Terence

Hawkes

Structuralism and Semiotics

Routledge
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AVAILABLE AS A COMPLETE SET (in Hardback only): ISBN 0415–29116–X

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We live in a world of signs, and of signs about signs. A growing awareness of this situation in the last decades of the twentieth century brought a monumental change in perspective on the very nature of reality. It forced us to recognise the possibility that 'reality' inheres not in things themselves, but in the relationships we perceive between things; not in items but in structures. In exploring and seeking to further these ideas, critics turned to the methods of analysis loosely termed 'structuralism' and 'semiotics'. Their work gave rise to a revolution in critical theory.

This classic guide discusses the nature and development of structuralism and semiotics, calling for a new critical awareness of the ways in which we communicate and drawing attention to their implications for our society. Published in 1977 as the first volume in the *New Accents* series, *Structuralism and Semiotics* made crucial debates in critical theory accessible to those with no prior knowledge of the field, thus enacting its own small revolution. Since then a generation of readers has used the book as an entry not only into structuralism and semiotics, but into the wide range of cultural and critical theories underpinned by these approaches.

Structuralism and Semiotics remains the clearest introduction to some of the most important topics in modern critical theory. An afterword and fresh suggestions for further reading ensure that this new edition will become, like its predecessor, the essential starting point for anyone new to the field.

Terence Hawkes is Emeritus Professor of English at Cardiff University. He is the author of a number of books on literary theory and on Shakespeare, including *That Shakespeherian Rag* (1986), *Meaning by Shakespeare* (1992) and *Shakespeare in the Present* (2002). He is General Editor of New Accents and of the Accents on Shakespeare series, also published by Routledge, and was the founding Editor of *Textual Practice*.

To ANN, as ever

First published 1977 by Methuen & Co. Ltd
Reprinted twice
Reprinted 1983 with revised bibliography
Reprinted three times

Reprinted 1991, 1992, 1997, 2003
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Second edition first published 2003

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

Typeset in Joanna by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0–415–32152–2 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–32153–0 (pbk)

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called 'Theory', 'Linguistics' and 'Politics' ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

New Accents deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of 'a time of rapid and radical social change', of the 'erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions' central to the study of literature. 'Modes and categories inherited from the past' it announced, 'no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation'. The aim of each volume would be to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change' by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a 'distinctive discourse of the future' beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded

piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. 'How can we recognise or deal with the new?', it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of 'a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names' and promising a programme of wary surveillance at 'the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable'. Its conclusion, 'the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts' may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now re-presented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicate, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we were not wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide-reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The late Professor John D. Jump gave the idea of this book a good deal of encouragement at an early stage, for which I remain most grateful. I only wish its realization were more worthy of him.

I must thank Professor Victor Erlich of Yale University for generously making his specialized knowledge freely available to me, even as we swam in Cape Cod Bay. And I am particularly grateful to John Hartley of Queensland University of Technology for his tireless and scrupulous reading of some difficult passages, and for his invaluable corrective commentary upon them. The errors that remain are, needless to say, all my own work.

Any book whose mode is largely one of exposition and synthesis cannot fail to incur a wide-ranging obligation to other books. The present case is certainly no exception, and I have tried to ensure that the extent of that obligation is recognized for the most part in the pages that follow. However, I must also acknowledge a particular debt to three writers whose accounts of Structuralism have contributed decisively to the form and content of my own: Jonathan Culler, Fredric Jameson, Robert Scholes. I have drawn extensively upon their work and, although I have tried to indicate the measure of my debt to it in the normal manner in the text and bibliography, its influence throughout has proved pervasive and formative to a degree that has ultimately

prohibited the detailed acknowledgement that is its due. I can only urge every reader of this book to become forthwith a reader of theirs.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Trustees of the Leverhulme Foundation for their generous award of a research grant which proved especially helpful.

Finally, let me thank my own students at Cardiff, whose response to some of this material in an earlier form amply confirmed their capacity for the patient education of their teachers.

My greatest debt of gratitude remains what it has always been: to my wife.

T.H.

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1

INTRODUCTION

To the average speaker of English, terms such as 'structure', 'structuralist' and 'structuralism' seem to have an abstract, complex, new-fangled and possibly French air about them: a condition traditionally offering uncontestable grounds for the profoundest mistrust.

But whatever the attractions of such anglo-saxon prejudices, they do not, on inspection, turn out to be particularly well-founded. The concept of 'structure', the notion of various 'structuralist' stances towards the world which might collectively be called 'structuralism', are not entirely alien to our trusted ways of thinking, nor did they spring, fully formed with horns and tail, out of the sulphurous Parisian atmosphere of the last decade.

