolve into something else, and finally die out, is impossible for us to date. With the evidence gone, it is only possible to suggest dates when these things may have happened, and we are usually only able to substitute one date, usually in the middle, for the real start and end of an item of clothing. For the purpose of this, a king or monarch has often been seen as the archetypal wearer of clothes, though his clothing will only tell us about a small privileged set of wearers' clothing.

Barthes, the French philosopher and social commentator, suggests that since the mid-eighteenth century, there are several disciplines that have concerned themselves with clothing. Historians have set about trying to trace different styles and forms of various items of clothing, making, in some cases, quite exhaustive catalogues of such work. However, it is not enough to understand only 'what people wore'. As clothing carries meaning, it is necessary to know who wore what, and why they wore it, and what gender and rank distinctions were revealed through clothing. It is important to know marked forms, and what was and was not acceptable and why. Sociologists have looked at some of these issues, and understanding clothing in the context of society is what sociologists need to study. It is possible to tell more about a society by what they wear and eat, than we can tell from a list of laws and wars. Psychology also has much to say about clothing, which is not surprising as it is so close to gender issues and also to eroticism. The seminal work is by Flugel, whose work is based on the psychoanalytical work of Freud. This work concerns gendered power relations, the way that fetishism functions, and other fears and desires of the male, concerning the female. The work that I consider particularly fascinating for those concerned with language, is the work of Saussure, the

structural linguist, who first proposed the idea that the clothing system was a language, like other languages.

“Sartre treats this question from a philosophical point of view when he shows that clothing allows man to ‘assume his freedom’, to constitute himself as he chooses, even if what he has chosen to be represents what others have chosen for him: society made Genet into a thief, and so Genet chooses to be a thief. Clothing is very similar to this phenomenon; it seems that it has interested writers and philosophers because of its links with personality, of its capacity to change one’s being for another; personality makes fashion; it makes clothing; but inversely, clothing makes personality. There is certainly a dialectic between these two elements. The final answer depends on our own personal philosophy.” 3.

CLOTHING AS LANGUAGE

Barthes said that it was Saussure, who realized that clothing functioned as a language. Clothing is far more than a vehicle for self-expression, though some psychological studies done in the States might suggest that. Saussure realized that clothing, like language, has two aspects to it. He divided language into *langue*, the formal, perfectly-formed, rule-governed system, and *parole*, which is what people actually speak. Clothing can be divided in the same way. There is dress, the system, which people accept as normal, and then there is the act of dressing every morning, which we customarily do. Dressing is the physical working out of dress, according to Saussure. This language has a grammar and syntax. There are strict rules about which items can be worn together, and in which order they are put on. Underwear cannot go on top of outerwear, for example, and we must wear a garment supported from the hips, a skirt or pants, to go with a garment that is supported from the shoulders, for example a shirt, or sweater. There are many rules of appropriate types of garments that can go together and those that do not go together. Dressing is the work of individuals, and reflects their choices and personality and what they consider appropriate for the engagements that they will be involved in that day. The sociologist is concerned with the dress system, marked and unmarked forms, what is valuable and what isn’t, what is permitted and what isn’t, and not so much with the dressing of individuals.

So how do dress and dressing interact? Sometimes through fashion houses and fashion trade shows, such as “Premiere Vision” in Paris, where decisions are made about the fashionable colors and themes two years in advance. For example, there might be a theme such as ecology, and the colors chosen might be pale blue, silver and white. It is clean and about ice and coolness. This could be called change from above. Sometimes there are

movements in the street, where an item is worn a certain way by a group of people and that style gets incorporated into the mode of the day. An example of this kind of change from below, would be when a group of students start to wear their shirts upside down, creating, in effect, a new style of garment. If this phenomenon moves from a few people dressing strangely, to become dress, if it somehow modifies the design of shirts, it will have changed from a weak form of meaning to a strong one. It will have become dress.

SEMIOLOGY AND CLOTHING

Language has meanings. Speech acts are about something. If one asks for coffee, people from the same language group understand that that person needs a drink. Though there is no direct relation between those sounds and the drink itself, we understand the code (language) and make the connections.

Language is the most complex and near perfect subject for semiology, the study of signs. The sound of the language is called, in semiology, the *signifier*, and the coffee is called the *signified*. If one sees a sign with a little red woman on it, it means that there is a women's toilet nearby. The little red woman is a signifier, and the toilet is the signified. That is how signs work. In the language of clothing there are important signifiers and signifieds. A Japanese example of a signifier and signified is that on January 15th, all 20-year-olds wear a "furisode" to celebrate coming-of-age. Wearing a "furisode" on January 15th has no intrinsic relationship to adulthood, but the signifier is the long waving sleeved kimono, and the signified is "I am twenty years old" and everyone in Japan understands this cultural message. I will return to this point about the signifier and the signified later. The way that the relationship between signifiers and the signified changes throughout history is very important.



