



Structuralism and Semiotics

-Applied Literary Criticism-
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Structuralism

- A movement of thought in the human sciences, wide spread in Europe (60's), affected by number of fields of knowledge and inquiry → philosophy, anthropology, history, sociology, and literary criticism
- Analyse cultural phenomena according to principles derived from linguistics, emphasizing the systematic interrelationships among the elements of any human activity, and thus the abstract *codes and *conventions governing the social production of meanings.

- The elements composing any cultural phenomenon are similarly “relational”
 - they have meaning only by virtue of their contrasts with other elements of the system
 - Meanings can be established not by referring each element to any supposed equivalent in natural reality, but only by analysing its function within a self contained cultural code.
- Concerned with language → more than just utterance in speech and writing → sign and signification → all conventions and codes of communication

- explains **the structures underlying literary texts** either in terms of a **grammar modeled** on that of language or in terms of **Ferdinand de Saussure's principle** that the meaning of each word depends on its place in the total system of language.
- The view of Structuralism is simply based on the application of structuralist principles to the human mind. (Claude Levy-Strauss)

Structuralism in Literary Analysis

- Challenges the long-standing belief that a work of literature (or any kind of literary text) reflects a given reality
- Rejecting traditional notions → literature expresses an author 's meaning or reflects reality
- Text as objective structure activating various codes and conventions which are independent of author, reader, and external reality

- It analyzes and explores the **structures underlying the text or system**, which make the content possible.
- One of the leading principles of Structuralism is that **the form defines the content** ("form *is* content").
- That is, that the underlying structure of a text or system, which presents and organizes the content, determines the nature of that content as well as its message or communicated information.
- Thus Structuralism analyzes **how meaning is possible and how it is transmitted** - regardless of the actual meaning → form and not content

- Northrop Frye, however, takes a different approach to structuralism by exploring ways in which genres of Western literature fall into his four mythoi (also see Jungian criticism in the Freudian Literary Criticism resource):
 - theory of modes, or historical criticism (tragic, comic, and thematic);
 - theory of symbols, or ethical criticism (literal/descriptive, formal, mythical, and anagogic);
 - theory of myths, or archetypal criticism (comedy, romance, tragedy, irony/satire);
 - theory of genres, or rhetorical criticism (epos, prose, drama, lyric) (Tyson 240).
- Example:
 - Examining the structure of a large number of short stories to discover the underlying principles that govern their composition
 - Principles of narrative progression
 - Characterization
 - Describing the structure of a single literary work to discover how its composition demonstrates the underlying principles of a given structural system

Advantage and Disadvantage of Structural Analysis

- In the Social Sciences, the validity of Structural Analysis may rest on quantifiable and verifiable research; though this may also be the case in the Humanities, the construction of the argument might have more importance.
- Advantage
 - enables an awareness to underlying structures and reveals their limiting and conditioning nature.
- Disadvantage
 - it does not enable analysis of the content

Semiotics

- Semiology → Saussure
 - the study of existing conventional communicative system
 - a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life
- Semiotics → Peirce
 - the science/ study of signs

- Semiotics can be applied to:
 - anything which can be seen as signifying something
 - to everything which has meaning within a culture.
 - media texts (including television and radio programmes, films, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, posters and other ads)
 - the practices involved in producing and interpreting such texts.
- The task of the semiotician (Saussurean tradition)
 - to look beyond the specific texts or practices to the systems of functional distinctions operating within them.
 - to establish the underlying conventions, identifying significant differences and oppositions in an attempt to model the system of categories, relations (syntagmatic and paradigmatic), connotations, distinctions and rules of combination employed.

Sign

→ anything stands for something else

→ words, images, sounds, gestures and objects

Peirce Definition of Sign:

- Symbol/ symbolic

- A symbol has no logical meaning between it and the object.

- the signifier does not resemble the signified → relationship: agreed, learned

- Icon/ iconic

- A sign that resembles/ imitates something, such as photographs of people.

- An icon can also be illustrative or diagrammatic, for example a 'no-smoking' sign.

- Index/ indexical

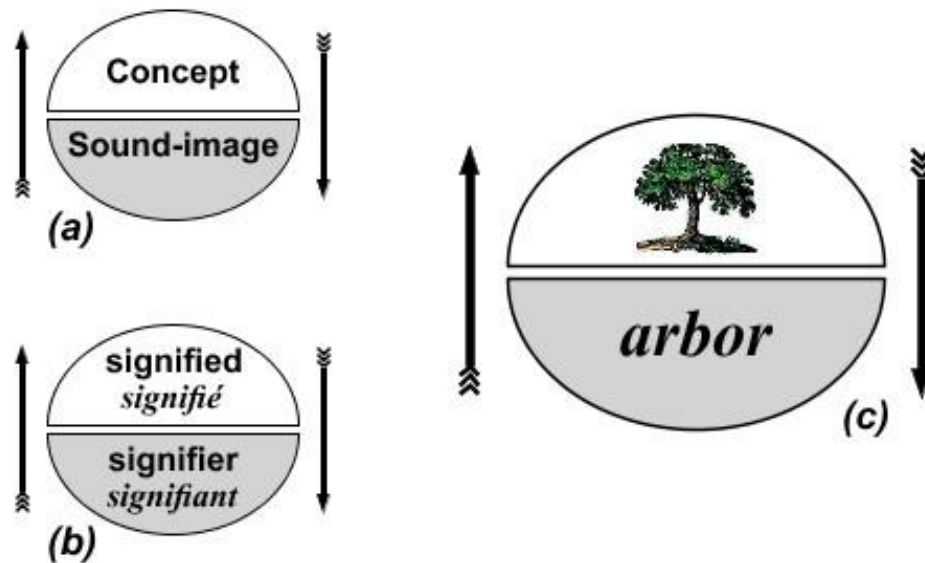
- A sign where there is a direct link between the sign and the object.

