

Structuralism

1. The nature of meaning or understanding.

A. The role of structure as the system of relationships

Something can only be understood (i.e., a meaning can be constructed) within a certain system of relationships (or structure). For example, a word which is a linguistic sign (something that stands for something else) can only be understood within a certain conventional system of signs, which is language, and not by itself (cf. the word / sound combination شَرَق and “shark” in English and Arabic). A particular relationship within a society (e.g., between a male offspring and his maternal uncle) can only be understood in the context of the whole system of kinship (e.g., matrilineal or patrilineal).

Structuralism holds that, according to the human way of understanding things, particular elements have no absolute meaning or value: their meaning or value is relative to other elements. Everything makes sense only in relation to something else. An element cannot be perceived by itself. In order to understand a particular element we need to study the whole system of relationships or structure (this approach is also exactly the same as Malinowski's: one cannot understand particular elements of culture out of the context of that culture). A particular element can only be studied as part of a greater structure. In fact, the only thing that can be studied is not particular elements or objects but relationships within a system. Our human world, so to speak, is made up of relationships, which make up permanent structures of the human mind.

B. The role of oppositions / pairs of binary oppositions

Structuralism holds that understanding can only happen if clearly defined or “significant” (= essential) differences are present which are called oppositions (or binary oppositions since they come in pairs). This means that meaning is not something absolute but relative and depends on binary oppositions. We cannot understand something unless we first perceive how it is different from something else, or its “opposition.” For example, there is no meaning “hot” unless there is also “cold,” no “good” without “evil,” no “male” without “female” and so on. All terms, so to say, “generate” their opposites. In fact, it is selecting these significant differences (opposites) that creates the world of objects for our mind. E.g., there would not be “native” without us perceiving our difference from “foreign,” and there wouldn't even be the human person if we didn't perceive our difference from other human beings!

One very important area where oppositions / significant differences are crucial is language where oppositions between sounds / words are crucial for understanding. For example, the only sound that makes the words “dog” and “dock” different is the last one. If we make sounds “g” and “k” indistinguishable in pronouncing them, we could not tell these two words apart: it means that g / k is a significant difference or opposition that is crucial to understanding. On the other hand, even if we pronounce the word “rock” with a rolling R (as Italians or Russians) we can still understand it: therefore r / R is not a

significant difference or opposition crucial to our understanding. (Thus what determines if we can understand someone's accent is whether this person can create enough difference between sounds that constitute binary oppositions that are significant for this language.)

These observations prove the existence of a structural principle in language: in language what makes any single item meaningful is not its particular individual quality but the difference between this quality and that of other sounds / words, or its position within the structure (system of relationships). These observations were made by Ferdinand de Saussure, in the *Course in General Linguistics*.

2. Levi-Strauss and structural anthropology; structural method applied to culture

Language is not the only area where structural principles can be applied. Anthropologists apply them to societies and kinship systems. Levi-Strauss also tried to apply structural principles to cultural phenomena such as mythology. According to Levi-Strauss, myth can be organized according to a certain structure, just as language. In language this structure can be roughly called "grammar" which is based on its system of significant differences or oppositions. Myth also has its system of oppositions and "grammar." If we know this "grammar" of myth well enough we might be able to decipher the "message" that myth is trying to convey to us. When we master the grammar of myths we can read their hidden messages, much as we can read "between the lines" for political statements and agendas in newspapers.

However, in order to "read" myths successfully, we must know the whole system of relationships in a particular myth, or its structure. This is what Levi-Strauss is attempting to do in his "Story of Asdiwal."

3. Roland Barthes and semiology

Structuralism is the theory that conceives of all cultural phenomena as sign systems, operating according to the rules of a deep structure. The simplest example of a sign system is traffic lights or road signs. A sign is arbitrary, but cannot be viewed outside of a system of signs.