VICO

In 1725 the distinguished Italian jurist Giambattista Vico published a book called *The New Science*. It was a momentous occasion, although it passed virtually unnoticed at the time. For the 'science' Vico proposed was nothing less than a science of human society. Its model was the 'natural' science of such men as Galileo, Bacon and Newton, and its aim was to perform for 'the world of nations' what these renaissance

scientists had achieved for 'the world of nature'. Its goal, in short, was the construction of a 'physics of man'.

The master key of the new science lay in Vico's decisive perception that so-called 'primitive' man, when properly assessed, reveals himself not as childishly ignorant and barbaric, but as instinctively and characteristically 'poetic' in his response to the world, in that he possesses an inherent 'poetic wisdom' (*sapienza poetica*) which informs his responses to his environment and casts them in the form of a 'metaphysics' of metaphor, symbol and myth.

This 'discovery' – achieved only with the greatest difficulty because 'with our civilized natures we (moderns) cannot at all imagine and can understand only by great toil the poetic nature of these first men' (34)[1] – reveals that the apparently ludicrous and fanciful accounts of creation and the foundation of social institutions that occur in early societies, were not intended to be taken literally. They represent, not child-like 'primitive' responses to reality, but responses of quite a different order whose function was ultimately, and seriously, cognitive. That is, they embody, not 'lies' about the facts, but mature and sophisticated ways of knowing, of encoding, of presenting them. They constitute not mere embroidery of reality, but a way of coping with it: 'It follows that the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables; for, as we shall see, all the histories of the gentiles have their beginnings in fables' (51).

Myths, properly interpreted, can thus be seen to be 'civil histories of the first peoples who were everywhere naturally poets' (352). For example,

> The civil institutions in use under such kingdoms are narrated for us by poetic history in the numerous fables that deal with contests of song . . . and consequently refer to heroic contests over the auspices . . . Thus the satyr Marsyas . . . when overcome by Apollo in a contest of song, is flayed alive by the god . . . The sirens, who lull sailors to sleep with their song and then cut their throats; the Sphinx who puts riddles to travellers and slays them on their failure to find the solution; Circe, who by her enchantments turns into swine the comrades of Ulysses . . . all these portray the politics of the heroic cities. The sailors, travellers, and wanderers of these fables are the aliens, that is, the plebeians who, contending with the heroes for a share in the auspices, are vanquished in the attempt and cruelly punished. (646–8)

[1] The numbers refer to the passages of Vico's *The New Science* as given in the revised translation of the third edition, by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1968.

All myths, that is, have their grounding in the actual generalized experience of ancient peoples, and represent their attempts to impose a satisfactory, graspable, humanizing shape on it. That shape, argues Vico, springs from the human mind itself, and it becomes the shape of the world that that mind perceives as 'natural', 'given' or 'true'.

This establishes the principle of *verum factum*: that which man recognizes as true (*verum*) and that which he has himself made (*factum*) are one and the same. When man perceives the world, he perceives without knowing it the superimposed shape of his own mind, and entities can only be meaningful (or 'true') in so far as they find a place within that shape. So '. . . if we consider the matter well, poetic truth is metaphysical truth, and physical truth which is not in conformity with it should be considered false' (205).

In short, the 'physics of man' reveals that men have 'created themselves' (367), that 'the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind' (331). Man seen thus is characteristically and pre-eminently a 'maker' (the Greek word for that being 'poet'), and the New Science will thus concentrate on a close study of the making or 'poeticizing' process.

This turns out to be a two-way affair of some complexity. For not only does man create societies and institutions in his own mind's image, but these in the end create him:

> What Vico wanted to assert was that the first steps in the building of the 'world of nations' were taken by creatures who were still (or who had degenerated into) beasts, and that humanity itself was created by the very same processes by which institutions were created. Humanity

> is not a presupposition, but a consequence, an effect, a product of institution building.
>
> (Bergin and Fisch, Introduction, *op. cit.* p. xliv)

That is, man constructs the myths, the social institutions, virtually the whole world as he perceives it, and in so doing he constructs himself. This making process involves the continual creation of recognizable and repeated forms which we can now term a process of *structuring*. Vico sees this process as an inherent, permanent and definitive human characteristic whose operation, particularly in respect of the creation of social institutions, is incessant and, because of its repetitive nature, predictable in its outcome.

> The nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being (147).

Once 'structured' by man, the 'world of nations' proves itself to be a potent agency for continuous structuring: its customs and rites act as a forceful brainwashing mechanism whereby human beings are habituated to and made to acquiesce in a man-made world which they nevertheless perceive as artless and 'natural'.

