

Structuralism in Anthropology

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Structuralism in anthropology is the view that meaning in human sociocultural life rests in the positional configuration of elements relative to each other in a structure or system, not in properties of those elements considered in their own right, nor in the elements' ties to forces external to the system. Various modern anthropologists have set forth partly structuralist theories and methodologies, including Sapir (e.g., 1949), other linguistically-oriented Americanists, and Dutch colonial scholars working in the Malay archipelago (de Josselin de Jong, 1977). However, structuralist anthropology as a paradigm is most associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss, who formulated and practiced it from the 1940s onward as an avowed adaptation of linguistic models of phonological order. Structuralism was one of the most influential intellectual movements in the human sciences and humanities in the 20th century.

Lévi-Strauss's Transfer of an Idea from Phonology to Analysis of Culture

Lévi-Strauss's initial exposure to structural linguistics came in the early 1940s, when he attended lectures in which Roman Jakobson outlined phonemes' character as negative, relative positions in a language-specific total configuration of significant distinctions (Jakobson, 1978). The model of language Lévi-Strauss thus acquired was that of *langue* or "linguistic system" set forth by Saussure (1959). In the lectures, Jakobson emphasized the uniqueness of phonological signs, as the only linguistic signs that are purely differential and negative in the Saussurean manner. Linguistic signs of all other levels possess characteristics and functions that are not determined exclusively by their position in a system of other signifiers. Far from heeding this point, Lévi-Strauss saw the phonological model to be directly useful in deepening anthropological understanding of vast areas of human sociocultural life beyond linguistic codes.

Lévi-Strauss applied metaphorically phonological styles of analysis to hundreds of anthropological subjects. Bending the '+' and '-' formalism of feature analysis to characterize whole social relationships, he suggested that in particular societies the moral and emotional quality of ties between different categories of kin is not determined by those kin relations in themselves but by their place in a configuration of other relations (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a). He similarly

argued that the categorization of particular kinds of relatives as marriageable and others as unmarriageable (such as the common pattern of categorizing children of a brother and sister as marriageable 'cousins' while categorizing the children of same-sex siblings as unmarriageable 'siblings') in a given society instantiates a society-level distribution of significant distinctions, and that a commitment to relations as such (in the form of a principle of reciprocity, or dependency on others for spouses) is the *raison d'être* of distinct kin categories and of marriage rules (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a). Regarding totemism (Lévi-Strauss, 1963b), he argued that the point of animal symbols is not the characteristics or usefulness of particular species but their intellectual value as signifiers of relational distinctness itself. Humans look to the distinctness of animal species for analogic markers of social distinction. Generalizing this argument in *The savage mind* (1966), Lévi-Strauss sought to document a pan-human faculty of proliferating classificatory order in relation to all concrete things and qualities in the world, through analogic mapping between sets of categorial distinctions. In numerous works on myth (e.g., Lévi-Strauss, 1969b), he argued that at multiple scales mythological narratives are elaborately organized around basic categorial oppositions between minimal signifying elements (termed *mythemes*).

Structuralism's Influence in Anthropology

Lévi-Strauss's main ideas, and his work on specific empirical topics, prompted a deepening of anthropologists' imaginativeness in noting interconnections across heterogeneous cultural data. Minimally, structuralism is the heuristic premise that all phenomena in cultural worlds might be interrelated, and that patterning of form (convergences in the shape or position of cultural elements, even in the absence of reflexive commentary about those elements on the part of the people practicing them) is itself evidence of such interrelatedness because it is a basic mode in which interrelatedness exists. This notion was intrinsic to pre-World War II anthropology's emergent understandings of culture (following Boas) or social order (following Durkheim), but Lévi-Strauss's structuralism pushed anthropology further in presenting an explicit alternative to the commonsense ideology that conscious individual psychology is the basic determinant of cultural practices. Even as scholars found serious fault with many of Lévi-Strauss's specific empirical claims and interpretive idioms, in the wake of structuralism it has become routine for

anthropologists to identify far-reaching, nonobvious patterns of interconnection across narratives, rituals, architectural forms, practices of food production and consumption, practices of bodily adornment, geography, cosmology, and other areas of life, where formerly these areas might have been only subjects of descriptive cataloguing. Structuralism gave anthropology new reach in seeing abstract categories or principles in ethnographic particulars. The anthropological topic of taboo, for example, was substantially reconceived following Lévi-Strauss's work on classification, when Leach (1964) and Douglas (1966) proposed structuralist analyses of taboos as enforcing the distinctness of categories in a culturally given system by suppressing interstitial entities, such as taxonomically anomalous animals. Recognition of symbolic logics at work in taboos of particular communities has been central to most subsequent writing on the subject.

