

Structuralism and Poststructuralism

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STRUCTURALISM

In order to understand poststructuralism, a brief exploration of its origins in structuralism is useful.

General principles

Structuralism became a dominant mode of thought in France in the 1960s.

The ideas that have been termed as structuralist offered to describe the world in terms of systems of centralized logic and formal structures that could be accessed through processes of scientific reasoning.

Individual objects were viewed as being part of a greater one.

Psychologists concentrated on the structures of the mind and sociologists emphasized the societal institutions which formed the individual.

And thus nothing was seen as an individual or to be of itself, rather everything was seen to be part of something and whole effort was to discover this relationship or the relatedness to one another.

For example, a particular building was seen less as an individual entity and more as a representative of an architectural style based on a particular point in time in a specific culture and thus reflecting identifiable values.

Similarly, people are seen as objects/products with the **self** and the unconscious.

They were being classified and constructed by their webs of cultural networks, perceptions and values. This allowed people to be seen largely as mechanical organisms produced by systems, and with defined needs, predictable behaviors and actions.

Thus, the underlying *forms* became the main focus and it emphasized *structures* and *processes* of construction and transmission of meaning rather than the **content**.

Language, signs and meaning:

Under structuralism, language was seen as the key process in the creation and communication of meaning.

It was viewed as a self-referential system – all perceptions and understandings were seen as being framed by words.

Meaning lay within the text, and a text was seen as a coherent and unified structure derived from pattern and order.

And the analysis simply involved uncovering these patterns and ascertaining their meaning through the particular order in which they have been constructed.

Much of this view was adopted from the early 20th century work of Saussure (1857–1913).

He, in viewing language as a system of signs and codes, argued for the deep structures, the rules and conventions which enable a language to operate at a particular point in time. (Do you recall Typo class! Language at any given point was self-contained system)

He saw individual words as arbitrary signs with meaning only in relation to other signs in the cultural system.

Within each rule-based language system (*langue*), the linguistic sign is the spoken or written word (the signifier) which attributes meaning to objects, concepts and ideas (the signified – the mental picture produced by the signifier) in the construction of reality.

For example, the word 'rain' produces a mental image of rain falling. We recognize the meaning of the word rain not from the word in itself but also due to its difference from other similar sounding words, such as 'ran' and 'lane', which produce different mental pictures.

In comprehending meaning we also utilize the difference between rain and similar concepts such as 'hail', 'sleet' and 'snow', as well as opposing concepts such as 'drought'.

Meaning is seen as being structured through binary opposition.

As Saussure said: 'in the language itself there are only differences, and no positive terms ... the essential function of a language as an institution is precisely to maintain these series of differences in parallel ... the language itself is a form, not a substance' (1916: 166).

Acceptance of the assumption that through signifiers and signified(s), reality is socially constructed.

Any utterance (*parole*) is meaningful only in relation to other words within the larger cultural system in which all of these have been constructed and later they become widespread.

Binary oppositions were sought to clarify meaning and were seen to provide a localizing focus (within specific cultures) and the interrelationships among signs were viewed as crucial in the analysis of language.

Some signs were seen as embodying broader cultural meanings and were termed 'myths' – these were viewed as having the capacity to operate as signifiers at a second level of signification or connotation (Barthes, 1957).

For example, a Ferrari sports car is a mythic signifier of wealth and a particular lifestyle.

Saussure called the structural analysis of the meanings of signs and codes of textual and material culture in terms of underlying structures, 'semiology' (1907–11, 1983) and Barthes (1964) continued this terminology while Pierce called it 'semiotics' (1894/1998).

Texts

The focus on signs, signifiers, codes (the frameworks in which signs make sense), and their orders and meanings that we get through repetitions of patterned relationships can enable texts and cultures to be 'read' using semiotic or other structural forms of analysis.

Here construction of meaning, representation of reality and the facilitating of binary opposites are integral.

Everything then became 'text', both the author and the reader are also viewed as social constructions, and the ways of presenting 'reality' within 'cultures' was meticulously documented.

In literature, reading carries with it certain conventions and expectations – words, style of presentation, type of narrative etc., to which the reader responds in the construction of the story (*parole*).

Within structuralism, however, each literary work is further seen as part of the broader institution of literature (*langue*) which is also intricately intertwined in the cultural system.