Vico's work ranks as one of the first modern attempts to break the anaesthetic grip that such a permanent structuring process has on the human mind. It thus represents one of the first modern recognitions of that process as a definitive characteristic of that mind. *The New Science* links directly with those modern schools of thought whose first premise may be said to be that human beings and human societies are not fashioned after some model or plan which exists before they do. Like the existentialists, Vico seems to argue that there is no pre-existent, 'given' human essence, no predetermined 'human nature'. Like the Marxists, he seems to say that particular forms of humanity are determined by particular social relations and systems of human institutions.

The one genuinely distinctive and permanent human characteristic is discernible in the faculty of 'poetic wisdom', which manifests itself as the capacity and the necessity to generate myths, and to use language

metaphorically: to deal with the world, that is, not directly but at one remove, by means of other agencies: not literally, but 'poetically'. 'There must', Vico insists, 'in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects' (161). This 'mental language' manifests itself as man's universal capacity not only to formulate structures, but also to submit his own nature to the demands of their structuring. The gift of *sapienza poetica* could thus be said to be the gift of structuralism. It is a principle which informs the way all human beings always live. To be human, it claims, is to be a structuralist.

PIAGET

If we are all structuralists, then we ought to know what a *structure* is. Yet that key concept can be uncomfortably elusive, and we ought now to try to move rather closer to it.

One of the most fruitful attempts at a definition has been made by Jean Piaget.[1] Structure, he argues, can be observed in an arrangement of entities which embodies the following fundamental ideas:

(a) the idea of wholeness
(b) the idea of transformation
(c) the idea of self-regulation

By *wholeness* is meant the sense of internal coherence. The arrangement of entities will be complete in itself and not something that is simply a composite formed of otherwise independent elements. Its constituent parts will conform to a set of intrinsic laws which determine its nature and theirs. These laws confer on the constituent parts within the structure overall properties larger than those each individually possesses outside it. Thus a *structure* is quite different from an *aggregate*: its constituent parts have no genuinely independent existence outside the structure in the same form that they have within it.

[1] Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, pp. 5–16.

The structure is not static. The laws which govern it act so as to make it not only structured, but *structuring*. Thus, in order to avoid reduction to the level merely of passive form, the structure must be capable of *transformational* procedures, whereby new material is constantly processed by and through it. So language, a basic human structure, is capable of transforming various fundamental sentences into the widest variety of new utterances while retaining these within its own particular structure.

Finally, the structure is *self-regulating* in the sense that it makes no appeals beyond itself in order to validate its transformational procedures. The transformations act to maintain and underwrite the intrinsic laws which bring them about, and to 'seal off' the system from reference to other systems. A language, to take the previous example, does not construct its formations of words by reference to the patterns of 'reality', but on the basis of its own internal and self-sufficient rules. The word 'dog' exists, and functions within the structure of the English language, without reference to any four-legged barking creature's real existence. The word's behaviour derives from its inherent structural status as a noun rather than its referent's actual status as an animal. Structures are characteristically 'closed' in this way.

STRUCTURALISM

It follows that structuralism is fundamentally a way of thinking about the world which is predominantly concerned with the perception and description of structures, as defined above. As a developing concern of modern thinkers since Vico, it is the result of a momentous historic shift in the nature of perception which finally crystallized in the early twentieth century, particularly in the field of the physical sciences, but with a momentum that has carried through to most other fields. The 'new' perception involved the realization that despite appearances to the contrary the world does not consist of independently existing objects, whose concrete features can be perceived clearly and individually, and whose nature can be classified accordingly. In fact, every perceiver's method of perceiving can be shown to contain an inherent bias which affects what is perceived to a significant degree. A wholly objective perception of individual entities is therefore not possible: any

observer is bound to *create* something of what he observes. Accordingly, the *relationship* between observer and observed achieves a kind of primacy. It becomes the only thing that *can* be observed. It becomes the stuff of reality itself. Moreover the principle involved must invest the whole of reality. In consequence, the true nature of things may be said to lie not in things themselves, but in the relationships which we construct, and then perceive, *between* them.

This new concept, that the world is made up of relationships rather than things, constitutes the first principle of that way of thinking which can properly be called 'structuralist'. At its simplest, it claims that the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by its relationship to all the other elements involved in that situation. In short, the full significance of any entity or experience cannot be perceived unless and until it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part.

It follows that the ultimate quarry of structuralist thinking will be the permanent structures into which individual human acts, perceptions, stances fit, and from which they derive their final nature. This will finally involve what Fredric Jameson has described as 'an explicit search for the permanent structures of the mind itself, the organizational categories and forms through which the mind is able to experience the world, or to organize a meaning in what is essentially in itself meaningless'.[1] The ghost of Vico clearly remains unplacated.