Yet absorption of some of structuralism's broad methodological insights has been matched also by emphatic rejections of structuralism as an overall theoretical doctrine in many anthropological quarters. The reasons for this include succession of intellectual generations, resurgence of ideologies of individualism, susceptibility of a famous body of work to stereotypic simplification, and continuing credence given to anthropological theories that do not recognize signification as a universal aspect of human activity. Among anthropologists who do recognize signification as basic to their subject, another influence of structuralism has been its enduring relevance as a foil against which to define other theoretical possibilities.

Errors in the Thesis of Autonomous System

Structuralism's central thesis is the autonomy of system, or the notion that a system of cultural categories is self-identical and self-determining. A system determines its internal elements, and is not determined by them. It is not affected by elements, forces, or systems outside itself, nor does it produce gaps of absent or contrary determination within itself. This autonomy and self-sameness of system is axiomatic to structuralism's methodological prescription of searching out the positional value of cultural elements. An element has a unitary positional value in relation to a set of other elements only to the same degree that there is a single stable and definably bounded system within which that element is embedded (though Lévi-Strauss's own unit of study was often the system of human culture at large). The thesis of the autonomy of system has its *locus classicus* in Saussure's

definition of *langue* or "language system, grammar, code." Saussure axiomatically separated linguistic system from language use, from temporality, from system-independent characteristics (e.g., materiality) of the media of signification and of the objects signified, and from the possibility of the simultaneous coexistence of different systems.

To summarize the full range of ways that anthropologists have pushed off from structuralism would probably be to summarize the state of the entire discipline. All currently important theoretical frameworks, though, have in common that they depart from the thesis of autonomous system by recognizing any given structural system to be foundationally dependent on and involved with something other than itself. In various ways, these departures from structuralism turn 'system' or 'structure' into a question rather than a premise.

The most frequent focus of revision has been system's involvement with history and events. Most scholars understand structuralism to be ahistorical. Saussure identified linguistic system as a synchronic phenomenon, existing virtually as if in a slice of time rather than diachronically as an entity whose internal makeup might be inseparable from its having histories and futures different from its present. Saussure further abstracted temporality out of structure by distinguishing *langue* "system, grammar" from *parole* "speech, performance, use." This distinction imagines that structures exist autonomously of events, such as events of signification in which speakers practice structural forms. There is a line of influence from these Saussurean axioms to Lévi-Strauss's views that myths are "instruments for the obliteration of time" or that some societies are culturally oriented to resisting structure-perturbing effects of events. Anthropologists in their empirical work have generally found, however, that all human sociocultural forms are inherently temporal and historical, in various senses. The forms change in time. Sahlin (1985), Robbins (2004), and others have presented structuralist-historical case studies arguing that discernment of broadly Saussurean cultural structures is itself crucial to account for processes of sociocultural transformation. Many scholars have found that system-internal relations at a given time are insufficient to give an account of how a system works or how it is what it is, but rather that its history is a necessary element of a scholarly understanding of that system, in many cases because the cultural forms themselves are internally diachronic and open-ended. If it is recognized that structures exist at a particular present moment temporally rather than virtually, this raises questions such as: How big is the present? What are the ways that a particular 'present' is inherently intertemporal, in the

sense of being connected to and composed of past and future moments that are different from it?