Structuralist positions

Key figures in various disciplines became very involved in structuralism. In Psychology, Jacques Lacan used the analogy of language and the binary oppositions of the 'subject' and 'other' to examine the development of the structure of the unconscious SELF (Lacan, 1957).

He suggested that the 'I' was broader than the centered 'ego' of Freud and that the unconscious 'self' was fragmented and dispersed.

This focus on deep rather than surface structures has similarities with modernity and in particular the works of Freud and Marx.

This is more evident with their de-emphasis on individuals as powerful agents and their focus on unconscious motivation and the power of societal structures in constraining action.

Barthes, who was a literary critic, outlined the process of analysis of 'objects' in terms of a search for their functional rules:

'The goal of all structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an "object" in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning of this object....(Barthes).

In the construction of myths, the anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss, personified the elements of the process into two intellectual approaches:

1. the 'bricoleur' (the worker who re-uses the bits and pieces at his disposal in creative ways)
2. and the engineer (who can access scientific thought, concepts and theories).

But despite the different approaches, both are constrained by the need to order and structure in the creation of knowledge.

The scientist 'is no more able than the "bricoleur" to do whatever he wishes when he is presented with a given task.

He too has to begin by making a catalogue of a previously determined set consisting of theoretical and practical knowledge, of technical means, which restrict the possible solutions' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 19).

Lévi-Strauss used binary oppositions to identify the underlying structures of phenomena and to track their interconnections with other parts of the culture or to compare the systems of 'myth' across cultures. For example, he investigated the meanings attached to raw or cooked food across a number of tribal cultural groups.

He wrote: 'That which constitutes a society and a culture is a universal code and it runs through the culture and the institutional and behavioural forms of that society. ...This universal cultural system objectively exists, structuring mental processes as well as social' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 202–12).

However, this view of the usefulness of some signs in determining universal cultural values would have to be questioned.

Returning to the example of the Ferrari sports car, this mythic signifier would have minimal use for its meaning

It will also have a quite different value to the pygmies of the Congo forests in comparison to the value and meaning it might hold for the elite of Milan.

This focus on the universality and centrality of structures and signs across cultures seemed to diminish the role of history in constructing and influencing current values and behaviors.

CRITICISMS OF STRUCTURALISM

In developing arguments regarding the limitations of structuralism, and in a similar process to that of between modernity and postmodernity, many authors were actually shifting the field forward.

They, at the same time, were also providing the foundations of what would later be termed post-structuralism.

Is there meaning beyond the text?

Derrida challenged the notion from Saussure by saying that meaning could be found in the differences between particular word(s) and other concepts in the language system

It would be achieved by emphasizing both the simultaneous referral and deferral of meaning, and that language and interpretation are crucial in understanding and making sense of human experiences.

He supported this view in his statement by saying that '*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text, *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]' (Derrida, 1976: 158).

This meant that textual signifiers did not relate to any clear, centered 'reality' or 'signified' outside the text; they simply slid away towards multiple possibilities.

Barthes also asserted that structural analysis could not seek meaning beyond the text itself.

In his essay 'Death of the author', Barthes suggested that the author did not have total control of textual meaning and had no greater insight into the text than the reader.

This allowed the notion of free play of meanings to be developed but also emphasized the impossibility of originality under structuralism where the text becomes a product of the system and any possibility of uniqueness is lost:

It is important for us to see what Barthes has to say on this. He would write about the meaning in the following way:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, take place. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. (Barthes, 1977b: 146)

Baudrillard (1993) also emphasized the death of the possibility of originality of the meaning in the recycling of images by referring to Andy Warhol's (1962) repeated identical paintings of Marilyn Monroe's face, and Derrida shared Nietzsche's critique of the level to which 'truth' had descended under structuralism:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms (the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal, or object)— in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically,

and it is also something which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; for example,

coins which have lost their pictures and now they matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (Nietzsche, 1911/1954: 46–7, quoted by Spivak in the preface to Derrida, 1976: xxii)

The problems of binary opposites

Derrida (1976) pointed out that when deconstruction of texts is utilized, binary opposition (each of which always contains traces of the opposing entity) collapses.

This deconstruction of the texts results in the difference between space and time and it makes no sense of Saussure's systems of meaning.

For example, the oppositions of the '*male*' and the '*female*' have both linguistic and biological traces.

Irigaray (1985) has also strongly criticized the limited social frames which binary oppositions have imposed, in particular the binary opposites of male/female.

She comments that this privilege of the male identity has led to a male orientation for all gender distinction.

