

Origin of structuralism:

Structuralism first comes to prominence as a specific discourse with the work of a Swiss linguist, **Ferdinand de Saussure**, who developed a branch of linguistics called "Structural Linguistics."

Which is the basic unit of language?

According to **Saussure**, the basic unit of language is a sign. A sign is composed of **signifier** (a sound-image, or its graphic equivalent) and a **signified** (The concept or meaning). So, for example, a word composed of the letters p-e-a-r Functions as a signifier by producing in the mind of English-speakers the concept (Signified) of a certain kind of rosaceous fruit that grows on trees, viz. a pear.

Who is Jacques Derrida?

French social philosopher and literary critic who may be labelled both a "Structuralist" and a "Post structuralist;" wrote critiques of his contemporaries' works, and of the notions underlying structuralism and poststructuralist.

Four basic concepts of Structuralism

1. It is holistic. Parts of a system are only understood by the way they interact with other parts. The meaning of things such as gestures and sentences fit into the context of the language.
2. It prioritizes the constant over the inconstant.
3. Structuralism opposes 'Positivism'. Positivists explain things by what they observe while Structuralists see an unobservable structure in observable chaotic world.
4. Structuralists believe that social structures constrain people sanctions.

What is Sign?

According to **Saussure**, **The sign is the basic element of language**. Meaning has always been explained in terms of the relationship between signs and their referents.

Signifier/Signified:

Saussure divides the **sign into its two aspects**. First there's the bit that you can see or hear. Visible signs have priority for Saussure because they are the types of sign that make up most of our known languages. Such signs are called "verbal" signs. This is its signifier. The signified is what these visible/audible aspects mean to us. Now we know very well that some marks mean very different things to different people at different times.

Example- The word "cat" in my example means "ginger monster" to me but to my neighbour it means cuddly old much maligned softy who is only innocently going about its business. The signified is thus always something of an Interpretation that is added to the signifier.

We can exemplify it as follows:

SIGNIFIED :



Concept :

SIGNIFIER :

Sound Image: CAT

This becomes the basic model of the sign in structuralist approach to Signifying phenomena. The signifier is the vehicle for meaning and the signified is its cargo.

Basic points and functions of Structuralism

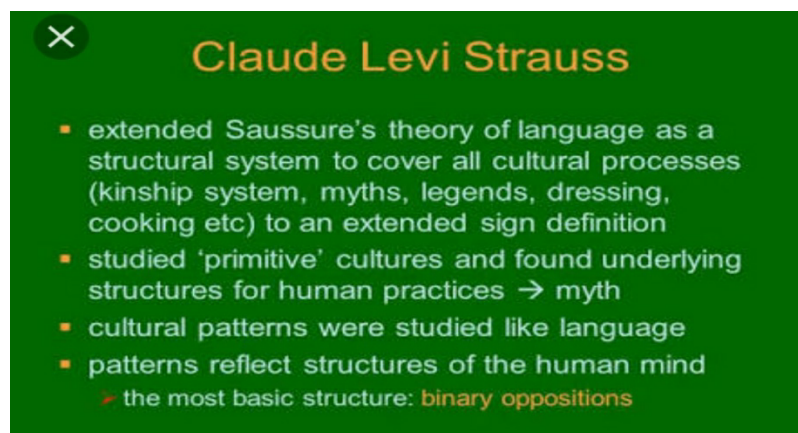
- **Levi Strauss:** Structuralism asserts itself as a method of scientific knowledge and even lays claim to the rigor of the exact sciences.
- Structuralism **was born of Linguistics**, and all the fields it covers have to do with signs. All the Disciplines encompassed by structuralism: Linguistics, Poetics, ethnology, psychoanalysis and, clearly in the back ground but still related, philosophy are grouped under sciences of the sign, or of sign –system.
- **Structural analysis does not explain the meaning of a text.**
- Structural analysis describes and explains a text as a system of narrative transformations.
- Structuralism insists on the **difference between signifier and signified**.
- Structuralism is good at highlighting those strategies or structures of story,

which we take for, granted. Even simple stories can have extremely complex structures. This is particularly true of narration.

