

Concept of Mimesis: A Phenomenon of Semiotic Interaction

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Abstract

In the past few decades, mimesis is comprehended as an important aspect to interface between literature, language and society, a phenomenon of semiotic interaction. By highlighting different semantic dimensions of the concept, mimesis is seen as being composed of various phases of interaction and as such, it is connected with imitation, depiction, iconicity and other semiotic concepts. The aim of this paper is to bring in potential possibilities for understanding and using the notion of mimesis in connection with some semiotic concepts and views.

'Mimesis' a Greek term which meant for Plato removed from reality and distortion is manipulated by Aristotle to mean something apparently better than reality. As Aristotle tried to

put a new concept against Plato's charge in the same way this paper focuses on possible concordances and structural analogies involved in imitation of foreign language in Indian society. This study will also reveal that any speaker can be good enough in expression but an artful skill is required to make an accurate and proper articulation. Thus the paper strongly supports the view that 'Mimesis' was probably not a notion with a single meaning even in the times when first mentioned in the literature. Therefore it is quite superficial to refer to it today as a single entity.

Introduction

Mimesis (Ancient Greek: μίμησις (mīmēsis), from μιμεῖσθαι (mīmeisthai), "to imitate," from μῖμος (mimos), "imitator, actor") is a critical and philosophical term that carries a wide range of meanings, which include imitation, representation, mimicry, imitatio, receptivity, nonsensuous similarity, the act of resembling, the act of expression, and the presentation of the self. In ancient Greece, mimesis was an idea that governed the creation of works of art, in particular, with correspondence to the physical world understood as a model for the truth and the good. Plato contrasted mimesis, or imitation, with dieresis, or narrative. The meaning of mimesis shifted to a specifically literary function in ancient Greek society after Plato, and its use has changed and been re-interpreted many times since then. Mimesis as a social-cultural phenomenon has also been analysed in the framework of postcolonial cultural studies.

The concept of Mimesis has been pointed out by various thinkers and philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Philip Sidney, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Adam Smith, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Erich Auerbach, Luce Irigaray, René Girard, Nikolas Kompridis, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Michael Taussig, Merlin Donald, and Homi Bhabha.

The purpose of this study is to introduce possibilities for understanding and using the notion of mimesis with regard to some semiotic concepts and views. Secondly, in order to understand the nature of 'mimesis and its interpretations, it is important to highlight the historical relation between 'mimesis' and actual performative activities.' Mimesis' has not always been a pure theoretical category, its roots lie in the oral tradition and as such it is the essence of mimesis to be dynamic and to include body-related motions, rhythms, gestures and

sounds. Also mimetic perceptions and actions are linked to human cultures since prehistoric times. They appear in the ritual objects resembling various creatures and objects of the world. One may also find approaches that link mimesis as a capability for imitation, directly to the rise and growth of human culture. Michael A. Arbib, for instance, considers the capacity of imitation to be the very trait that distinguishes humans from their predecessors. At the same time, he sees that unique quality being the major underlying force for the development of human culture. Michael A. Arbib writes: “imitation plays a crucial role in human language acquisition and performance, and [...] brain mechanisms supporting imitation were crucial to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*” (Arbib 2002)

Mimesis: A Moving Concept

The modern use of the word mimesis varies from the ancient use to a great extent. By analysing the ideas of mimesis in the writings of Plato, Cervantes, Rousseau and Kierkegaard Norwegian literary theorist Arne Melberg have regarded ‘mimesis as a moving concept. Due to its diversity of possible uses, the ancient concept has become a point of departure for many contemporary cultural and literary theorists. In the present context, it is not correct to speak of mimesis as a single concept, but rather as a constantly changing, transforming and as it were ‘living’ family of concepts. Belonging to the same concept family does not mean that it is not possible to distinguish different concepts therein and describe the relations between them. Hence, instead of concrete definitions and logical inferences, a more intuitive and descriptive approach is necessary, just as it would be if one were describing the relations between different people and generations in a real family.

According to the approach proposed in this study, mimesis lies in the region between imitation, representation, perception and performance. Binding the perception of an object with conscious performance, mimesis inevitably presupposes the existence and participation of human creative forces. Mimesis is an active process in which something new is created, even if it is based on what is previously known, and thus mimesis and creativity are very closely connected.

