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Saussure's approach to linguistics

Having studied at Leipzig and Berlin, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1911) taught Sanskrit, Gothic and Old High German, first at the University of Paris and subsequently in Geneva. An obviously gifted man, at the age of 21 Saussure wrote a splendid dissertation ('Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes'), which already anticipated pivotal features of his mature thought. But with age, Saussure wrote less, and by the time he died he had published not more than 600 pages. His ideas only became widespread through the posthumous publication of his *Course in General Linguistics*, which was based on his lectures at the University of Geneva. For almost half a century the readership of this work was limited to linguists, but once the structuralist bandwagon was well on its way, other social scientists became fascinated with it.

It is, first, important to compare Saussure's structuralism with that of Durkheim. Three differences are worth mentioning here. First, whereas Durkheim's *oeuvre* is Janus-faced, Saussure's is not. We have already referred to the fact that various theoretical research programmes can be attributed to Durkheim: structuralism is only one of them. This is not the case for Saussure, whose theoretical contribution forms much more of a unity. Second, whereas Durkheim's structuralism was meant to be a contribution to sociology, Saussure's was not. Saussure was concerned with linguistic matters and only occasionally explored the possibilities of extending his ideas beyond the boundaries of the study of language. It was the accomplishment of others to demonstrate the wider sociological significance of his insights into linguistics. It also follows that, whereas Durkheim's propositions for sociology are clear-cut, the implications of Saussure for the social sciences remain open to discussion. Third, one of Durkheim's main concerns throughout his life was to explain social facts as *caused* by other social facts, similar to the way in which

physico-chemical forces operate. Drawing upon analogies with thermodynamics and electricity, structuralist notions are subordinated to a causal analysis. As will be shown shortly, the purpose of a Saussurean approach to language was to reveal the underlying 'syntagmatic' and 'paradigmatic' relations. In this structuralist theory of semiotics, there is hardly any place for a fully developed notion of causality.

Linguists today argue that the importance of Saussure's *Course* lies in the fact that the author distanced himself from two established opinions on language. First, there was the view, initially introduced by Claude Lancelot and Antoine Arnauld as early as the seventeenth century, that language is a mirror of thoughts and intrinsically rational. Second, there were the *Junggrammatiker* (the 'neogrammarians') such as Franz Bopp and Karl Brugmann, and Saussure's teachers Hermann Osthoff and August Leskien. According to their view, very much in vogue in the nineteenth century, the history of a language informs one about its current form. Sanskrit was believed to be the oldest language, and knowledge of it made it possible to trace back the history of other languages and to reveal their mutual roots. These two views had two features in common. First, both assumed that it could be established why, within any language, a particular name or pattern of sound is used to express a certain idea or concept. The further back one goes in history, the less arbitrary is the relationship between naming and concepts. Second, both conceived of language as a nomenclature. That is, both took it to be a set of names attached to universal concepts which are unchangeable and which exist independent of language.

With the appearance of Saussure's *Course* this picture was changed altogether. First, contrary to the atomistic nature of these earlier beliefs, Saussure introduced a holistic view of language. Whereas his predecessors conceived of language as nothing but the sum of its component parts, Saussure insisted that it needs to be seen as a structure in which the meaning of individual concepts is dependent on their relationship within a larger whole. Second, in contrast with, for instance, Bopp's bias in favour of diachronic analysis, Saussure's view of language attributes more importance to the synchronic investigation of language (1960: 71–100). Third, Saussure demonstrated successfully that language is not a nomenclature. If it were, translation would be an easy task, but it is not, and this can be explained by the fact that different languages structure the world differently. Likewise, the boundaries and semantics of concepts continuously change through time, and this again shows that languages organize the world differently.

Central to Saussure's theory is his distinction between '*langue*' and '*parole*'. Saussure introduced this distinction in his attempt to identify the object of linguistic investigation (ibid.: 7–23). What Saussure called *parole* or the 'executive side of language' alludes to actual utterances. *Langue* refers to the shared set of structural properties underlying language usage. Saussure insisted that the major concern of linguistics should be with *langue*, not *parole*. Similar to Durkheim's notion of the externality of social facts, Saussure argued that the simultaneous system of *langue* precedes *parole*, and that the former is the *sine qua non* for the latter. What people say or write makes sense because of the pre-existent structural properties of language. Language is a shared, social experience: people can speak and write because of the intersubjective nature of language usage.