- The majority of traffic signs are Index signs as they represent information which relates to a location (eg, a 'slippery road surface' sign placed on a road which is prone to flooding).



- Saussure:

- Fundamental aspects of Saussure's theory of the sign are its bilateral structure, its mentalistic conception, the exclusion of reference, and the structural conception of meaning.
- linguistic sign is two-sided psychological entity consisting a concept and a sound-image



- Langue vs. Parole

- Langue: language system

- Parole: speech → individual's use of the social sign system in speech acts and texts

- Synchronic vs. Diachronic

- synchronic: studies of a sign system at a given point of time, irrespective of its history

- diachronic : studies of the evolution of a sign system in its historical development

Semiotics in Literary Criticism

- Stresses on the production of literary meanings from shared *conventions and codes



Semiotics

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An approach to textual analysis

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Structural analysis

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Focuses on the structural relations which are functional in the signifying system at a particular moment of history

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Involves identifying constituent units in a semiotics system (text or socio-cultural practice), the structural relationship between them (the opposition, correlation, and logical relations) and the relation of the parts to the whole

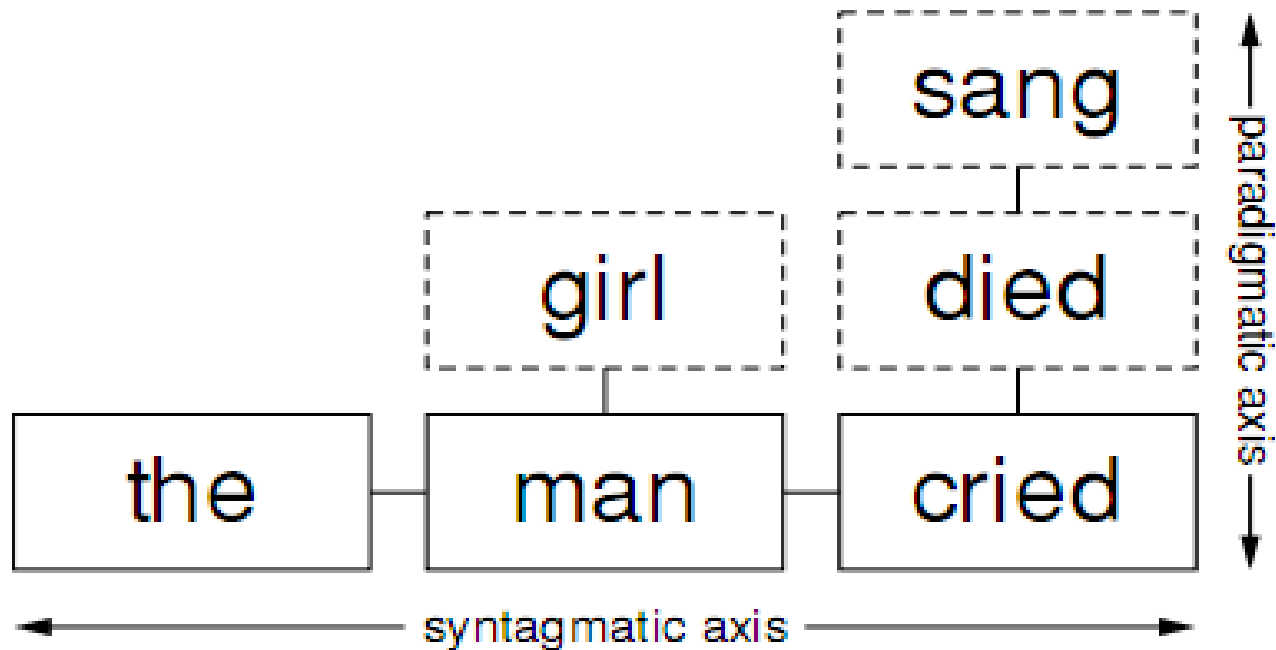


FIGURE 3.1 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes

- Syntagmatic → positioning
- Paradigmatic → substitution → associative relations (Saussure)

People to refer to

- Ferdinand de Saussure → langue, parole, signified, signifier
- C.S. Peirce → index, icon,
- Claude Lévi-Strauss → Anthropologie Structurale, Elementary Structures of Kinship
- Roland Barthes → the Death of the Author, Mythologies
- Noam Chomsky → surface structure and deep structure
- Roman Jakobson → Linguistics and Poetics
- Jonathan Culler → Structuralism And Semiotics

What Were They Like? (Denise Levertov)

Did the people of Viet Nam use lanterns of stone?
Did they hold ceremonies to reverence the opening of buds?
Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
Did they use bone and ivory, jade and silver, for ornament?
Had they an epic poem?
Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
It is not remembered whether in gardens
stone gardens illumined pleasant ways.

Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,
but after their children were killed there were no more buds.

Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.

A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.
All the bones were charred.

it is not remembered. Remember,
most were peasants; their life was in rice and bamboo.
When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.
When bombs smashed those mirrors
there was time only to scream.

There is an echo yet
of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now.

To Helen

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, wayworn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome.

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy Land!

Edgar Allan Poe

Sources:

- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/07/>
- <https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~palmquis/courses/structural.htm>