Study of Various Critical Mimetic Theories

One of the best-known modern studies of mimesis, understood as a form of realism in the arts, is Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, published in 1946 and written while the author was in exile from Nazi Germany. The book states a famous comparison between the way the world is represented in Homer's *Odyssey* and the way it appears in the Bible. From these two seminal Western texts, Auerbach builds the foundation for a unified theory of representation that spans the entire history of Western literature, including the Modernist novels being written at the time Auerbach began his study.

The Frankfurt school critical theorist T.W. Adorno made use of mimesis as a central philosophical term, interpreting it as a way in which works of art embodied a form of reason that was non-repressive and non-violent.

In *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), the anthropologist Michael Taussig examines the way that people from one culture adopt another's nature and culture (the process of mimesis) at the same time as distancing themselves from it (the process of alterity). He describes how a legendary tribe, the "white Indians", or Cuna, have adopted in various representational figures and images reminiscent of the white people they encountered in the past (without acknowledging doing so).

Taussig, however, criticizes anthropology for reducing yet another culture that of the Cuna, for having been so impressed by their exotic (and superior) technologies of the whites, that they raised them to the status of gods. To Taussig, this reductionism is suspect, and he argues thus from both sides in his *Mimesis and Alterity* to see value in the anthropologist's perspective, at the same time as defending the independence of a lived culture from anthropological reductionism.

Both Plato and Aristotle saw in mimesis the representation of nature. Plato wrote about mimesis in both Ion and The Republic (Books II, III and X). In *Ion*, he states that poetry is the art of divine madness, or inspiration. Because the poet is subject to this divine madness, it is not his/her function to convey the truth. As Plato has it, truth is the concern of the philosopher only.

As culture in those days did not consist in the solitary reading of books, but in the listening to the performances, the recitals of orators (and poets), or the acting out by classical actors of tragedy, Plato maintained in his critique that theatre was not sufficient in conveying the truth. He was concerned that actors or orators were thus able to persuade an audience by rhetoric rather than by telling the truth.

In Book II of *The Republic*, Plato describes Socrates' dialogue with his pupils. Socrates warns we should not seriously regard poetry as being capable of attaining the truth and that we who listen to poetry should be on our guard against its seductions, since the poet has no place in our idea of God.

In developing this in Book X, Plato tells of Socrates' metaphor of the three beds: one bed exists as an idea made by God (the Platonic ideal); one is made by the carpenter, in imitation of God's idea; one is made by the artist in imitation of the carpenter's.

So the artist's bed is twice removed from the truth. The copiers only touch on a small part of things as they really are, where a bed may appear differently from various points of view, looked at obliquely or directly, or differently again in a mirror. So painters or poets, though they may paint or describe a carpenter or any other maker of things, know nothing of the carpenter's (the craftsman's) art, and though the better painters or poets, they are, the more faithfully their works of art will resemble the reality of the carpenter making a bed, nonetheless the imitators will still not attain the truth (of God's creation).

The poets, beginning with Homer, far from improving and educating humanity, do not possess the knowledge of craftsmen and are mere imitators who copy again and again images of virtue and rhapsodies about them, but never reach the truth in the way the superior philosophers do.

Interpretation of Mimesis according to Plato and Aristotle

Similar to Plato's writings about mimesis, Aristotle also defined mimesis as the perfection and imitation of nature. Art is not only imitation, but also the use of mathematical ideas and

symmetry in the search for the perfect, the timeless and contrasting being to becoming. Nature is full of change, decay, and cycles, but art can also search for what is everlasting and the first causes of natural phenomena. Aristotle wrote about the idea of four causes in nature. The first formal cause is like a blueprint, or an immortal idea. The second cause is the material, or what a thing is made out of. The third cause is the process and the agent, in which the artist or creator makes the thing. The fourth cause is the good, or the purpose and end of a thing, known as telos.

Aristotle's Poetics is often referred as the counterpart to this Platonic conception of poetry. Poetics is his treatise on the subject of mimesis. Aristotle was not against literature as such; he stated that human beings are mimetic beings, feeling an urge to create texts (art) that reflect and represent reality.

While describing the nature of poetry Wimsatt and Brook, stated that;

“A term which meant for Plato removed from reality and distortion is manipulated by Aristotle to mean something apparently better than reality.”

The term ‘Imitation’ was already used by Plato in the sense of mere coping, but Aristotle proceeds to give a more constructive and precise interpretation. In Poetics, Aristotle writes;

“Epic, poetry and tragedy, comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one another in three respects, - the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct. ”

The medium of the poet and the painter are different. The latter imitates through form and colour and the former imitates through language and rhythm. The musician imitates through rhythm. In this way, poetry is nearer to music than painting. The manner of a poet may be purely narrative i.e. Epic or representation of an action i.e. Drama.