Equally important is his distinction between 'sign', 'signifier' and 'signified'. The sign refers to both the signifier and the signified (ibid.: 65–7). Whereas the signifier is the utterance or trace, the signified is the concept attached to it. If we say 'horse', the utterance or trace 'horse' is the signifier, the concept 'horse' is the signified and the sign refers to both. These distinctions are relevant for understanding his notion of the 'arbitrary nature of the sign' (ibid.: 67–70). The arbitrariness refers to the bond between the signifier and the signified. Saussure's use of 'arbitrary' calls for further explanation here. What he meant is that a different signified could have been attached to a particular signifier, were it not for the relationship between the sign that links them and other signs within that language. Now, we mentioned earlier that, in Saussure's view, language is not a nomenclature and that there are thus no unchangeable universal signifiers. Hence, his notion of the 'arbitrary nature of the sign' not only designated the 'unmotivated' bond between sound-image and concept, but also the arbitrary nature of both the signified and the signifier in themselves (Culler 1986: 28–33).

Still regarding Saussure's concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign, there is a potential misunderstanding, which we briefly wish to point out. The notion of an arbitrary nature of the sign could well be understood to mean that the individual speaker can decide which signifier to use. But Saussure insisted that he did not mean this at all (1960: 68–9). As a matter of fact, he very much denied individuals that power. Reminiscent of Durkheim's reflections upon the constraining features of social facts, Saussure went to great lengths to show that, because of its public-collective features, language is 'necessary' in that no individual is able to choose different signifiers from the ones in use. This particular view of

language, as both arbitrary and necessary, is sometimes referred to as 'conventional' (see, e.g., Harland 1983: 13).

Closely related to the notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign is the principle of difference. Saussure's famous analogy between language and a chess game is useful here (1960: 88ff., 110–11). The meaning of a piece is not derived from its material form in itself, but depends on how that piece can be distinguished from the other pieces. Likewise, in language, identity is a function of differences within a system. This applies to both signifier and signified. The meaning of the utterance 'man' is dependent on its difference from the utterances 'can', 'gen', 'mean', 'mess', etc. Likewise, the meaning of any colour, say green, is dependent on its differences from the other colours currently in use: blue, yellow, red, etc. Another way of expressing this insight is by saying that identity depends on difference from an 'absent totality'. For instance, when we refer to the colour green, the meaning of green is derived from its difference within a system of colours which is currently in use and which, although not uttered, is nevertheless implied. Notice that the principle of difference operates at several linguistic levels, say from phonemes to grammatical facts. The phoneme (for instance, *c* in the word 'cat') is defined by its opposition to other phonemes which can potentially replace it and still make sense (in this case: 'bat', 'mat', 'sat', etc.). Grammatical facts comply with the very same notion of the relational nature of the sign: for instance, the future tense of a verb is dependent on its opposition to its present tense (ibid.: 120–2).

Saussure's distinction between synchronic and diachronic analyses of language is well known. Initially, he used the terms 'static' and 'evolutionary' linguistics, but then opted for synchronic and diachronic analysis (ibid.: 79–81). Whereas the former takes a snapshot of language, the latter follows its evolution through time. Although critics of Saussurean linguistics tend to portray it as simply 'ahistorical', Saussure's own position was more subtle. Contrary to what the textbooks say of him, he recognized the historicity of language. The arbitrary nature of the sign implies that there are no essential, universal features to meaning, and meaning is thus constantly in flux. Now comes the interesting twist in his argument. Whereas most scholars would conclude from this the priority of diachronic over synchronic analysis, for Saussure it meant exactly the opposite. The arbitrary nature of the sign not only makes for the historicity of language, but also for the necessity of analysing language synchronically. From a Saussurean perspective, the explanation for this paradox is rather straightforward. The arbitrary nature of the sign means that the sign does

not possess any essential features of its own. In structuralist parlance, there are no positive, self-defined signs in language. Every sign is entirely defined by its relationship with other signs which are currently in use, and it must therefore be taken to be a relational entity. Now, if the meaning of a sign is dependent on its relationship with other signs at a given time, it follows that a synchronic analysis is called for (ibid.: 79–100; see also Culter 1986: 46–57).