Considerations of temporality are inseparable from considerations of a wider array of ways structure is irreducibly involved with subjectivity and with use-in-context, including sign users' reflexive orientations to their sign systems and signifying practices. The force of Lévi-Strauss's adoption of phonology as a metaphor for culture was to emphasize the non-conscious character of structures. Just as people speak without having overt propositional knowledge of their language's grammatical structures, so too cultural subjects' consciousness (or indeed, their existence) is secondary to the cultural structures in which they live, and may have no necessary place in analysis of those structures. Yet in linguistics, Benveniste (1971) showed that first- and second-person pronouns are elements of linguistic structure that encode the presence of a speaking or listening subject, and Jakobson (e.g., 1971) elaborated this point for the encoding of diverse aspects of a situation of speech use in grammatical shifters. This amounts to recognizing *parole* as irreducibly present in *langue*. In diverse ways, anthropologists have found the perspectives of acting subjects to be integral to cultural structure, often, though, also finding that the relations between structure and subject, between these two and material or institutional worlds, or even between a subject and itself, are not seamless. For example, Valeri (2000) documents tensions between symbolic logic and mortal, bodily conditions of existence underpinning the taboos of a hunting community. Relatedly, scholars have sought in varying ways and with varying success to reconcile perceptions of categorial structure with social dynamics of value, hierarchy (Dumont, 1980), power, and desire. Work in linguistic anthropology documents the structure-creating effects of pragmatic acts of signification, and the structural consequentiality of sign users' reflexive sensibilities and ideologies about the pragmatic organization of sign use (Silverstein, 1976). This work emphasizes the emergent, contingent character of structure, and as such refuses the objectivist reification of structure that Voloshinov (1972) early identified in the Saussurean paradigm and that Bourdieu (1977) later identified in the Lévi-Straussian one. Finally, Bakhtin (e.g., 1981) has become one ancestral icon of the notion that structure is intrinsically heterogeneous, and that signifying acts by definition occur at border zones joining together multiple, even mutually inconsistent categorial systems.

None of these departures from the thesis of autonomous system can viably abandon the idea of system or structure as such, or some other basic idea of durable relational logic. The central empirical,

methodological, and theoretical questions of anthropology remain ones of how to give accounts of socio-cultural worlds that document the character of existing relational logics, but neither dissolve those logics into nonrelational determination nor reify them as existing transcendently unto themselves.

See also: Distinctive Features; Jakobson, Roman (1896–1982); Lévi-Strauss, Claude (b. 1908); Saussure, Ferdinand (-Mongin) de (1857–1913); Semiotic Anthropology; Structuralism; Structure and Structuralism: Semiotic Approaches.

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Structuralist Phonology: Prague School

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Structuralism: Theoretical and Methodological Assumptions

Most 20th-century humanistic thought notably including semiotics and linguistics as well as the social, behavioral, and cognitive sciences (e.g., sociology, psychology, and anthropology – which the French refer to as *les sciences humaines*) ultimately can be defined and described as belonging to a larger structuralist paradigm originally outlined by Saussure (1966: 16 [1916]), where linguistics was to be part of a larger science called semiology (later to be known as semiotics). Linguistics (as opposed to semiotics) has often been considered to be the better-defined discipline and has even been viewed as the most developed branch within this structuralist paradigm. Within linguistics, the distinction between phonetics versus phonology, the postulation of the phoneme, its various definitions, and the discovery procedures by which it is determined via distinctive features and minimal pairs, etc., have been one of the major cornerstones of structuralism in general and structural linguistics in particular.

Every linguistic theory is the direct result of a specific set of theoretical axioms that is related to how the linguist defines language, defines a linguistic problem, determines the source, kind, and amount of data to be selected and analyzed, chooses a methodology to select and analyze the data, and evaluates, compares, and contrasts the analyses in light of the above. These five criteria basically serve to describe how and what a particular linguist or school of linguistics views as the goals of linguistic research (Tobin, 1990).

Structural linguistics in general and structuralist phonology in particular share a basic definition of

language as a hierarchical 'system of interrelated systems which is organized internally and is used by human beings to communicate. Theoretically, this definition of language implies a dichotomy between *langue* and *parole*, *langue* being an abstract code composed of signals and meanings and their paradigmatic, or associative, and syntagmatic relations, a complex code that is shared by a community of speakers. *Parole* is the concrete and seemingly chaotic realization of this complex abstract code – exploited by individual speaker – to communicate specific discourse messages in different linguistic and situational contexts. The primary task of the linguist is to postulate the abstract code or system of systems of a language to explain the nonrandom distribution of the linguistic forms of that language in diverse linguistic and situational contexts. Methodologically, this definition of language implies a respect for and a reliance on observable empirical data (as opposed to contrived or purely introspective data) culled from discourse and a commitment to deal with the human factor (i.e., the cognitive, perceptual, linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior of human beings) as they are relevant to communication in different linguistic and situational contexts.

Many diverse models of linguistic analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, have been developed to describe, interpret, and explain concrete individual linguistic phenomena (*parole*) according to general, communal, and abstract theoretical principles (*langue*) in various structural guises and under quite different names. The notion of a general structuralist model may be viewed as a theoretical and methodological bridge between the abstract and concrete levels of human linguistic phenomena.

Indeed, one may safely state that a model has been established (a model basically derived from phonology within linguistics) that has been extended throughout the humanities and social or human sciences. This structuralist model for linguistics is illustrated schematically in **Figure 1**.