Fig 1. Coming of age ceremony showing clothing signifying coming-of-age

According to Ewadin Ardener, a British anthropologist, who is renowned for his gender studies, women are a muted group. Ardener's muted group theory suggests that speech does not serve all groups' in a community equally. Dominant groups form the language and it is their language. It expresses their experience best and it does not serve to express the minority groups experience as well. For example, public debate is the role of men, and women's talk is gossip and chatter. Women are muted in comparison with men. If women do not talk with men's logic they are accused of being illogical and talking nonsense. We play many roles however, and a woman is muted in comparison to her husband, but dominant with her children. Playing many roles is part of a woman's life, and does not imply that there is anything fake about any of these roles. If a woman is muted in the area of verbal language, maybe she has chosen to use another language. This may account for why clothing is seen as so important by so many women, and why it is seen as being so closely connected with their identity.



Fig 2. This man's body art indicates that he is a member of certain groups, as he rides atop the "omikoshi" at Sanja Matsuri. He has also earned the right to show off, as he is on display, and the tattoos, (like clothing can) both reveal, conceal and draw attention to his body

CHANGES IN THE LANGUAGE OF CLOTHING (POST-MODERNITY)

Historically, dress was to separate the respectable from the non-respectable. Only a courtier could afford to look like a courtier, because cloth was expensive. Laws of scarcity supported the hierarchy. Exotic furs, gold, silver and silk were expensive because they were rare. These were prized by the upper classes and not available to the lower classes. There was little change until the 14th century. This phase Barthes refers to as the classical phase. Clothing was a form of social control and it supported the natural, God-given hierarchy. Change was slow and there was no challenge to the order because it was seen as God-given. Clothing separated humans from nature, the rich from the poor, male from female and there were direct links between the signifier and the signified. In the 14th century merchants became rich and started wearing expensive fabrics beyond their rank. Laws forbade it, but the laws didn't cover styles, so they began to wear gorgeous styles instead. Once the merchant class began to wear the styles of the upper classes, the upper classes moved on to another style and so the fashion system was born. The fashion culture had leaders and followers. There was now a challenge to the social order and clothing became a contested area.

One can observe a similar movement in Japan's history, with the rise of the emerging

merchant class in the Edo period, and its newfound wealth leading to a boom in fashionable kimono wearing. In a similar way, sumptuary laws, laws governing clothing, tried to regulate the wearing of certain fabrics or colors, but this only led to new innovations in dyeing and weaving techniques. It also led to a displacement of the ornamentation from the outside to the lining of the kimono or onto the underwear or the back of the "haori". Subsequently the 'iki' sensibility emerged, and a growth in the value of the understated or hidden beauty, to which not all had access.

The industrial revolution democratized fashion to a large extent, by mass-producing fabric and making clothes available to all, using artificial dyes, mechanized weaving looms and sewing machines. The classical stage of clothing gave way to what Barthes called the *modern* or *production* stage. Work and not birth status began to define rank, and as the male work force flocked to the factories and cities, the women stayed at home. The division between public and private, unknown until the 14th century, was well-formed and women were part of the private, domestic realm. Uniforms showed ranks, and there was clothing for different parts of the day as well as for different jobs: for example, a morning jacket, an evening dress, a smoking jacket. This was all a threat because in the old order, status was a given, but in the new order status could be challenged. In the old order, to try and step outside the system was an offense against God, but now it was an offense against manners and good breeding. Joan of Arc was thought to be from the devil because she wore men's clothing, whereas Eliza Doolittle reveals her lack of social status by her outrageous clothing choices before she even opens her mouth. In the second phase there is a secular world, a world of work and uniforms, and constructed meanings about clothing and culture or manners. Clothing and rank were about the law of exchange and not the law of nature. In the modern or production phase there are indirect signifier, signified links, the links that society has designated for signifiers and signified. Things could now change their value, which was not possible in the classical period. (An example of this kind of change, which has happened relatively recently, though not yet in Japan, is the status accorded to fur. Fur was once the sign of the rich and privileged, but due to the political voice of animal rights' activists in Europe and in the UK who had a strong anti-fur advertising campaign with the slogan, "It takes forty dumb animals to make a fur coat, it takes only one to wear it," fur has now become the sign of the environmentally insensitive).