We finish the exposition of Saussure's thought with a brief note regarding the distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. Whereas the former refer to oppositional relations between replaceable items, the latter refer to combinatory relations between signs. Hitherto, we have only dealt with relations of paradigmatic contrast. Regarding syntagmatic relations, 'I love', for instance, can be followed by 'you', 'flying', 'them', 'Bruges', 'that film', etc. It cannot be followed by 'underwent', 'she', etc. There is thus a group of words which, according to the rules of syntagmatic relations, can follow 'I love'. Each two members of that group are in paradigmatic opposition to one another. Saussure's bold conjecture is that, at any level (i.e. whether one is dealing with phonemes, morphemes or 'grammatical facts'), language can be reduced to a combination of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations (1960: 122–7).

Saussure's impact on the development of social theory has been considerable. First, his distinction between *langue* and *parole* (and his prioritizing of the former over the latter) struck a chord with those who were disenchanted with the positivist pursuit of regularity conjunctions (see also chapter 8). The relevance of the distinction between *langue* and *parole* indeed extends beyond the realm of language. It can be seen as derived from a more general opposition between underlying structures on the one hand, and their particular instantiations on the other. From that general dualism follows, for instance, the hierarchical opposition between social structure and behavioural patterns. With this model in mind, the positivist preoccupation with statistical regularities was in vain: it was a mere search at the superficial non-structural level. Second, various social scientists became aware that, like language, other systems of discourse could be studied semiotically. Whether scientific theories, hairstyles, restaurant menus or ancient myths, they can all be studied as systems of signs (see, e.g., Barthes 1972; 1983). For example, there are clear rules regarding appropriate combinations of meal courses and vis-à-vis potential substitute courses. The meaning of each course depends on its difference from alternative choices. Compared with a light course, heavy and filling

courses might suggest (in some social circles) a lack of delicacy or sophistication.

Durkheim and Saussure set the stage for a structuralist movement in the social sciences. Three Frenchmen were essential to the further development of structuralist thinking. First, Fernand Braudel introduced Durkheimian notions in history (Braudel 1972: préface, 1980). As opposed to a mere history of events or 'small-scale science of contingency', Braudel searched for what he coined the *longue durée*. This refers to underlying structures which are relatively stable and which stretch over long periods of time. These geophysical, climatological or demographic structures constrain people's action and thought. Braudel was one of the founders of the highly influential Annales School; most of its members carried out historical research in a similar vein.³ Second, Louis Althusser argued that there is an epistemological break between the early and the later Marx (Althusser 1972; Althusser and Balibar 1970). Whereas the former was still indebted to German idealism and classical political economy, the latter went further and developed a structuralist 'science of history'. Against existentialist readings of Marx, Althusser argued that the later Marx rejected any a priori conceptions of human needs. Individuals are not the real subjects of history any longer; the hidden relations of production are. Others soon followed Althusser in the pursuit of structuralist Marxism; Étienne Balibar and Nicos Poulantzas were probably the best known amongst them (Althusser and Balibar 1970; Poulantzas 1968). Third, by drawing upon Roman Jakobson, Sigmund Freud and Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss developed a structuralist anthropology. With the help of the structuralist method, he analysed diverse social phenomena, ranging from myths to kinship systems. Compared with Braudel and Althusser, Lévi-Strauss has been the most influential. His structuralist method was emulated by Edmund Leach and many other anthropologists. Given the abstract nature of his work, his influence went far beyond anthropology. We will therefore pay special attention to his work.

Lévi-Strauss's anthropology

The name of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–) is closely associated with the structuralist tradition. Born in Belgium, Lévi-Strauss moved to France as a child, and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. During his studies in Paris he became acquainted with French sociology, notably the works of Comte, Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. His interest soon shifted to cultural

anthropology when he moved to Brazil, first in a teaching capacity at the University of São Paulo, then on a research expedition funded by the French government. During the Second World War he fled to the United States, and taught at the New School of Social Research in New York. It was there that he met the linguist Jakobson – an encounter which would lastingly shape Lévi-Strauss's intellectual development. In his later life he moved back to France – first to the École Pratique des Hautes Études, subsequently as Professor of Anthropology at the Collège de France – where he established himself as one of the leading figures of the structuralist movement.