Nevertheless, we must set our sights a little lower than the 'permanent structures of the mind' for the moment, and concentrate on the impact that the structuralist way of thinking has had on the study of literature. As we do so, we might remind ourselves that, of all the arts, that involving the use of words remains most closely related to that aspect of his nature which makes man distinctive: language. And it is not accidental that many of the concepts now central to structuralism were first fully developed in connection with the modern study of language: linguistics; and with the modern study of man: anthropology. Few spheres could be closer to the mind's 'permanent structures' than those.

[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, p. 109.

2

LINGUISTICS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

SAUSSURE

We can begin with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist whose work forms the groundbase on which most contemporary structuralist thinking now rests. Saussure inherited the traditional view already referred to, that the world consists of independently existing objects, capable of precise objective observation and classification. In respect of linguistics this outlook yields a notion of language as an aggregate of separate units, called 'words', each of which somehow has a separate 'meaning' attached to it, the whole existing within a *diachronic* or historical dimension which makes it subject to observable and recordable laws of change.

Saussure's revolutionary contribution to the study of language lies in his rejection of that 'substantive' view of the subject in favour of a 'relational' one, a change of perspective closely in accord with the larger shift in perception mentioned above. It is recorded in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, the account, put together from notes taken by his students, of a series of lectures which he delivered at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911, and published posthumously in 1915. The *Cours* presents the argument that language should be studied,

not only in terms of its individual parts, and not only diachronically, but also in terms of the relationship *between* those parts, and *synchronically*: that is, in terms of its *current* adequacy. In short, he proposed that a language should be studied as a *Gestalteinheit*, a unified 'field', a self-sufficient system, as we actually experience it *now*.

Saussure's insistence on the importance of the *synchronic* as distinct from the *diachronic* study of language was momentous because it involved recognition of language's current *structural* properties as well as its *historical* dimensions. As Fredric Jameson puts it 'Saussure's originality was to have insisted on the fact that language as a total system is complete at every moment, no matter what happens to have been altered in it a moment before.'[1] Each language, that is, has a wholly valid existence *apart* from its history, as a system of sounds issuing from the lips of those who speak it now, and whose speech in fact constructs and constitutes the language (usually in ignorance of its history) in its present form.

Saussure begins with a consideration of the whole phenomenon of language in terms of two fundamental dimensions which it exhibits: that of *langue* and that of *parole*. The dialectical distinction he draws between these two has proved of fundamental importance to the development of linguistics in general and of structuralism in particular.

The distinction between *langue* and *parole* is more or less that which pertains between the abstract language-system which in English we call simply 'language', and the individual utterances made by speakers of the language in concrete everyday situations which we call 'speech'. Saussure's own analogy is the distinction between the abstract set of rules and conventions called 'chess', and the actual concrete games of chess played by people in the real world. The rules of chess can be said to exist above and beyond each individual game, and yet they only ever acquire concrete form in the relationships that develop between the pieces in individual games. So with language. The nature of the *langue* lies beyond, and determines, the nature of each manifestation of *parole*, yet it has no concrete existence of its own, except in the piecemeal manifestations that speech affords.

Man can be described as the animal who characteristically devises

[1] Jameson, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.

and invests in language: that is, in a complex system or structure of correspondences between distinct signs, and distinct ideas or 'meanings' to which those signs distinctively relate. It happens – perhaps by accident – that the vocal apparatus has become the chief instrument and vehicle for language's concrete actualization in the real world of social intercourse. Nevertheless, '. . . what is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas' (p. 10).[1] This faculty, termed 'the linguistic faculty proper' lies in fact 'beyond the functioning of the various organs', and may be thought of as 'a more general faculty which governs signs' (p. 11). And what that faculty or power to construct signs generates in respect of language may be thought of as the larger structure which, though we never see or hear it in actual physical terms, can be deduced from its momentary manifestation in actual human utterances. *Langue* is therefore 'both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty' (p. 9). *Parole*, it follows, is the small part of the iceberg that appears above the water. *Langue* is the larger mass that supports it, and is implied by it, both in speaker and hearer, but which never itself appears.

The fact that language is intangible and never appears all at once in its entirety, but only in the incomplete performance of part of the repertoire by individual speakers has, since Saussure, offered a fruitful direction in which modern linguistics might move. That is, towards a description of the full pattern of systematized relationships which individual utterances and understanding point at and presuppose: towards, to use the modified terminology proposed by more recent linguists such as Noam Chomsky, an account of the system of 'competence' that must precede, and that must (to use his terminology again) 'generate' individual 'performance'. Not surprisingly, where individual *performance*, or *parole* seems heterogeneous, without pattern, without systematic coherence, its preceding *competence*, or *langue* seems homogeneous. It exhibits, in short, a discernible structure.

[1] Page references are to the translation of Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* by Wade Baskin; *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, 1959.