The third phase, which Barthes suggests that we are in now, is *post-modernity*. This phase is different from the other two phases because the links between signifier and signified are broken down, and it becomes only about the surfaces, signifier, signifier links and not signifier signified links. In other words, it is about a random playing with signs. In a

sense it is post-fashion, because the language of fashion itself is being deconstructed. This last stage, which we could call *simulation*, invites only examination of the code. Can we argue that dress has lost its signifying function? While some feel that fashion has been democratized, some feel that power relations are inherent in all manufactured goods. First, dress reified the social hierarchy, and then it was a site for the struggle for social supremacy. The elite, wanting to stay ahead of the game, is the starting point for this. As the rich involved themselves in conspicuous consumption, (which is written into fashion by its decorativeness and non-functionality), they make something new, which others follow. Real power in post-modernism is replaced with seductive power.

According to Barthes, one of the factors that denotes post-modernity, in social theory, is a refashioning of personal identities using cultural materials. Features are borrowed out of context and appropriated into another context giving them new meanings. Post-modernity is about fragmentation, ambivalence and freedom from signification. Style itself becomes a replacement for identity. Fashion is not an over-determined language. Fashion is a fight to define ourselves. In post-modernity real drives and libido are replaced by the desire for competition, risk and games. Seduction is based on the attraction of the void. From the Renaissance period to the 18th century there was a courtly game, and from then on there was the appearance of democracy. Now there are playful, meaningless symbols in our post-modern fashion.



Fig 3. Girls line up in Harajuku, to have their pictures taken with people dressed as little girls, whose costumes resemble Victorian clothing. They are neither children, Victorians, nor females

Examples of post-modern fashion are all around us. In Japan, a notable feature is that people buy T-shirts with English or English-like sentences or letters on them, without ever reading them. In the West one buys a "Stop the war" T-shirt, if one is a pacifist. The T-shirt is a signifier for our political views. In Japan it is only the design of the letters that is interesting, so people do not appear to notice if the English is incorrect, incoherent, or has spelling mistakes. Neither do they seem to notice or care, if the message of the T-shirt is disgusting or provocative. Other languages are also worn, and the wearers do not appear concerned that they do not know the messages on such T-Shirts. Big girls dress as little girls, (but not contemporary little girls), Lolita fashions incorporate parasols, ribbons and lace and have strong Victorian references, though one can suppose that the majority of wearers do not know who Lolita was, and have never read the Nabokov novel of that name. Boys wear women's kimono, frilly skirts, girls and boys pierce their bodies, and the tattoo, once the signifier of being a yakuza group member has become the property of the young frequenting Harajuku. Items are also appropriated from kimono culture, geta, Japanese-style bags, and western clothing made out of prints of yuzen and other kimono-patterned cloth.



Fig 4. Young people wearing kimono in unconventional ways, with no reference to the kimono tradition or rules of wear

CONCLUSION

Is fashion really fashion for its own sake? Is it really just a playing with signs? Does the language not talk about anything anymore? Though the relationship between signifier and signified may be weaker does it not still exist? Think of the importance of “dress for success” recruit suits. Think of all the advertisements for sports clubs, diet and health foods, and cosmetic surgery. Are we free to wear what we like? Are we free to have any body shape we like? If we go along with the fashion regime we are condemned for being frivolous. If we do not go along with it we have gender disorder. We are old-fashioned or strange.

Playing with signifiers is now, in itself, a signifier. It has meaning in the fashion world and is a form of cultural capital. It is a mark of either the rich and famous, those creative enough to invent for themselves, or who are brave enough to flaunt conventions, or those who are marginalized enough already not to care. The clothing industry may not make as much meaning in its relationship with the outside world, but a closed system can also make meanings. It has its own “Goddesses” of the catwalk, its own creed of styles and colors. It will continue to be denying death, and, every style is immortal. It always has the chance to come around again.

Throughout history, clothing has been the object of codification.

“This brings us to revise a traditional point of view that at first glance seems reasonable and which maintained that Man invented clothing for three reasons: as protection against harsh weather, of modesty for hiding nudity, and for ornamentation to get noticed. This is all true. But we must add another function, which seems to me to be more important: the function of meaning. Man has dressed himself in order to carry out a signifying activity. The wearing of an item of clothing is fundamentally an act of meaning that goes beyond modesty, ornamentation and protection. It is an act of signification and therefore a profoundly social act right at the very heart of the dialectic of society.” 4.

FOOTNOTES

1. Newman Cathy. Fashion, p40. National Geographic. 2001.
 2. Newman Cathy. Fashion, p28. National Geographic. 2001.
 3. Barthes Roland. The language of Fashion, p96. Berg. 2006.
 4. Barthes Roland. The Language of Fashion, p97. Berg. 2006.
- All photographs taken by the author on the streets of Tokyo.

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