The objects of imitations are men in action. Here action may be external or internal. The poet may imitate;

“Men as they were or are, or as they ought to be.”

Tragedy and epic represent men on a heroic scale, better than they are while comedy represents men on a lower scale, worse than they are. In this context, Humphry House pointed that;

“Comedy would make its personages worse and tragedy would make them better than the men of the present day.”

This means that Imitation is not a mere photographic representation of the surface of things, but it is a creative process. The poet selects and orders his material and in this way he re-creates reality. He brings order out of Chaos.

Aristotle by this theory of Imitation answers the charge of Plato that poetry is an imitation of imitations. In other words, poetry is an imitation of shadow of shadows twice removed from reality. Plato charges poetry as: “The mother of lies”. God created the world according to the idea of his mind. The world, therefore, is not the reality, but a copy of the reality in the mind of the supreme. The Poet imitates this copy; hence poetry is twice removed from reality or truth.

Aristotle defended poetry against Plato’s theory. Aristotle says that Art imitates “ Ideal reality”. Art moves in the world of Images and reproduce the external world according to the idea or image in his mind. This is only possible in the presence of imagination. Thus, poetry is a creative process. So in this manner Aristotle injected a new life into the concept of Imitation.

Concept of Mimesis in Context of Language Acquisition

Language is a skilled activity. In the development and acquisition of the skill, imitation plays a pivotal role. In the context of language, we can compare Traditional Grammarian with Modern Linguist. As the Traditional Grammarian gives priority to the written form of language and consider the spoken form used by the modern linguist as the corruption of language. While modern linguists have proved that the change in the form of language is not corruption but it is a creative process, as every generation changed and developed its language according to its requirement. So it is not the corrupted form rather an innovative process.

In the same manner by highlighting the concept of mimesis stated by Aristotle, it can be stated that language acquisition is also an imitation. In today's world learners of language are given the opportunity to get exposure to various real world environments. It is evident that technology is a tool and we need wisdom to use it, to serve the desired purpose. Learning language through technology, i.e. Communication lab, video lectures, internet etc. is also an imitation process, but it can be categorized as skillful imitation. Here the learner not only imitates, but composes it creatively by adding non-verbal communication skills. In the very initial stage the learner feels fear and hesitation to use a language which is different from his mother tongue, e.g. If an Indian tries to learn English or any foreign language. Here the learner tries to imitate the best speaker or rather his teacher or a person who has better knowledge of language than him. Most researchers found that an imitation of the teacher is the best game to play, to learn and to get something in the form of 'fluent speaker' and to become a real learner of the second language.

Imitation plays vital role because whatever the learner gets is the way in which the speaker speaks, chats, walks, smiles, uses his posture and gestures, facial expressions, articulating the spellings and illustrating the given situation. Half success comes out if the imitation of the instructor can be done skillfully. This is what is called language-learning-mechanism.

The relation between imitation and language accounts from different disciplines, The issue is the role that imitation plays in the origin of language, in the acquisition of language by children, in the historical development of languages, and in the social use of language. There are separate sub-questions about imitation in relation to phonology, lexis and syntax. Not surprisingly views differ sharply, not only between the different disciplines but also within disciplines, notably within linguistics, and in the evolutionary account of language.

It has been studied that humans automatically match their language style to fit an environment or to imitate a speaker or significant other. New research discovers that

contentment in a relationship is often signified by a matching of each other's language style to an even greater degree than what occurs naturally.

“When two people start a conversation, they usually begin talking alike within a matter of seconds,” says James Pennebaker, University of Texas psychology professor.

“This also happens when people read a book or watch a movie. As soon as the credits roll, they find themselves talking like, the author or the central characters.”

This tendency is called *language style matching* or LSM.

Conclusion

Learning is undoubtedly a creative process, although the learner tries to imitate the speaker, but he not only imitates, but makes it more creative by using his skills. So in a broad sense it would be apt to state that, every event or learning follows the concept of imitation not merely to do the task but to produce better than the existing. Thus, under this surface of denotations there is the myriad of connotations which engage Mimesis to many historical layers of culture, ethnicity and iconicity, making it quite difficult to define. The most extreme adherence to the conventional meaning of ‘mimesis’ is the way in which the notion of ‘imitation’ is used in contemporary cybernetics and electronics when discussing robots that are capable of imitating (Breazeal, Scassellati 2002). Here the participation of the creative subject is completely absent, and thus it is “pure imitation”.

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