Ferdinand de Saussure, in the *Course in General Linguistics*, describes language as a system of signs (a word is a sign) to which we respond in a predictable way. According to him, the sign is made up of a signifier (e.g., the acoustic form of the word, the sound) and a signified (e.g., a mental concept). These two are combined in the mind resulting in understanding or meaning (e.g., perceiving the sound "cat" signals the object "cat"). The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; any word can be used to signify anything.

Saussure also envisaged *semiology* (*semiotics*) as a science of signs in general, not only linguistic signs (words). Language is only one of the systems that is studied by semiotics.

Semiotics was viewed by Saussure as a key to unlocking a variety of cultural phenomena all of which are various sign systems.

Thus culture operates by constructing systems of conventional oppositions that fall into conventional sign systems, or system of cultural codes that can be “read” as text, language, or messages. This is called cultural construction of meaning, or social construction of reality. (Incidentally, this is important for the idea of difference, for some of the oppositions constructed by culture can affect how different groups of humans are perceived and treated, e.g., if they fit within an opposition “savage-civilized” etc.)

Roland Barthes helped found the modern science of semiology, applying structuralist (or semiotic) methods to the “myths” that he saw all around him: media, fashion, art, photography, architecture, literature. According to Barthes, anything in culture can be a sign and send a specific message. In his *Mythologies* Barthes describes some methods of “deciphering” these messages.

According to Barthes, “myth is a type of speech” (the original meaning of the Greek *mythos*: word, speech, story). Myth is a “system of communication” or a “message,” a “mode of signification.” This means that everything can be myth, provided that it conveys some meaning or message (cf. cultural signs and icons). Since language is the universal method of communication in humans, we can potentially convert everything into language. “Speech of this kind [i.e., myth] is a message” so it is not confined to oral or written speech. So a photograph is “a kind of speech,” in the same way as a newspaper article. If an object means something it becomes speech. “Myth as a semiological [or semiotic] system”; mythology is part of the science of semiology discovered by Saussure.

The main principles of Barthes’ analysis of myths is that:

myth is something hidden and needs to be uncovered

myth has a message and intent and needs to be deciphered

Type of social phenomenon	Binary (significant) oppositions	Element in a system/structure	Deciphering message
language	dog-doc this-dis rock-Rock got-gat	شرق shark غرب garb grammar	understanding language
society	sister-brother foreign-native	maternal uncle in matrilineal society	understanding social structure
myth	same as above	mythical structure?	mythical message?

How one would approach the study of myth structurally:

1. By understanding a culture as a text or language phenomenon: identifying significant binary oppositions (for example “ocean/land” would not be significant for someone who lives in a desert), determining how they are related, and building a structure
2. By comparing traditional stories to these systems of oppositions, or social-cultural structures, and determining which stories might be significant to this culture. Ultimately, by deciphering the messages that may be contained in these traditional stories for this culture.
3. Incidentally, this approach also creates a new definition for myth: a story that has the structure of significant binary oppositions and may be important for this culture and conveys a message. This might account for some important traditional stories that are part of a culture but do not fall under Malinowski’s requirements for myth: that is, they do not seem to “legalize” any social practices or institutions.

Supplementary information:

Structuralism

in linguistics, any one of several schools of 20th-century linguistics committed to the structuralist principle that a language is a self-contained relational structure, the elements of which derive their existence and their value from their distribution and *oppositions* in texts or discourse. This principle was first stated clearly, for linguistics, by the Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussurean structuralism was further developed in somewhat different directions by the Prague school, glossematics, and other European movements. In the United States the term structuralism, or structural linguistics, has had much the same sense as it has had in Europe in relation to the work of Franz Boas (1858-1942) and Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and their followers. Nowadays, however, it is commonly used, in a narrower sense, to refer to the so-called post-Bloomfieldian school of language analysis that follows the methods of Leonard Bloomfield, developed after 1930. Phonology (the study of sound systems) and morphology (the study of word structure) are their primary fields of interest. Little work on semantics has been done by structural linguists because of their belief that the field is too difficult or elusive to describe.

