

## HZT4UE – Theory of Knowledge

### UNIT 4: LANGUAGE

#### 4.5 Structuralism

##### **Structuralism (or Semiotics)**

Structuralism owes its methodological genesis to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist who was the first to emphasize the priority of linguistic structure in the scientific study of language. Saussure called his new theory of language 'semiology' or the 'science of signs' as he developed it during his lectures on linguistics in Paris and Geneva. Most remarkably, it was not until three years after his death in 1913 that the notes from these lectures were collated and published as the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916).

Structuralism is appealing to some critics because it adds a certain objectivity, a SCIENTIFIC objectivity, to the realm of literary studies (which have often been criticized as purely subjective/impressionistic). This scientific objectivity is achieved by subordinating "parole" (speech) to "langue" (language), actual usage is abandoned in favor of studying the structure of a system in the abstract. Thus structuralist readings ignore the specificity of actual texts and treat them as if they were like the patterns produced by iron filings moved by magnetic force--the result of some impersonal force or power, not the result of human effort.

In structuralism, the individuality of the text disappears in favor of looking at patterns, systems, and structures. Some structuralists (and a related school of critics, called the Russian Formalists) propose that ALL narratives can be charted as variations on certain basic universal narrative patterns. In this way of looking at narratives, the author is canceled out, since the text is a function of a system, not of an individual.

The Romantic humanist model holds that the author is the origin of the text, its creator, and hence is the starting point or progenitor of the text. Structuralism argues that any piece of writing, or any signifying system, has no origin, and that authors merely inhabit pre-existing structures (langue) that enable them to make any particular sentence (or story)--any parole. Hence the idea that "language speaks us," rather than that we speak language. We don't originate language; we inhabit a structure that enables us to speak; what we (mis)perceive as our originality is simply our recombination of some of the elements in the pre-existing system. Hence every text, and every sentence we speak or write, is made up of the "already written."

By focusing on the system itself, in a synchronic analysis, structuralists cancel out history. Most insist, as Levi-Strauss does, that structures are universal, therefore timeless. Structuralists can't account for change or development; they are uninterested, for example, in how literary forms may have changed over time. They are not interested in a text's production or reception/consumption, but only in the structures that shape it.

In erasing the author, the individual text, the reader, and history, structuralism represented a major challenge to what we now call the "liberal humanist" tradition in literary criticism. The HUMANIST model presupposed:

1. That there is a real world out there that we can understand with our rational minds.
2. That language is capable of (more or less) accurately depicting that real world..
3. That language is a product of the individual writer's mind or free will, meaning that we determine what we say, and what we mean when we say it; that language thus expresses the essence of our individual beings (and that there is such a thing as a unique individual "self").
4. The SELF--also known as the "subject," since that's how we represent the idea of a self in language, by saying I, which is the subject of a sentence--or the individual (or the mind or the free will) is the center of all meaning and truth; words mean what I say they mean, and truth is what I perceive as truth. I create my own sentences out of my own individual experiences and need for individual expression.

The STRUCTURALIST model argues

1. That the structure of language itself produces "reality"--that we can think only through language, and therefore our perceptions of reality are all framed by and determined by the structure of language.
2. That language speaks us; that the source of meaning is not an individual's experience or being, but the sets of oppositions (without 'big', there cannot be 'little') and operations, the signs and grammars that govern language. Meaning doesn't come from individuals, but from the system that governs what any individual can do within it.
3. Rather than seeing the individual as the center of meaning, structuralism places THE STRUCTURE at the center--it's the structure that originates or produces meaning, not the individual self. Language in particular is the center of self and meaning; I can only say "I" because I inhabit a system of language in which the position of subject is marked by the first personal pronoun, hence my identity is the product of the linguistic system I occupy.

Source: <[www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/1derrida.html](http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/1derrida.html)>

### **Some Elements of Structuralism and its Application**

1. Structuralism notes that much of our imaginative world is structured of, and structured by, binary oppositions (being/nothingness, hot/cold, culture/nature); these oppositions structure meaning, and one can describe fields of cultural thought by describing the binary sets which compose them.
2. Some signs carry with them larger cultural meanings, usually very general; these are called, by Roland Barthes, "myths", or second-order signifiers. Anything can be a myth. For example, two-story pillars supporting the portico of a house are a mythic signifier of wealth and elegance.

