

Lecture 4: Structuralism

1. What is Structuralism?

Structuralism is an intellectual movement and methodology that analyzes cultural phenomena (language, literature, mythology, society, etc.) as systems of interrelated parts governed by underlying structures.

At its core, structuralism believes:

- Meaning arises from the **relationship between elements** in a system.
 - These relationships are **governed by rules or structures**, often hidden.
 - To understand a text or phenomenon, we must **decode the structure** behind it.
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2. Origins and Background

Structuralism has roots in **linguistics**, particularly in the work of **Ferdinand de Saussure**, and later spread to **anthropology, literary theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy**, and more.

3. Key Figures & Contributions

Ferdinand de Saussure (Linguistics)

- Introduced **Structural Linguistics**.
- Differentiated between:
 - **Langue** (language system) and **Parole** (individual utterances).
 - **Signifier** (sound/image) and **Signified** (concept).
 - **Sign** = Signifier + Signified.
- Emphasized that meaning is **relational** and based on **differences** between signs.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (Anthropology)

- Applied structuralism to **myths, kinship systems, and cultural practices**.
- Claimed the human mind organizes experiences through **binary oppositions** (e.g., nature/culture, raw/cooked).
- Myths across cultures share **universal structures**.

Roland Barthes (Literary Theory & Semiotics)

- Wrote *Mythologies* and *S/Z*.
- Shifted focus from authorial intent to **codes, signs, and structures** in texts.

- Famous idea: the “**Death of the Author.**”

Jacques Lacan (Psychoanalysis)

- Reinterpreted Freud through structuralist linguistics.
- Focused on the **Symbolic order** and how language structures the unconscious.

Michel Foucault (*early works*)

- In *The Order of Things*, he explored **epistemes** (historical knowledge systems) but later moved toward **post-structuralism**.
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4. Structuralism in Literary Theory

- A literary text is seen not as a unique work, but part of a **larger system of conventions** and genres.
 - Narratives can be analyzed using **narrative structures**, such as:
 - **Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale**
 - **Greimas’ Actantial Model**
 - Binary oppositions in plots (good/evil, male/female, etc.)
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5. Key Concepts

- **Structure:** An underlying system or network of relationships.
 - **Binary Oppositions:** Paired opposites that help organize meaning.
 - **Intertextuality:** Every text is part of a web of texts; meaning arises from relations between them.
 - **Synchronic vs. Diachronic:**
 - **Synchronic:** Studying systems at a fixed point in time.
 - **Diachronic:** Studying historical development over time.
 - **Semiotics:** The study of signs and symbols in communication.
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6. Criticisms of Structuralism

- Too deterministic—ignores human agency.
 - Overly abstract—structures can be speculative.
 - Underestimates historical, social, and political context.
 - Gave rise to **Post-Structuralism**, which questioned fixed meanings and structures.
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8. Recommended Readings

- **Ferdinand de Saussure** – *Course in General Linguistics*
- **Claude Lévi-Strauss** – *The Raw and the Cooked*
- **Roland Barthes** – *Mythologies, S/Z, The Death of the Author*
- **Tzvetan Todorov** – *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*
- **Jonathan Culler** – *Structuralist Poetics*