The full implications of this turn out to be fundamentally challenging, in that they require us to relinquish what Charles C. Fries has called an 'item-centered' view of the world, and the 'word-centred thinking about language'[1] produced by it, in favour of the sort of 'relational' or 'structural' view already referred to. If no 'item' has any significance by itself, but derives its significance entirely from its relationship with other items, then this must affect our thinking about language at a very basic level. We can begin with the *sounds* made by the human voice.

At this fundamental *phonetic* level, it quickly becomes clear that a large number of different 'items' are indeed in operation, and we only have to listen to an ordinary conversation to establish their range and complexity. Yet it is also clear that what makes any single item 'meaningful' is not its own particular individual quality, but the *difference* between this quality and that of other sounds. In fact, the differences are systematized into 'oppositions' which are linked in crucial relationships. Thus, in English, the established *difference* between the initial sound of *tin* and the initial sound of *kin* is what enables a different 'meaning' to be given to each word. This is to say that the meaning of each word resides in a structural sense in the difference between its own sounds and those of other words. In this case, the English language has registered the contrast or sense of 'opposition' between the sound of /t/ in *tin* and the sound of /k/ in *kin* as significant, that is, as capable of generating meaning.

However, much more crucial is the fact that by no means every possible contrast is registered as significant by the language. In fact, large numbers of contrasts are ignored by it, and only a relatively small proportion of the differences that actually occur between sounds are *recognized* as different for the purpose of forming words and creating meaning. Those that are not so recognized – however different they may be in fact – are simply lumped together as 'the same'. For example, the /p/ sound as it occurs in *pin* is obviously very different from what we habitually term 'the same' /p/ sound as it appears in *spin*: and there is a no less clear difference between the first consonant of *coal* and the first consonant of *call*. No 'foreign' speaker of English would ever call

[1] Charles C. Fries, *Linguistics and Reading*, p. 64.

these sounds 'the same'. We do, simply because the differences between them are not 'recognized' in English, in the sense that they are never used to distribute 'meaning' between words.

What we encounter here is a fundamental *structuring* principle. It is one which characteristically overrides the 'actual' nature of individual items, and systematically imposes its own shape or pattern upon them. When we look closely at the process we can see that it works by forcing us (whether we like it or not) to distinguish between two kinds or levels of 'difference'. There is that which *actually* occurs (*coal/call*) on the *phonetic* level, but which the *structure* of the language does not register, and which its speakers accordingly do not, when they speak the language, recognize. And then there is that which also actually occurs, but which since the structure of the language *does* take account of it, is recognized. This 'recognized' level is called the *phonemic* level, the items which appear on it are called *phonemes*, and it is these sounds (as in the first consonants of tin and kin) that the speakers of the language hear as 'different', that is, as opposed in a pattern of meaningful contrasts. The point is that of the many 'samenesses' or differences that actually occur (or have diachronically occurred) in the language, we only perceive those which the language's *synchronic* structure makes meaningful, and vice versa.

The arrangement which makes them so could be called both arbitrary and systematic. 'Arbitrary' because it is self-contained and self-justifying: there is no appeal possible beyond it to some category of the 'natural' or the 'real' which would justify tin/kin's 'difference' and deny that of coal/call. And 'systematic' because, by the same token, we feel ourselves to be in the presence (and in the grip) of a firmly rooted and overriding *system* of relationships governed by general laws which determine the status of each and every individual item it contains.

Such a system, encountered even at this primary level, can properly be termed *structural*. It is perceived as a *synchronic* phenomenon. And since it occurs at the very moment when language emerges as speech, the *phonemic principle* which animates it can be said to be a (if not the) fundamental structural concept. The notion of a complex pattern of paired functional differences, of 'binary opposition' as it has been termed, is clearly basic to it. In fact, the principle is common to all languages. As Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle point out, the

discernment of binary opposition is a child's 'first logical operation', and in that operation we see the primary and distinctive intervention of culture into nature.[1] There are thus grounds for recognizing, in the capacity for the creation and perception of binary or paired 'opposites', and in the cognate activity of the creation and perception of phonemic patterning at large, a fundamental and characteristic operation of the human mind. It is an operation which creates structures.

But Saussure goes further. Language, after all, inheres not in 'the material substance of words' (p. 18) but in the larger and abstract 'system of signs' of which those words are the barest tip. In fact, 'signs and their relations are what linguistics studies' (p. 102) and the nature both of signs and of the relationship between them is also seen to be structural.

The linguistic sign can be characterized in terms of the relationship which pertains between its dual aspects of 'concept' and of 'sound-image' – or, to use the terms which Saussure's work has made famous – *signified* (*signifié*) and *signifier* (*signifiant*). The structural relationship between the concept of a tree (i.e. the *signified*) and the sound-image made by the word 'tree' (i.e. the *signifier*) thus constitutes a linguistic sign, and a language is made up of these: it is 'a system of signs that express ideas' (p. 16).