Her concern lies with female sexuality and gender, which are seen to have been rendered invisible, except through the male 'gaze' or dissolved into reproductive activities.

'There is only one gender, the masculine, that elaborates itself in and through the production of the 'Other' (Irigaray, 1985: 18).

Signs and signifiers and the problem of desire

Jacques Lacan, like Derrida, has emphasized on the relationship between signifiers themselves (rather than signifier and signified as Saussure did) and further added into the debate of the concept of 'desire' through alleging that the sense of self such as 'I' is constructed through the symbols of language.

Without language, we cannot perceive the difference between others and ourselves.

Thus, language develops around a lack, a separation from the other which creates desire (desire of the other – the arena which all else relates to or gains relevance from).

Lacan sees the unconscious-self as being structured like a language and made up of signifiers. Because of this, signifiers have no fixed identity or reference points.

They shift and change continuously. Desire becomes insatiable, combining both the difference and the lack- 'an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued'. (Lacan, 1981: 154).

The self tries to create meaning in order to make sense of individual being.

Julia Kristeva similarly has criticized linguistics as having 'no way of apprehending anything in language which belongs not with the social contract but with play, pleasure or desire' (Kristeva, 1986: 26; see also Kristeva, 1980).

The socially framed 'speaking subject' (a person capable of both conscious and unconscious motivation) is involved in the creation of two levels of meaning: semiotic (involving the complexities of internal individual processing) and symbolic (based more in signs).

Kristeva suggested another form of analysis, *semanalysis* (a combination of psychoanalysis and semiology), which utilizes signifying processes rather than sign systems to criticize meaning in terms of its elements and laws and to allow the impact of the signifying system on the individual to be ascertained in terms of socio-bio-physio-logical constraints.

Here, she is seeking the movement of unconscious desire into language: 'the language of dreams and the unconscious-self ... is not identical to *la langue* studied by linguistics; it is, however, made in this *langue*. ... At once ultra-linguistic and supra-linguistic, or trans-linguistic' (Kristeva, 1989: 272).

The position of the individual

The contentions surrounding 'desire' and the movement beyond the language system can also be seen in some other works as well.

Specially in the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, who have criticized psychoanalysis on the grounds that it has come to stuck in a limited Oedipal frame.

This frame prevented the recognition that individuals are resistant and adaptive to predictable roles.

In moving towards an active rather than a passive individual, Deleuze and Guattari further criticize psychoanalysis for its view that 'desire' was psycho-symbolic and negative – always seeking something that is absent.

They reconceived desire as creative in a sense of an active involvement in the world.

Territorialisation is seen as an active process involving new ideas (deterritorialisation) to allow new connections to be formed (reterritorialisation) in the production of another form of the body without organs. (remember Luce Irigaray!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)

The issue of broader cultural concepts

Michel Foucault (1972) has introduced a broader political perspective into the study of texts and has spoken against the flexibility of Deleuze and Guattari.

He has re-emphasized on the arguments regarding the construction and control of people via signs and symbols.

He took a more negative and bounded view of self-construction.

In this, he decided to expose the history of claims to truth by indicating that there were identifiable and underlying structures which could be observed objectively.

He also decided to assert that any event requires multiple narratives in order to achieve many perspectives through which it has been constructed.

The discourses of power must be traced back in time and thus be exposed so that future patterns can become clearer.

Foucault has exposed the manner in which the state had created particular powerful discourses such as 'madness' and 'sexuality' and how through using the metaphor of the arterial system, these ideas had filtered down to the population and had become the basis of their understandings and explanations.

In this situation, he further decided to demonstrate that language would not necessarily reflect the reality and the location of 'truth' could become very controversial.

In tracing the discourses, hidden or buried truths are not sought; the search itself is an active process of detection and creation.

Foucault also emphasized that the death of the author left this position open to other possibilities, such as the emergence of other 'voices'.

He utilizes Nietzsche's historiographical approach – genealogy – to access the knowledge (the hidden voices) which has not been recorded.

He also emphasized that in order to expose the hidden power plays, the memories and knowledge that have been covered over in the maintenance of powerful interests must be exposed.

The search is directed to "that which was already there", the image of a primordial truth is fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to disclose an original identity' (Foucault, 1984).

Despite these challenges, Foucault still tends to fall back on the underlying structuralist dichotomies 'powerful' and 'powerless' to frame discourses.