It has occasionally been asserted that Lévi-Strauss's structuralist analysis of culture is very much indebted to Durkheim. Although there is some truth in this claim, it certainly requires further qualification. As a matter of fact, a brief comparison of the intellectual projects of Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss will help in elucidating the latter's. Insofar as there has been an appropriation of Durkheim's thought by Lévi-Strauss, it has been a highly selective one. Lévi-Strauss distanced himself from the functionalist or positivist readings of Durkheim which were prominent at the time (see also chapters 2 and 8). Not that these readings were necessarily false depictions of Durkheim's thought at certain points in his life. Yet for Lévi-Strauss these aspects of Durkheim's work were less attractive, probably erroneous and largely to be ignored. More worthy of attention, but seriously in need of a contemporary reassessment, were Durkheim's earlier propositions regarding social facts and collective representations. Finally, the most important contribution to Lévi-Strauss's intellectual development are Durkheim's later writings on religion.

Lévi-Strauss's selective appropriation of Durkheim is symptomatic of the significant differences between the two men. First, whereas especially the earlier work of Durkheim is still very much embedded in the *Weltanschauung* of the nineteenth century, Lévi-Strauss's work is, in many respects, a reaction to this intellectual tradition. In *Division of Labour* Durkheim drew upon analogies with biological evolution to explain the transition from 'mechanical' to 'organic' types of solidarity. In contrast, Lévi-Strauss has always been hostile to evolutionist types of explanation. The early Durkheim was concerned mainly with those theoretical principles that only reveal themselves across longer temporal spans. *Ex adverso*, Lévi-Strauss focused upon those mechanisms that reveal themselves across cultures. Durkheim was aware of the problems which accompanied industrialization and modernization, but he nevertheless defended the cultural and structural transformations which the West was

undergoing. Certain adjustments needed to be made, but the overall trend was one of progress. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss's *oeuvre* can be read as a fierce critique of the Western project of modernity.

Second, in some respects the aims of Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss are diametrically opposed. To clarify this, it is useful to consider the not uncommon view that anthropologists belong to either of two categories. On the one hand, there are those who are struck by and sensitive to the enormous cultural differences between societies. Underlying their work is an inclination to focus on the more malleable features of people's personality or practices, or, more strongly, a tendency towards an outright *tabula rasa* conception of the individual. On the other hand, there are those who find these differences superficial, and who are overwhelmed by that which all human beings have in common. They dedicate their life to a search for the universal features of humankind. However crude this distinction, it is a very useful one within the context of our discussion, for whereas Durkheim is very much representative of the former, Lévi-Strauss is an almost archetypal example of the latter. Durkheim was sensitive to the differences between various cultures. The existence of these differences (which can be ascertained empirically) was, for instance, central to his refutation of any *a priori* moral theory. Lévi-Strauss's project could not be more different. Normally, one would expect a collection of ethnographic details about numerous foreign cultures to back the insight that cultures radically differ from each other, but Lévi-Strauss used that information to convince the reader about the similarities between human beings. For him, people cannot help but structure the world in the same way.

Third, some of the ideas of Durkheim reached Lévi-Strauss through his reading of the work of Durkheim's nephew, Mauss. This is not to suggest that Durkheim did not exercise any direct influence on Lévi-Strauss. But Mauss's influence is at least as important, and whenever he deviated from his uncle's path (a rare occurrence indeed), Lévi-Strauss was likely to follow the nephew. In particular, Lévi-Strauss seemed very much taken by Mauss's notion of a 'total social fact'. Through that notion, both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss purported to transcend the opposition between atomism and holism. They followed Durkheim in his critique of individualist forms of explanation, but deplored the reifying tendencies in his notions of a collective mind or collective consciousness. In an attempt to avoid the deterministic pitfalls of Durkheim's idea of a collective consciousness, Mauss outlined the concept of a total social fact as embedded within actual patterns of social interactions. This seemed attractive to Lévi-Strauss, who

also attributed to Mauss the uncovering of unconscious structures underlying the surface level of ethnographic results. For Lévi-Strauss, this was remarkably similar to the way in which linguistics reveal structures underneath the immediately accessible level of speech patterns (1994: 5ff.).