Since language is fundamentally an *auditory* system, the relationship between signifier and signified unfolds during a passage of time. Where a painting can display and juxtapose its elements at the same time, verbal utterance lacks that kind of simultaneity and is forced to deliver its elements in a certain order or sequence which is itself significant. In short, the mode of the relationship between signifier and signified can be said to be essentially, albeit minimally, sequential in nature.

The overall characteristic of this relationship is one that we have already encountered: it is arbitrary. There exists no necessary 'fitness' in the link between the sound-image, or signifier 'tree', the concept, or signified that it involves, and the actual physical tree growing in the earth. The word 'tree', in short, has no 'natural' or 'tree-like' qualities, and there is no appeal open to a 'reality' beyond the structure of the language in order to underwrite it.

[1] Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, pp. 60–1.

The very arbitrariness of the linguistic sign protects it from change. As Saussure says 'any subject in order to be discussed must have a reasonable basis' (p. 73). But the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is not 'reasonable', and so it cannot be discussed in the sense that we cannot profitably consider or debate its adequacy. The sign is simply there. There is literally no reason to prefer any other word from any other source, *arbre, baum, arbor* or even an invented word, *fnurd*, to 'tree'. None is more adequate or 'reasonable' than another. The word 'tree' means the physical leafy object growing in the earth because the *structure of the language* makes it mean that, and only validates it when it does so. It follows that language acts as a great *conservative* force in human apprehension of the world.

In fact, the very arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified that makes language conservative in nature also serves to guarantee the 'structural' nature of the system in which it occurs in precisely the terms put forward by Piaget. Language is self-defining, and so whole and complete. It is capable of a process of 'transformation': that is, of generating new aspects of itself (new sentences) in response to new experience. It is self-regulating. It has these capacities precisely because it allows no single, unitary appeals to a 'reality' beyond itself. In the end, it constitutes its own reality.

In other words, language stands as the supreme example of a self-contained 'relational' structure whose constituent parts have no significance unless and until they are integrated within its bounds. As Saussure puts it, 'Language is a system of inter-dependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others' (p. 114).

If all aspects of the language are thus 'based on relations' (p. 122) two dimensions of these relationships must assume particular importance. Saussure presents these as the linguistic sign's *syntagmatic* (or 'horizontal') relations, and its simultaneous *associative* (or 'vertical') relations.

It has been pointed out that the mode of language is fundamentally one of sequential movement through time. It follows from this that each word will have a linear or 'horizontal' relationship with the words that precede and succeed it, and a good deal of its capacity to 'mean' various things derives from this pattern of positioning. In the sentence

'the boy kicked the girl', the meaning 'unrolls' as each word follows its predecessor and is not complete until the final word comes into place. This constitutes language's syntagmatic aspect, and it could also be thought of as its 'diachronic' aspect because of its commitment to the passage of time.

But each word will also have relationships with other words in the language that do not occur at this point in time, but are *capable* of doing so. The word, that is, has 'formulaic' associations with those other words from among which it has, so to speak, been chosen. And these other words, 'part of the inner storehouse that makes up the language of each speaker' (p. 123) – they might be synonyms, antonyms, words of similar sound or of the same grammatical function – help, by *not* being chosen, to define the meaning of the word which has. It obviously follows from our notion of language as a self-contained structure that the *absence* of certain words partly creates and certainly winnows and refines the meanings of those that are present, and in the above sentence, part of the meaning of 'kicked' derives from the fact that it turns out *not* to be 'kissed' or 'killed' as the full relationships of the words in the sentence are unrolled. These kinds of relationships can be thought of as on a 'vertical' plane to distinguish them from the simultaneously operating yet quite distinct relationships of the horizontal, syntagmatic plane. They constitute the word's *associative* aspect, and obviously form part of its 'synchronic' relationship with the whole language structure (pp. 122–7).

Thus, the value of any linguistic 'item' is finally and wholly determined by its total environment: 'it is impossible to fix even the value of the word signifying "sun" without first considering its surroundings: in some languages it is not possible to say "sit in the *sun*" ' (p. 116).

Ultimately, it seems that the very *concepts* a language expresses are also defined and determined by its structure. They exist, not intrinsically, as themselves ('Hebrew does not recognize even the fundamental distinctions between the past, present and future. Proto-Germanic has no special form for the future' (pp. 116–17)) and not positively, by their actual content, but negatively, by their formal differentiating relations with the other terms in the structure. 'Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not' (p. 117).

In thus focusing attention on what might be called the distinctive

'oppositional' mode in which linguistic structures are cast, Saussure seems finally to reinforce their 'closed' self-sufficient, self-defining nature, and to make them look inwards, to their own mechanisms, not outwards to a 'real' world that lies beyond them. Signs, like phonemes, function 'not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position', and thus – since the total mode of language is oppositional – '. . . whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it.' As a result, 'in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system' (pp. 118–21).