3. The conception of the constructed subject opens up the borders between the conscious and the unconscious. The unconscious itself is not some strange, impenetrable realm of private meaning but is constructed through the sign-systems and through the repressions of the culture. Both the self and the unconscious are cultural constructs. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan tried to combine the works of Saussure and Freud, looking for the structure of the conscious and subconscious.
4. In the view of structuralism our knowledge of 'reality' is not only coded but also conventional, that is, structured by and through conventions, made up of signs and signifying practices. This is known as "the social construction of reality." There is, then, in structuralism, a coherent connection among the conceptions of reality, the social, the individual, the unconscious: they are all composed of the same signs, codes and conventions, all working according to similar laws.
5. Structuralism enables us to approach texts historically or trans-culturally in a disciplined way. Whenever we have to look more objectively, when we are transversing barriers of time, say, or of culture or interest, then the structural method, the search for principles of order, coherence and meaning, become dominant.
6. This sort of study opens up for serious cultural analysis texts which had hitherto been closed to such study because they did not conform to the rules of literature, hence were not literature but 'popular writing' or 'private writing' or 'history' and so forth. When the rules of literary meaning are seen as just another set of rules for a signifying arena of a culture, then literature loses some aspects of its privileged status, but gains in the strength and cogency of its relationship to other areas of signification. Hence literary study has expanded to the study of textuality, popular writing has been opened up to serious study, and the grounds for the relationship between the meaning-conventions of literature and the way in which a culture imagines reality have been set, and we can speak more clearly of the relation of literary to cultural meanings. All documents can be studied as texts -- for instance, history or sociology can be analyzed the way literature can be.
7. Belief-systems can be studied textually and their role in constructing the nature of the self understood.
8. Structuralism underlines the importance of genre, i.e. basic rules as to how subjects are approached, about conventions of reading for theme, level of seriousness, significance of language use, and so forth. Different genres lead to different expectations of types of situations and actions, and of psychological, moral, and aesthetic values. One gains an appreciation of literature as an institution, as a coherent and related set of codes and practices, and so one sees also that reading is situated reading, that is, it is in a certain meaning-domain or set of codes. It follows that when literature is written, it will be written under these codes (it can break or alter the codes to create effects, but this is still a function of the codes). Consequently one can be more open to challenges to and alterations of literary conventions. Once one sees that reading and writing are both coded and based on conventions one can read 'against the grain' in a disciplined way,

and one can read readings of literature -- reading can become a more self-reflexive process.

Source: <[www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/struct.html](http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/struct.html)>

### **Claude Lévi-Strauss**

In the domain of anthropology and myth studies, the work done in the immediate post-World War II period by Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced structuralist principles to a wide audience. For the anthropologist, all aspects of culture—sexual taboos, kinship laws, marriage rites, cookery, social hierarchies, religious rituals, myths—proved amenable to structural analysis. His structural study of myth suggested that commonalities and pattern of myth exist across cultures.

Because structuralism values deep structures over surface phenomena, it parallels, in part, the views of Marx and Freud, both of whom were concerned with underlying causes, unconscious motivations, and transpersonal forces, shifting attention away from individual human consciousness and choice. Like Marxism and Freudianism, therefore, structuralism furthers the ongoing modern diminishment of the individual, portraying the self largely as a construct and consequence of impersonal systems. Individuals neither originate nor control the codes and conventions of their social existence, mental life, or linguistic experience. As a result of its demotion of the person, or subject, structuralism is widely regarded as “antihumanistic.”

In 1961, Levi-Strauss situated structural anthropology within the domain of “semiology.” Increasingly, the terms semiology and Semiotics came to designate a field of study that analyzes sign systems, codes, and conventions of all kinds, from human to animal and sign languages, from the jargon of fashion to the lexicon of food, from the rules of folk narrative to those of phonological systems, from codes of architecture and medicine to the conventions of myth and literature. The term semiotics has gradually replaced structuralism, and the formation of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in the 1960s has solidified the trend.

