

STRUCTURALISM: ORIGINS AND CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

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What I mean by "structuralism" is a set of methods, not an ideology, which started in France during the sixties. It is a remarkable movement because its origins can be found not only in philosophy, but also in linguistics and anthropology. Current structuralism has grown even more interdisciplinary, its methods affecting more fields than those already mentioned and especially psychoanalysis, literary criticism, Marxist sociology, psychology, etc. The dimensions of this paper prevent me from even quickly reviewing this list, and I shall limit myself to a brief analysis of what I consider to be the linguistic and philosophical origins of structuralism before turning to Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is probably the most representative "structuralist" today.

I. THE LINGUISTIC ORIGINS

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure taught his *Course in General Linguistics* between 1906 and 1911. Its rediscovery several decades later triggered off the structuralist controversy.

Saussure is the author of a certain number of clear-cut distinctions aimed at constituting linguistics as a rigorous science.

1) *Language vs. speaking*: *language* ("langue") is the virtual system of rules which makes speaking possible. This system preexists the individual who cannot change it, but has to conform to it in order to be able to speak. *Speaking* ("parole"), the actual, personal manifestations of "language," is free only within the rules of "language." It reflects the tension existing between the social contract and the freedom of the individual.

Saussure restricts the linguistic field to the study of "language." He claims that only "language" can be studied scientifically because it is systematic and finite, whereas individual "speaking," being unpredictable and infinite, cannot be scientifically investigated. This disregard for the speaking subject clearly announces the theme of the "dissolution of man" (Lévi-Strauss), which has become one of the main purposes of current structuralism.

2) *Synchrony vs. diachrony*: Saussure's second clear-cut epistemological distinction takes into account the time factor. By diachrony he means the axis of successivities, whereas synchrony refers to the axis of simultaneities. Here again, Saussure makes a choice, he chooses synchrony over diachrony, for he thinks that evolutionary linguistics has been too much confused in the past. As he puts it, a panorama can be taken only from one viewpoint and not from several at the same time.

3) *Syntagmatic vs. associative* relations: the intervention of space also introduces two different axes in language. The syntagmatic axis follows the actual linear dimension of language, as in a sentence, where different terms are contiguous to each other. The syntagm relies on a conjunctive, "and-and," relationship. Conversely, the associative or paradigmatic axis is merely virtual. It substitutes similar terms to each other, as in free mental associations, for example. This type of relationship rests upon a disjunctive, "either-or," pattern.

These two axes of language, as identified by Saussure, were to exert a significant influence upon later structuralism, especially Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myths, as we shall see.

4) *Signifier vs. signified*: In the past, the sign was always defined in relationship to what is designated: the referent. Saussure rejects the referent because a) it is extraneous to the world of signs, b) its relationship to the sign cannot be talked of linguistically, but only metaphysically. Consequently, he sets up the postulate of the closure of the world of signs: the "signified" is no longer the extraneous thing but the psychic representation of it, or "concept." The "signifier" is not the physical sound itself, but only its psychological imprint, or "acoustic image."

The exclusion of the referent will have dramatic repercussions: meaning no longer results from the "vertical" reference of a sign to a thing but from the lateral relationship between signs. Meaning is no longer attached to an isolated sign. It becomes the mere resultant of at least two opposing signs constituting an elementary "structure." Saussure was clearly referring to this dissolution of meaning in his famous statement: "in language, there are only differences."¹

II. PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS

The rediscovery of Saussure in the fifties was not a mere coincidence, but it had been prepared long since by the influence of several philosophers, and among them Nietzsche in particular.

Nietzsche clearly announced two of Saussure's main themes: the dissolution of meaning, consequence of the death of God, and the dissolution of man.