Language seen thus must finally be judged to be 'a form and not a substance' (p. 122): it is a structure which has *modes*, rather than an aggregate of items which has *content*.

And since this self-regarding, self-regulating form constitutes our characteristic means of encountering and of coping with the world beyond ourselves, then perhaps we can say that it constitutes the characteristic human structure. From there, it is only a small step to the argument that perhaps it also constitutes the characteristic structure of human reality.

That step takes us across the Atlantic.

AMERICAN STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS

We have noted that Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* was first delivered as a series of lectures in Geneva between 1906 and 1911. In the form of notes taken by students, the *Cours* was published posthumously in French in 1915. Although its ideas proved widely influential in Europe, the First World War broke down contacts between European linguists and those active in North America, the rift was widened by the Second World War, and an English translation of Saussure's *Cours* did not appear until 1959.

As a result of this, and also as a result of the existence to hand, as it were, of a large number of Indian languages unknown to European linguists, the study of language in North America became a separate and independently flourishing growth. In Saussure's terms, its main

thrust was towards synchronic accounts of native Indian languages. These were often begun for the purposes of furthering religious missionary work, but an additional impetus came from a sense of urgency that many of these languages were fast disappearing. The necessity simply to record and analyse them took precedence over any concern with the construction of general linguistic theories to an extent that seemed to make the term 'descriptive linguistics' wholly appropriate as far as its early practitioners, such as Franz Boas (1858–1942), as well as its historians were concerned.

One of the most important and influential of the American 'descriptive' linguists after Boas was Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and it was his work which formed the basis of what in America came to be termed 'structural linguistics'. As Fries argues, Sapir's book *Language* (1921) marks a significant breakthrough, for in it he records his growing awareness that languages operate by means of some kind of inherent *structuring* principle which simply overrides the 'objective' observations and expectations of the non-native speaker, who listens from 'outside':

> I found that it was difficult or impossible to teach an Indian to make phonetic distinctions that did not correspond to 'points in the pattern of his language' however these differences might strike our objective ear, but that subtle, barely audible phonetic differences, if only they hit the 'points in the pattern' were easily and voluntarily expressed in writing . . .
>
> (*Language* p. 56n.)

In short, like Saussure, Sapir discovered that the *phonetic* difference between two sounds only becomes meaningful to the native speaker when it coincides with the *phonemic* structure (or 'points in the pattern') of the language in which it occurs. Moreover, that structure has a considerable 'anaesthetic' effect on the native speaker's perception of his own language. He finds it very difficult to hear distinctions that the phonemic structure does not 'recognize'.

By the time Leonard Bloomfield had published his enormously influential book *Language* (1933) linguistics in America had followed Sapir's insights to such a degree that it could be called 'structural' without falsification, although the term conventionally applied to this

mode of linguistic analysis remained the looser one 'descriptive'. The climax of work in this vein, certainly in the field of phonology, is probably represented by the publication in 1951 of Trager and Smith's significantly titled *Outline of English Structure*.

Meanwhile, as a result of first hand contact with 'exotic' cultures that had been denied to European linguists, American structural linguistics – always closely linked with anthropology – had made progress in another area: that of the relationship between language and the cultural 'setting' in which it occurred. As the life of Indian tribesmen came more and more closely to be studied, this relationship seemed to have both a reflective and a formative character.

We have noticed that a language's structuring agency seems to exert an 'anaesthetic' power which makes it difficult for its speakers to register sounds that do not conform to the 'contrastive' or oppositional patterns of its phonemes. The same power makes it very difficult for us even to form or utter sounds used phonemically in other languages that do not fit the phonemic structure of our own. This is what gives foreign speakers their 'foreign' accents. The silent effectiveness of this power is such that it would therefore be surprising if each language's structure did not finally make its impress upon habits of perception and response that ultimately extend beyond itself. And indeed, when Sapir, and later the influential B. L. Whorf, made their initial extensions of linguistic structuring into other fields of social behaviour, they quickly reached the conclusion that the 'shape' of a culture, or total way of life of a community, was in fact determined by – or at any rate clearly 'structured' in the same way as – that culture's language. There is therefore, concluded Sapir in a classic statement, no such thing as an objective, unchanging 'real world':

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group.