At the moment when structuralist methodology was expanding into the discipline of semiotics, critical reaction occurred, particularly in France, where it led to such antithetical and schismatic projects as Gilles Deleuze's "schizoanalysis," Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction, Michel Foucault's "genealogy," and Julia Kristeva's "semanalysis." These critical schools were lumped together and labeled poststructuralism in the United States. For Marxists, the truth of human existence could be understood by an analysis of economic structures.

Despite the various critiques of structuralism, it has generated much important work and holds promise of continuing to do so.

Source: *The Continental Philosophy Reader*. Ed. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater. London: Routledge, 1996.

**Questions on Structuralism:**

- 1) What is the main idea behind structuralism? Who came up with the idea?
- 2) Give two differences between the humanist model and the structuralist model.
- 3) What did Lacan try to do?
- 4) Using the word genre in your response, how does structuralism open up even “trashy” stories like Harlequin Romances to intellectual study? What other types of genres or media might then also be examined?
- 5) What did Levi-Strauss do with structuralism?

# Structuralism and Semiotics

## Structuralism

Structuralism is a way of thinking about the world which is predominantly concerned with the perceptions and description of structures. At its simplest, structuralism claims that the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by all the other elements involved in that situation. The full significance of any entity cannot be perceived unless and until it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part. Structuralists believe that all human activity is constructed, not natural or "essential." Consequently, it is the systems of organization that are important (what we do is always a matter of selection within a given construct). By this formulation, "any activity, from the actions of a narrative to not eating one's peas with a knife, takes place within a system of differences and has meaning only in its relation to other possible activities within that system, not to some meaning that emanates from nature or the divine" (Childers & Hentzi, p. 286.). Major figures include Claude Lévi-Strauss (LAY-vee-strows), A. J. Greimas (GREE-mahs), Jonathan Culler, Roland Barthes (bart), Ferdinand de Saussure (soh-SURR or soh-ZHOR), Roman Jakobson (YAH-keb-sen), Vladimir Propp, and Terence Hawkes.

## Semiology

Semiotics, simply put, is the science of signs. Semiology proposes that a great diversity of our human action and productions--our bodily postures and gestures, the the social rituals we perform, the clothes we wear, the meals we serve, the buildings we inhabit--all convey "shared" meanings to members of a particular culture, and so can be analyzed as signs which function in diverse kinds of signifying systems. Linguistics (the study of verbal signs and structures) is only one branch of semiotics but supplies the basic methods and terms which are used in the study of all other social sign systems (Abrams, p. 170). Major figures include Charles Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault (fou-KOH), Umberto Eco, Gérard Genette, and Roland Barthes (bart).

## Key Terms:

**Binary Opposition** - "pairs of mutually-exclusive signifiers in a paradigm set representing categories which are logically opposed and which together define a complete universe of discourse (relevant ontological domain), e.g. alive/not-alive. In such oppositions each term necessarily implies its opposite and there is no middle term" (Daniel Chandler).

**Mythemes** - a term developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss--mythemes are the smallest component parts of a myth. By breaking up myths into mythemes, those structures (mythemes) may be studied chronologically or synchronically/relationally.

**Sign vs. Symbol** - According to Saussure, "words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather are 'signs' which are made up of two parts (like two sides of a sheet of paper): a mark, either written or spoken, called a 'signifier,' and a concept (what is

'thought' when the mark is made), called a 'signified'" (Selden and Widdowson 104 - see General Resources below). The distinction is important because Saussure contended that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary; the only way we can distinguish meaning is by difference (one sign or word differs from another).

The relational nature of language implied by Saussure's system rejects the concept that a word/symbol corresponds to an outside object/referent. Instead, meaning--the interpretation of a sign--can exist only in relationship with other signs. Selden and Widdowson use the sign system of traffic lights as an example. The color red, in that system, signifies "stop," even though "there is no natural bond between red and stop" (105). Meaning is derived entirely through difference, "a system of opposites and contrasts," e.g., referring back to the traffic lights' example, red's meaning depends on the fact that it is not green and not amber (105).