1) *The Death of God*. This is for Nietzsche an event of unprecedented dimension. Its importance has not yet been fully realized by mankind, as the story of the madman in *The Gay Science*² shows, where it is likened to lightning and thunder which people are afraid to openly face because of the radical upheavals it entails. This radical liberation process affects all of the fields (theology, philosophy, morals, linguistics, etc.) where the absolute signified "divine" exerted its rule. Everything that was built upon the former belief in the divine is now collapsing. The death of God affects linguistic meaning as follows: language is no longer the product of a

divine "legislation," i.e., right of giving names. The death of the divine authority voids the illegitimate pretenses of language which now appears fallacious. Faith in language was possible only as long as it was believed to rest upon a divine foundation. Now that this foundation has collapsed, language appears void and arbitrary, a chain of loose signifiers without corresponding signifieds. Nietzsche compares this situation to that of coins having lost their imprints and which, for this reason, are no longer considered coins but mere metal.³

Nietzsche's radical critique of language in the light of the death of God clearly announces the main themes of structural semiology: the arbitrariness of the sign, the elimination of the referent, the closure of the world of signs, the dissolution of meaning. It ruins for ever the reassuring belief in the intrinsically resembling nature of language as "prose of the world."⁴

2) *The death of the subject.* The death of God event, however dramatic its consequences, is insufficient as long as man takes the place of the dead God, and replaces the former divine absolute by a human absolute. Nietzsche's insight is that man takes God's place out of frustration and revenge. By doing that, he remains within the sphere of incomplete nihilism. Even though atheistic nihilism may have replaced the former Christian nihilism, it is still a reactive, and therefore incomplete, nihilism. The mere thought that man could recur eternally is enough to induce disgust and nausea into the ailing Zarathustra.⁵ Zarathustra recovers only once he realizes that the eternal recurrence is to be understood on a diametrically opposed way, not at all as the eternal recurrence of the same, but as a "selective"⁶ principle from which nihilistic man excludes himself, since a negation cannot in any way become part of the Dionysian affirmation of life, which underlies the eternal recurrence.

Only the Overman will recur and this implies the death of present mankind. Current structuralism has clearly perceived that the eternal recurrence and the rise of the Overman mean the illusory nature of "man." Thus, Nietzsche appears to be one of the major forerunners of structuralism.

III. CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS: LEVI-STRAUSS

1) The dissolution of meaning. One of Lévi-Strauss' major innovations consisted in applying to the study of myths Saussure's linguistic patterns: a close parallelism is being established between mythology and linguistics. The hermeneutic interpretation of myths, which aims at giving an intrinsic meaning to each particular mythic element, or "mytheme," is as outdated as pre-Saussurian linguistics which tried to attach a particular meaning to each given sound. Following Saussure, it has now become clear that meaning is no more tied to a given mytheme than it is to a

specific sound. As in Saussurian linguistics, where meaning results only from the combination of elements between themselves, the meaning of mythemes should similarly result from the way they are combined to each other.

Lévi-Strauss shows dramatically in his famous treatment of the Oedipus myth⁷ what the "vertical," paradigmatic reading of mythemes classified into columns can add to a mere "horizontal," syntagmatic reading. Four columns appear: overrating of blood-relations, underrating of blood-relations, denial of man's autochthonous origins, persistence of man's autochthonous origins. They oppose in pairs, and this double set of oppositions would, according to Lévi-Strauss, be indicative of a logical conflict: is man born from one, or from two? Lévi-Strauss sees in the impossibility to overcome this conflict the circumstances which produced this particular myth. Hence, the famous definition of myth as a "logical tool" aimed at mediating oppositions.

Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the Oedipus story uncovers a remarkable property of myth: mythic discourse reunified the two irreconcilables: the Saussurian dichotomy which set apart the irreversible process of "speaking" and the reversible system of "language." Mythic discourse reconciles these two poles since it can be read not only following the linear and irreversible pattern of time, but also according to a second, reversible dimension. In short, myth can be read like an "orchestra score."