> No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.
>
> (*Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality*, p. 162)

The assumption fundamental to this conception is that the world of space and time is in fact a continuum, without firm and irrevocable boundaries or divisions, which each language divides up and encodes in accordance with its own particular structure. As Dorothy Lee expresses it,

> . . . a member of a given society – who, of course, codifies experienced reality through the use of the specific language and other patterned behaviour characteristic of his culture – can actually grasp reality only as it is presented to him in this code. The assumption is not that reality itself is relative, but that it is differently punctuated and categorized by participants of different cultures, or that different aspects of it are noticed by, or presented to, them.[1]

In short, a culture comes to terms with nature by means of 'encoding', through language. And it requires only a slight extension of this view to produce the implication that perhaps the entire field of social behaviour which constitutes the culture might in fact also represent an act of 'encoding' on the model of language. In fact, it might itself *be* a language.

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

This, in essence, was the view taken by a number of anthropologists whose work began to appear during and just after the Second World War. Chief among them, and the one whose committed pursuit of the

[1] Dorothy Lee, 'Lineal and nonlineal codifications of reality' in Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (eds.) *Explorations in Communication*, Boston, 1960, pp. 136–54.

principles involved has most helped to attract the epithet 'structuralist' to his discipline, was the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The notion of a myth-making 'poetic wisdom' which animates the response to the world of so-called 'primitive peoples' is a fundamental principle of Lévi-Strauss's thought. This of course links him directly with Vico, a connection confirmed by his ultimate aim to produce a 'general science of man' as well as by his basic conviction that 'men have *made* themselves to no less an extent than they have made the races of their domestic animals, the only difference being that the process has been less conscious or voluntary'.[1] The same concern also links him with the thinking of Marx and Lévi-Strauss has acknowledged that connection in his remark that 'the famous statement by Marx, "men make their own history, but they do not know that they are making it" justifies first, history, and second, anthropology' (*SA*, p. 23).

However, while he also shares Vico's interest in language as a major aspect of the 'science of man', he is to be distinguished both from the Italian jurist and the German philosopher by the extent of his concern to utilize the methods of modern linguistics in his analysis of nonlinguistic data: by his very American notion (directly derived, as he recognizes, from the work of Whorf, Sapir and others) that since language is man's overwhelmingly distinctive feature, it constitutes 'at once the prototype of the *cultural phenomenon* (distinguishing man from the animals) and the phenomenon whereby all the forms of social life are established and perpetuated (*SA*, pp. 358–9). As he put it in his famous book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) 'Qui dit homme, dit langage, et qui dit langage dit société.'

The central question to emerge from such a viewpoint is the one raised above: in Lévi-Strauss's words, 'whether the different aspects of social life (including even art and religion) cannot only be studied by the methods of, and with the help of concepts similar to those employed in linguistics, but also whether they do not constitute phenomena whose inmost nature is the same as that of language' (*SA*, p. 62).

If that were indeed the case, then the analysis of language would

[1] 'Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Penguin Books, 1972), p. 353. I shall hereafter refer to this work as *SA*.

obviously suggest an appropriate model for the analysis of culture at large. And at one level, however manifold and complex his contribution to the broader fields of 'structuralism' might be, the general drift of Lévi-Strauss's work has ultimately been directed towards an investigation of the validity of that proposition.

Like the linguist, he sets out to identify the genuinely constitutive elements of what appears at first sight to be an apparently disparate and shapeless mass of phenomena. His method, fundamentally, involves the application to this non-linguistic material of the principles of what he himself terms the 'phonological revolution' brought about by the linguist's concept of the phoneme. That is, he attempts to perceive the constituents of cultural behaviour, ceremonies, rites, kinship relations, marriage laws, methods of cooking, totemic systems, not as intrinsic or discrete entities, but in terms of the contrastive relationships they have with each other that make their structures analogous to the phonemic structure of a language. Thus, 'like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems' (*SA*, p. 34) and 'like language . . . the cuisine of a society may be analysed into constituent elements, which in this case we might call "gustemes", and which may be organized according to certain structures of opposition and correlation' (*SA*, p. 86).

To correct the error of Whorf, whose studies Lévi-Strauss sees as lacking an integrating theory, being merely empirical, atomistic, and concerned with the parts and not the whole of a culture (*SA*, p. 85), these systems should be seen to combine to form 'a kind of language, a set of processes, permitting the establishment between individuals and groups, of a certain type of communication' (*SA*, p. 61). Each system, that is, kinship, food, political ideology, marriage ritual, cooking, etc. constitutes a *partial* expression of the total culture, conceived ultimately as a single gigantic *language*. Moreover, '. . . if we find these structures to be common to several spheres, we have the right to conclude that we have reached a significant knowledge of the unconscious attitudes of the society or societies under consideration' (*SA*, p. 87).

Perhaps the best way of indicating the fruitful nature of this pursuit of 'unconscious attitudes' is to try to give an account of Lévi-Strauss's analysis of three specific 'systems' which seem to yield valuable material: those of kinship, myth, and the nature of the 'savage' mind.