Fourth, Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss were different personalities, involved in different kinds of practice. To put it bluntly: Durkheim was a scientist at heart, and Lévi-Strauss was not. Although Durkheim contemplated following in the religious footsteps of his father (who was a chief rabbi) and although there are some obvious traces of a religious upbringing in his work, his outlook on the world was, from an early age onwards, a rational-scientific one. We have already briefly sketched Durkheim's antagonistic attitude to the literary 'brilliance' of his Parisian contemporaries, and how his life was devoted to the development of a scientific approach to society. Durkheim aimed at applying as much scientific rigour as was employed in the natural sciences, and he tried to achieve this by rigidly adhering to the rules of logic, and by putting his theories through severe empirical tests.⁴ Lévi-Strauss is very different indeed. Although he (and structuralism in general for that matter) aimed at a science of society, he regularly broke the most elementary rules of scientific investigation. We are dealing here with a very different mind: a man with great sensitivity, but surely not a scientist. For anybody who is acquainted with Lévi-Strauss's writings, it will come as no surprise that his home background was artistic, and that he himself was an accomplished musician. Leach was not far from the truth when he referred to Lévi-Strauss as a 'visionary'. We are dealing with a highly imaginative, artistic mind, which expresses intuitions about the world, rather than examining their validity.

If Durkheim's influence on Lévi-Strauss is ambiguous, the impact of structuralist linguistics is less so. While lecturing in New York during the war, Lévi-Strauss developed a friendship with the Russian linguist and folklorist Jakobson. Jakobson introduced Lévi-Strauss to Saussure's work, the linguistics of the Prague School and, obviously, his own contributions. Jakobson was very much influenced by Saussure's notion that the meaning of a linguistic item depends on its *difference* from other items currently in use. With this Saussurean framework as his starting point, Jakobson conceived of language in terms of binary oppositions. That is, people are able to distinguish a consonant from a vowel, an acute sound from a grave one, and a voiced sound from an unvoiced sound. By extending Jakobson's theory to non-linguistic domains, Lévi-Strauss became one of the first to investigate social life by systematically employing analogies with

linguistic systems. He analysed kinship and myths in terms of binary oppositions, correlation, inversion and permutation, similar to Jakobson's treatment of the phoneme on the phonological level. What is important, however, is Lévi-Strauss's systematic attempt to go beyond the conscious level, looking for those universal, unconscious features of the mind which uniformly force a particular structure onto the world. As we suggested earlier, from Lévi-Strauss's perspective, this search for the universal, unconscious level is loyal to both Mauss and structural linguistics.

Lévi-Strauss deplored the fact that Freud and Marx had been excluded from the syllabus when he was a student. He did become acquainted with the writings of both later in his life. Here again, his readings of these authors deviated from the prevailing interpretations of his time. During the 1940s and 1950s, an attempt was made to merge existentialist philosophy with Marxism, and to interpret the latter in terms of the former. Lévi-Strauss's understanding of Marx could not be more different. He saw in Marx a structuralist *avant la lettre* who constantly searched beyond the surface level for economic structures. The same applies to his reading of Freud. Freud was initially introduced into the social sciences by members of the Frankfurt School (e.g., Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer) and theoreticians with close affinities to critical theory (e.g., Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm). Most of them attempted to integrate Freud (and Marx) with a humanist tradition, and they interpreted the work of Freud along these lines. Lévi-Strauss's reading was different indeed. What was appealing for him was Freud's attempt to develop a scientific explanation of psychological phenomena by moving beyond the conscious level and searching for the underlying structure and power of the unconscious. The merging of structuralism and psychoanalysis became prominent in Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths, to which we will turn shortly.

First, we need to outline Lévi-Strauss's overall scheme. His starting point is that human beings have certain features in common, one of these being the way they construct and divide up the external world. The surrounding world is potentially open to many categorizations, but human beings employ particular ones. They interpret their surroundings by reducing them to discontinuous units. Lévi-Strauss came to this conclusion through generalizing from Jakobson's structuralist treatment of language. According to this theory, people have an in-built ability to discriminate vowels from consonants. The former have high noise energy, while the latter are less loud. People are also able to distinguish compact sounds (*a* or *k*) from diffuse sounds (*u*, *p*, *i* or *t*), and acute sounds (sounds with a high frequency pitch, such as *i* or *t*) from grave sounds (sounds

with a low frequency pitch, such as *u* or *p*). So one arrives at Jakobson's primary vowel (and consonant) triangle (see figure 1.1).

According to Jakobson's triangle, people unwittingly process linguistic information through binary oppositions. Lévi-Strauss used this simple idea to analyse non-linguistic cultural phenomena. Take, for example, food and culinary activities. Simple binary oppositions ('nature versus culture' and 'altered versus unaltered') are at work here. It is obvious that ordinary raw food has not undergone any transformation, whereas cooked or rotten food has. But there is a difference between cooked food and rotten food. The former has been altered through cultural means, whereas the latter has been transformed through nature. So Lévi-Strauss arrived at a primary culinary triangle (see figure 1.2), which allows him to distinguish and analyse the main types of culinary activity. Boiling, for instance, is similar to roting, because it also leads to the decomposition of food.