Lévi-Strauss extends to whole myths the principles governing the analysis of this single myth. An individual myth does not have much meaning in itself. By including variants of the same story, or even different myths, the mythologist achieves a paradigmatic analysis which is the only way to reach the full meaning. This program is being carried out in *Mythologiques*, where whole myths or even sets of myths are paradigmatically related: for example, several Bororo myths at the beginning of *The Raw and the Cooked*⁸ deal with the origin of water. This Bororo cycle does not tell much by itself. It acquires meaning only once it has been related to the Gé myths telling the origin of fire. This connection occurs according to the structure *fire vs. non-fire*. Thus, eventually, the Bororo cycle becomes part of a paradigmatic set dealing with fire, cooking, culture. This may seem paradoxical, as the Bororo myths did not tell a word about the origin of fire, but Lévi-Strauss stresses the fact that the two terms of a structure belong together despite, or rather thanks to their opposition.

This emphasis upon the synchronic-paradigmatic dimension of myths does not entail the rejection of diachrony. Lévi-Strauss may have given this impression in his analysis of the Oedipus story, but his subsequent works insist upon the irreversible way in which some transformations

occur. This is particularly clear in *Mythologiques*, the whole structure of which is musical. Myths are being played like contrapuncts, that is to say they are submitted to a double determinism, both horizontal and vertical. In no way are they being reduced to their mere vertical dimension.

This addition of a second, paradigmatic dimension to the once one-dimensional, syntagmatic text requires the use of musical metaphors. Linear speech is unable to express the two dimensions of myth, whereas musical language, possessing both dimensions, appears to be the privileged tool of the structural analysis of myths. This "musical" analysis totally renovates our understanding of the text in general. Instead of a linear, surface-text, the possibility is now suggested of a "tabular,"⁹ multi-dimensional text. This possibility had already become Saussure's major obsession during the last part of his life devoted to the search for anagrams, i.e., for a second, latent text running parallel to, and below, the primary, superficial text.¹⁰

2) The "dissolution of man": The aims of the structural analysis of myths are clearly described in the "Overture" to *The Raw and the Cooked*. They consist in uncovering "codes," i.e., *universal* and *unconscious* systems accounting for as many cultural manifestations as possible. This definition of the code implies the existence of universally valid structures of human mind. This assumption dramatically refuses the traditional distinction between "civilized" and "primitive" mentalities. Lévi-Strauss claims that there is no difference between the "civilized" and the "savage" mind. The only difference concerns the available means, technological in one case, rudimentary in the other; but this difference is merely contingent, and does not affect the basic, universal structures of the human mind, of which "man" is but the product.

The general laws the structural analysis aims to discover have a second characteristic, namely that they are unconscious. This idea, which appears gradually in the "Overture" to *The Raw and the Cooked*, establishes an increasing gap between mythic systems and the praxis of given subjects. Here again, Lévi-Strauss applies the Saussurian pattern of "language" to mythology: on the same way that "language" was independent of individual "speaking," the systematic structures of myths are independent of the individual subject. Therefore, the object of mythic analysis does not consist in trying "to show how men think myths, but rather how myths think themselves out in men without their being aware of it."¹¹

Thus, the illusory nature of the traditional "subject" seems to be one of the main conclusions reached by structural analysis. What is left, once the subject had vanished? A "categorical, combinatory" unconscious, a "Kantism without a transcendental subject."¹² Lévi-Strauss has perfectly recognized one of the main thrusts of his enterprise in Paul Ricoeur's characterization.

NOTES

¹ F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 120.

² F. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, W. Kaufman trans. and ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), pp. 95-96.

³ F. Nietzsche, *Das Philosophenbuch* (Paris: Aubier, 1969), p. 182.

⁴ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1970), p. 17.

⁵ F. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 331.

⁶ F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, W. Kaufman trans. and ed. (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1968), p. 545.

⁷ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Jacobson-Schoepf trans. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 202-228.

⁸ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, J. and D. Weightman trans. (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1969).

⁹ R. Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 37.

¹⁰ J. Starobinski, *Les mots sous les mots. Les anagrammes de F. de Saussure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

¹¹ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 12 (amended translation).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11, n.3.

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