- It is a study of the cultural construction or identification of meaning according to the relations of signs that constitute the meaning-spectrum of the culture. 39

Structuralism is a general tendency of thought. Structuralism is, however, not necessarily an intrinsic fact of nature but rather is a way of thinking;

Structuralism (Claude Levi-Strauss)



Claude Levi Strauss

- extended Saussure's theory of language as a structural system to cover all cultural processes (kinship system, myths, legends, dressing, cooking etc) to an extended sign definition
- studied 'primitive' cultures and found underlying structures for human practices → myth
- cultural patterns were studied like language
- patterns reflect structures of the human mind
 - the most basic structure: binary oppositions

structuralism is an approach used to analyze culture

1. Claude Levi-Strauss, the person who may consider the developer of structuralism, has some really outspoken critics.
2. As a means of analyzing **culture, or the set of learned behaviors and ideas that characterize a society**, structuralism, and of course, Levi-Strauss as its developer, asserts that **human culture is just an expression of the underlying structures of the human mind.** Strauss's structuralism asserts humans act as we do, not because of where we live or other social factors, but because of the actual structure of the human mind.

Binary Opposites

In the mid-20th century, two major European academic thinkers, **Claude Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes**, came together and discovered that the way we understand certain words does not depend so much on the meaning that they directly contain, but much more by our understanding of the difference between the word and its '**opposite**' or, as they called it '**binary opposite**'.

They realised that words simply act as symbols for society's ideas and that the meaning of words was a relationship rather than a fixed thing just a relationship between opposing ideas.

3. Binary Opposition

he'd argue that the **mind of the savage** - this is Levi-Strauss' term and is definitely not generally accepted today - has the same structure of those who consider themselves civilized.

Using an extremely simple **example**, he'd say humans like to eat meat cooked, not because our culture tells us to, but because our mind's structure determined that cooked meat is the way to go!

4. With his belief in structuralism, Levi-Strauss added that there are certain **universals** that can apply to all human cultures. For **example**, whether 'savage' or civilized, most will choose cooked over rare.

5. Levi-Strauss also claimed that the structure of the human mind leads all humans to think in terms of **binary opposition**, or simply stated, the contrasts between two opposite things.

Example- For instance, there is hot and cold. However, in order to understand what hot is, the human mind must experience cold. Similarly, there is dark and light. Again, in order to define dark, the human mind has to understand its opposite, light.



Examples of Binary Opposites

- Good vs Evil,
- Black vs White,
- Boy vs Girl,
- Peace vs War,
- Civilised vs Savage,
- Democracy vs Dictatorship,
- First world vs Third world,
- Domestic vs foreign/alien,
- Articulate vs inarticulate ,
- Young vs Old,
- Man vs Nature,
- Protagonist vs antagonist,
- Action vs inaction,
- Motivator vs observer,
- Empowered vs victim ,
- Man vs Woman,
- Good looking vs Ugly,
- Strong vs weak,
- Decisive vs indecisive,
- East vs West,
- Humanity vs technology,
- Ignorance vs wisdom

6. Marriage and Kinship

With much of his work in structuralism focusing on family relationships, Levi-Strauss used the concept of binary opposition to explain marriage and marriage taboos.

7. Incest Taboo- For instance, almost all, if not all, cultures feel that marriage between **blood siblings is a big no**. To Levi-Strauss, the root of this belief is not found in some sort of ethical system or some Puritanical belief in right or wrong. Instead, it's simply a product of the human mind's propensity to classify things as good or bad.

8. Taking it a step further, some structuralists, including Levi-Strauss, would argue that the human mind recognizes the **need for different cultures to intermarry** in order to create cooperation among groups of people. This cooperation will then lead to human life continuing. Stated simply, it might be easy to kill the guy from the neighboring tribe.



Binary Oppositions(Dualism)

- According to structuralist anthropologist **Claude Levi- Strauss** (b. 1908), all human cultures share an underlying reliance on **dualism**, the tendency to see the world in terms of opposing binary oppositions- raw/cooked, nature/culture, man/woman, for example.
- In addition, each **binary opposition** reveals an underlying tension, a potential conflict that myth or art tries to reconcile. The form of such resolutions reflect the prevailing culture.
- e.g. In James Cameron's *Terminator* films we see the machines vs. humanity. In *Terminator 2* (1991) the T-800="human" and T-1000="machine". In *Wizard of Oz* (1939) *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) we see rural vs. urban and ("There's no place like home").
- Dramatic conflict, in and of itself, creates binary oppositions.