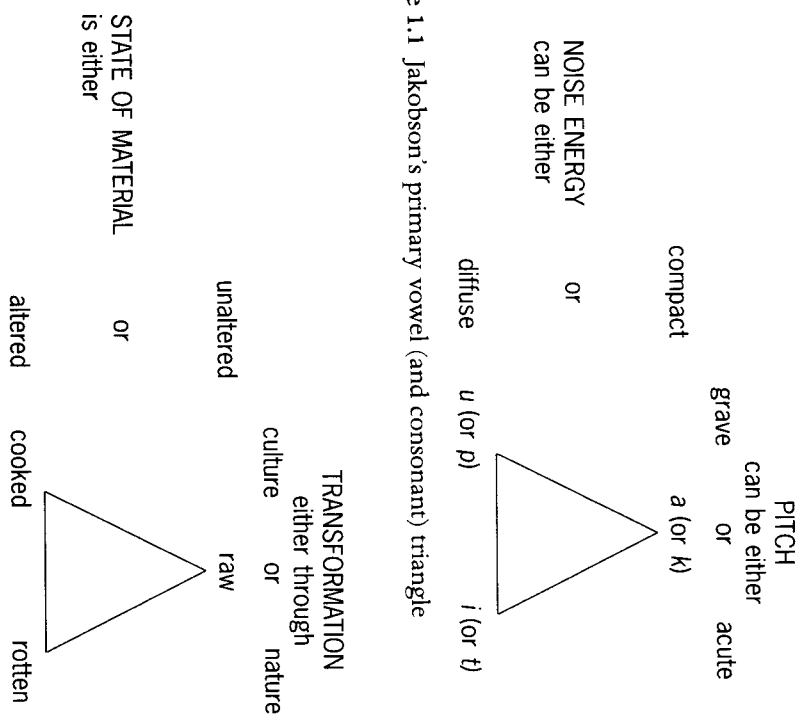


Figure 1.1 Jakobson's primary vowel (and consonant) triangle

Figure 1.2 Lévi-Strauss's primary culinary triangle

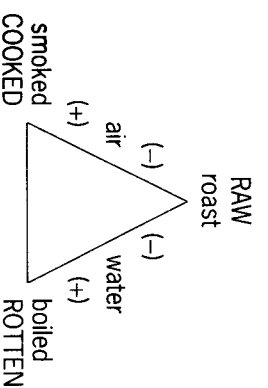


Figure 1.3 Lévi-Strauss's developed culinary triangle

Source: Lévi-Strauss 1978: 490

But it is different from rotting in that it can only take place through the medium of water plus cultural means (one needs a container). Smoking leads to complete cooking, with the medium of air, but without any cultural means. Roasting leads to only a partial transformation, and it is accomplished without the medium of air, water or any cultural means. Lévi-Strauss thus arrived at his *developed* culinary triangle (see figure 1.3). This example gives some indication of how, through simple binary oppositions, Lévi-Strauss tried to tackle elaborate cultural procedures.

Let us now move to Lévi-Strauss's treatment of myths, which, amongst other things, will give some indication of the extent to which both structuralism and psychoanalysis have influenced his work. He started off by pointing out a particular ambiguity in the study of myths. That is, on the one hand, a myth is one amongst many linguistic manifestations, and, on the other hand, it belongs to a more complex order than other linguistic expressions (1993: 206–11). Indicative of the fact that myths are both 'part of and above language' is that, contrary to other linguistic phenomena, they employ a dual time referent. On the one hand, they allude to reversible time in that they refer to events which have taken place a long time ago. On the other hand, they operate outside time in that they inform us not only about the meaning of the past, but also about the present and the future. Now, this means that in order to understand myths, they need to be analysed at both temporal levels. Lévi-Strauss invoked the example of an orchestra score to support his method of analysis. In order to find harmony, one needs to read the orchestra score both 'diachronically' and 'synchronically'. The former means that it is read as if it were a book: from left to right and top to bottom, starting with page one, then page two, etc. The latter means that one tries to conceive of the notes along