Structuralism

in cultural anthropology, the school of thought developed by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which cultures, viewed as systems, are analyzed in terms of the structural relations among their elements. According to Lévi-Strauss's theories, universal patterns in cultural systems are products of the invariant structure of the human mind. Structure, for Lévi-Strauss, referred exclusively to mental structure, although he found

evidence of such structure in his far-ranging analyses of kinship, patterns in mythology, art, religion, ritual, and culinary traditions. The basic framework of Lévi-Strauss's theories was derived from the work of structural linguistics. From N.S. Trubetzkoy, the founder of structural linguistics, Lévi-Strauss developed his focus on unconscious infrastructure as well as an *emphasis on the relationship between terms*, rather than on terms as entities in themselves. From the work of Roman Jakobson, of the same school of linguistic thought, Lévi-Strauss adopted the so-called distinctive feature method of analysis, which postulates that an unconscious "metastructure" emerges through the human *mental process of pairing opposites*. In Lévi-Strauss's system the human mind is viewed as a repository of a great variety of natural material, *from which it selects pairs of elements that can be combined to form diverse structures. Pairs of oppositions can be separated into singular elements for use in forming new oppositions.*

In analyzing kinship terminology and kinship systems, the accomplishment that first brought him to preeminence in anthropology, Lévi-Strauss suggested that the elementary structure, or unit of kinship, on which all systems are built is a set of four types of organically linked relationships: brother/sister, husband/wife, father/son, and mother's brother/sister's son. Lévi-Strauss stressed that the emphasis in structural analysis of kinship must be on human consciousness, not on objective ties of descent or consanguinity. For him, all forms of social life represent the operation of universal laws regulating the activities of the mind. His detractors argued that his theory could be neither tested nor proved and that his lack of interest in historical processes represented a fundamental oversight. Lévi-Strauss, however, believed that *structural similarities underlie all cultures and that an analysis of the relationships among cultural units could provide insight into innate and universal principles of human thought.*

Claude Lévi-Strauss

(b. Nov. 28, 1908, Brussels, Belg.), French social anthropologist and leading exponent of structuralism, a name applied to the analysis of cultural systems (e.g., kinship and mythical systems) in terms of the structural relations among their elements. Structuralism has influenced not only 20th-century social science but also the study of philosophy, comparative religion, literature, and film. After studying philosophy and law at the University of Paris (1927-32), Lévi-Strauss taught in a secondary school and was associated with Jean-Paul Sartre's intellectual circle. He served as professor of sociology at the University of São Paulo, Brazil (1934-37), and did field research on the Indians of Brazil. He was visiting professor at the New School for Social Research in New York City (1941-45), where he was influenced by the work of linguist Roman Jakobson. From 1950 to 1974 he was director of studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études at the University of Paris, and in 1959 he was appointed to the chair of social anthropology at the Collège de France. In 1949 Lévi-Strauss published his first major work, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (rev. ed., 1967; *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*). He attained popular recognition with *Tristes tropiques* (1955; *A World on the Wane*), a literary intellectual autobiography. Other publications include *Anthropologie*

structurale (rev. ed., 1961; Structural Anthropology), *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962; *The Savage Mind*), and *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui* (1962; *Totemism*). His massive *Mythologiques* appeared in four volumes: *Le Cru et le cuit* (1964; *The Raw and the Cooked*), *Du miel aux cendres* (1966; *From Honey to Ashes*), *L'Origine des manières de table* (1968; *The Origin of Table Manners*), and *L'Homme nu* (1971; *The Naked Man*). In 1973 a second volume of *Anthropologie structurale* appeared. *La Voie des masques*, 2 vol. (1975; *The Way of the Masks*), analyzed the art, religion, and mythology of native American Northwest Coast Indians. In 1983 he published a collection of essays, *Le Regard éloigné* (*The View from Afar*). Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was an effort to reduce the enormous amount of information about cultural systems to what he believed were the essentials, the formal relationships among their elements. He viewed cultures as systems of communication, and he constructed models based on structural linguistics, information theory, and cybernetics to interpret them.