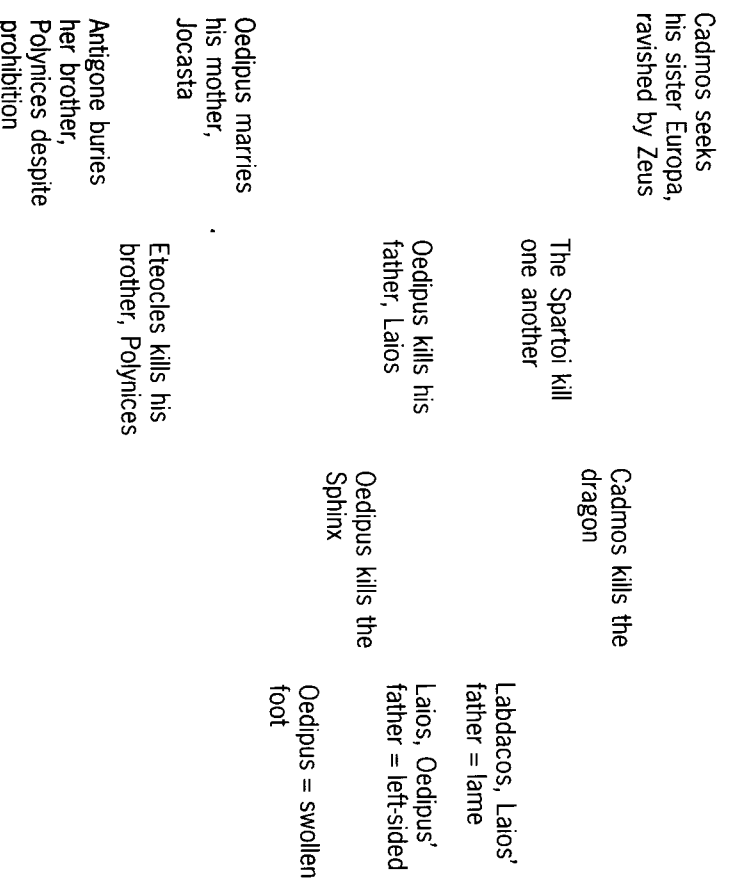


Figure 1.4 Lévi-Strauss's treatment of the Oedipus myth

Source: Based on Lévi-Strauss 1993: 214

each axis as one bundle of relations. Now, Lévi-Strauss invited us to 'read' myths in a similar fashion (ibid.: 211ff.).

Take, for example, the Oedipus myth, which Lévi-Strauss transformed as a chart (see figure 1.4). If one wanted to tell the story, one would read from left to right, and from top to bottom. But if one wants to understand the myth, Lévi-Strauss argued, one would read column by column (ibid.: 214ff.). The columns are constructed such that each one involves events which have something substantial in common. For instance, the events included in the first column indicate blood relationships which are too intimate or too close, whereas events in the second column imply the underrating of blood relationships. The third column refers to the killings of those monsters who are a threat to the coming to life, or the living of, human beings. The fourth column concerns the names of Oedipus and

his ancestors, and all indicate problems with **walking or standing up** (ibid.: 213–15).

Now, whereas the first and the second columns are rather straightforward, the third and the fourth are obviously not self-explanatory and necessitate further interpretation. Here, the interpretative abilities of the structuralist researcher become important. Partly drawing upon psychoanalytic accounts of symbols and partly inferring from his general knowledge of other myths, Lévi-Strauss suggested that the events in column three symbolize the denial of the autochthonous origin of human beings, whereas column four symbolizes the continuance of that very same autochthonous origin. It follows that column four is to three as column two is to one. That is, 'the overruling of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it' (ibid.: 216). So, the myth deals with the contradiction between the belief that human beings are autochthonous and the knowledge that they are born from the union of man and woman (ibid.: 215ff.).

This example is indicative of Lévi-Strauss's structuralist analysis of myths, and it allows us to summarize the main features of that analysis. First, there is no intrinsic or invariable meaning to any 'mytheme' or 'gross constituent unit'. Their meaning depends on their opposition to other symbolic units within that myth. Second, myths should not be conceived of in isolation from each other. A closer look shows the extent to which, through necessary transformations like symmetrical inversion, one myth is related to another. Whether we study Oedipus, Antigone or Phaedra, myths express the basic polarities such as 'nature versus culture', 'gods versus man' or 'life versus death'. Third, myths enable people to articulate and come to terms with the basic contradictions of human existence. The contradictions at stake are those between people's unconscious wishes or anxieties on the one hand, and their conscious experience on the other. Myths have an existential value in that they enable people to transcend these contradictions, somehow to reduce these in-built tensions.

Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths shows most effectively that his work meant a radical break with nineteenth-century ways of theorizing about the social. Against nineteenth-century unilinear evolutionism and its attendant notion of progress, Lévi-Strauss argued for the importance of synchronic analysis through which foreign cultures, *prima facie* very different, end up remarkably similar to ours. Through an in-depth comparative analysis of different cultures, he attempted to demonstrate the

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universal, innate properties of the human mind which bring the old and the new together, and which show distant societies to be much closer to us than was once believed. There is, no doubt, a political or ideological message to Lévi-Strauss's anthropology. Whereas, for decades, armchair anthropologists had somehow assumed the West to be the ultimate outcome of a necessary, linear process, Lévi-Strauss's notion of a universal mind looks for that which necessarily links us all together (1993: 1–27; 1994: 312–62).

Attempting to capture the innate properties of the human mind, Lévi-Strauss's work is one of the most ambitious and challenging attempts to develop a grand theory about culture. But it is evidently not devoid of problems, and two arguments, which have been held against him, are especially worth mentioning. First, it has been pointed out correctly that, contrary to what Lévi-Strauss believed, not all cultural forms are reducible to the logic of binary oppositions. Second, it has been argued (again convincingly) that, rather than attempting to put his theory to the test, Lévi-Strauss seemed to select empirical evidence in order to support his argument. Both are valid points, but it seems to us that there are more severe problems with his project. First, his work exhibits a remarkably closed, circular form of argument. He always seems to have a set of tools at hand (inversions and permutations) which turn those myths that do not *prima facie* fit his scheme into transformations of ones that do. There is an uncertainty regarding which potential or real myths would, within the parameters of his structuralist theory, be potential falsifiers of that very same theory. Second, an aura of mystery surrounds his choice of the basic dichotomies, and the reader is expected to accept uncritically the 'superior' intuition of the *maître-penseur* in these matters. It is perfectly possible, without deviating from the structuralist cause, to account for the same phenomena by invoking a different set of universal dichotomies from the ones used by Lévi-Strauss. It is not clear which criteria should be employed to judge and compare between these distinct structuralist readings. Third, from the perspective of evolutionary biology, there might be grounds to support Lévi-Strauss's assumption that there are innate, universal structures of the human mind. More contentious, however, is his belief that he can have access to these innate structures as they are. If innate universal structures of the human mind did exist, any attempt, including Lévi-Strauss's, to get access to them would only be possible by drawing upon the very same innate structures. These universal structures are both the object of research and the medium through which that research becomes possible. It is obvious that the dual nature of this type

of knowledge formation (as both medium and object) is not unproblematic, and calls for more epistemological foundation than provided in Lévi-Strauss's work.

By the end of the 1960s, structuralism had developed into two different schools. Both criticized central features of the structuralist project, but both also shared a lot in common with structuralism. First, there is post-structuralism, associated with the work of Jacques Lacan (1989), Jacques Derrida (1973; 1976; 1978) and Michel Foucault.⁵ Post-structuralists build further upon the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The theory shares with structuralism an anti-humanist and anti-Cartesian stance. But whereas structuralists aimed at a science of signs (and a science of society), post-structuralism purports to undermine notions of truth and scientific objectivity. Post-structuralists tend to commit themselves to conceptual or epistemological relativism. A more radical version of the post-structuralist position is taken up by some feminist authors, such as Hélène Cixous (1981), Luce Irigaray (1985) and Julia Kristeva (1982; see also Marks and de Courtivron 1981). We will deal with Foucault and post-structuralism in chapter 5. Second, there is Pierre Bourdieu's genetic structuralism and Anthony Giddens's structuralism theory. Both feel uneasy with the reifying tendencies of structuralist reasoning and its neglect of social praxis. Both also feel uncomfortable with the structuralists' exclusive emphasis on the constraining nature of structure. This explains why structuralism fails to account sufficiently for how structures are reproduced through time. While accepting some structuralist notions, both Bourdieu and Giddens attempt to link these with insights from social phenomenology and hermeneutics. The reproduction of structure is then seen as a continuous practical accomplishment by competent individuals. Bourdieu is clearly embedded in the French structuralist tradition, whereas Giddens is more eclectic. This explains why we leave Giddens for a separate chapter (see chapter 5), and why we will turn to Bourdieu now.