

Structuralism

Origin and Growth of Structuralism:

- Structuralism is an intellectual movement.
- It began in France in the 1950's.
- During the early part of 1960, some critics believed that **structuralism offered a single unified approach to human life that it would embrace all disciplines.**
- It reached Britain and the USA mainly in the 1970's and attained widespread influence throughout the 1980's.
- The term 'structuralism' in reference to social science first appeared in the works of Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009), a French anthropologist, who gave rise to structuralism movement in France, influencing the thinking of other writers such as Louis Althusser and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, as well as the structural Marxism of Nicos Poulantzas. Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida focused on how structuralism could be applied to literature.
- The origin of Structuralism can be found in the work of **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857-1913), a Swiss Linguist.
- Saussure was a key figure in the development of modern approaches to language study.
- In the 19th century, linguistic scholars mainly focused on the **historical aspects of language** (working out the historical development of languages and connections between them, and speculating about the origins of language itself).
- The historical linguists employed a **diachronic mode (i.e. study across time)**.
- But it is **Saussure**, in his work *A Course in General Linguistics (1916)*, called for a **scientific study of language (i.e. focusing upon the patterns and functions of language as in use today that is called as Synchronic study)** rather than a historical one.
- "Gang of Four" of structuralism Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes, and Michel Foucault.
- Ferdinand de Saussure is called as the Father of Modern Linguistics.(Noam Chomsky is also called by the same title).

The base for Structuralism

The following two factors help the development of Structuralism.

(1) Linguistics

(2) Mythology

Mythology:

- Mythology should be approached through Science.
- Terence Hawks states that the Mythology was created by our primitives/ ancients.
- Today, those mythologies create us and act us.

What is Structuralism?

The Structures in question here **are** those **imposed by our way of perceiving the world** and **organizing experience**, rather than objective entities already existing in the external world.

In sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, **structuralism is a general theory of culture and methodology** that implies that elements of **human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader system. It works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel.**

Simon Blackburn, a philosopher, summarized structuralism as follows

It is belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure.

Structuralism is an attempt to see everything in terms of Saussurean linguistics

- Things** can be seen as a system of **Signs**. (Things- toys, tree, a wrestling, a poem).
- The sign** is constituted by the **signifier** and the **signified**.
- The Signifier** is the **Word** (the Alphabets arranged in a particular order).

- **The Signified** is the **Concept/image** that the signifier stands for.

E.g.:

SIGN  **SIGNIFIER + SIGNIFIED**

SIGN  **WORD + IMAGE**

Tiger (Sign)  **Tiger (Word) + Tiger (image)**

❖ **Saussurean** linguistics has three fundamental assumptions:

(1) Arbitrariness

(2) Relational

(3) Systematic

(1) Arbitrariness:

- **The meaning** or **Significance** is not a kind of **core** or **essence inside things**: rather meaning is always **outside**.
- **Meaning** is always an **attribute** of things (Meanings are attributed to the things by the human mind, not contained within them).
- **So, the meanings**, attributed **to words** are entirely **arbitrary**, and **prescribed through usage and conventions only**.
- There is no inherent or “natural” connection between the word and the meaning.

- The word has no quality that suggests the meaning (except in onomatopoeic words like “hiss”, “cuckoo”...etc.).
- Therefore **language cannot** be said to **stand for, or reflect, reality or the world.**

To sum up in proper Structuralistic terminology, the **relation between signifier / word** and **signified / meaning** is purely **arbitrary.**

(2) Relational:

- **Things cannot be understood in isolation** (No word has its meaning in isolation).
- **Linguistic elements** (words) are defined in **relationships of combination** and **contrast** with one another.
- **Signs are structured** with the principle of **differential relations**, and of **opposites (binary oppositions)**.
- The relations are charged with deep meanings in human culture.
- **So, a word possesses meaning through its difference from other words** in the organizational chain (the syntagmatic arrangement of words).

Example:

(1) The word “**cat**” means cat only by its virtue of its difference from “**cap**” or “**hat**”.

(2) “**Hovel, shed, hut, house, mansion, palace**”

- The meaning of any one of these words would be altered if any one of the others were removed from the chain.
- ‘**Hut**’ and ‘**shed**’ are both **small** and **basic structures**, but they are not quite the same thing.
- ‘**Hut**’ is primarily **for shelter** (e.g. a night- watchman’s hut)
- ‘**Shed**’ is primarily **for storage**.
- “**House, mansion, palace**”

‘**A mansion**’ can be defined as **a dwelling which is bigger and grandeur than a mere ‘house’ but not as big and grand as ‘palace’**

(3) **Paired opposites/ binary opposition:**

If we have paired opposites then this mutually defining aspect of words is more apparent.

- ‘**male**’ and ‘**female**’

- Each designates the **absence of characteristics** included in the other.
- **'male,** can be mainly seen as **'not female'.**

(3) Systematic:

- **Language constitutes our world and our very existence.**
- The whole is greater than the parts.
- We therefore **should not look at what people say, but what makes speech possible at all.**

Diachronic versus Synchronic study of Language:

The key difference between synchronic and diachronic linguistics lies in the viewpoint used to analyze these two branches of linguistics. Synchronic linguistics, also known as descriptive linguistics, is the study of language at any given point in time while diachronic linguistics is the study of language through different periods in history.

Synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics are two main divisions of linguistics. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure introduced these two branches of linguistics in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Overall, synchrony and diachrony refer to a language state and to an evolutionary phase of language.

What is Synchronic Linguistics?

Synchronic linguistics, also known as descriptive linguistics, is the study of language at any given point in time, usually at present. However, this point in time can also be a specific point in the past. Thus, this branch of linguistics attempts to study the function of language without reference to earlier or later stages. This field analyzes and describes how language is actually used by a group of people in a speech community. Thus, involves analyzing grammar, [classification](#), and arrangement of the features of a language.

What is Diachronic Linguistics?

Diachronic linguistics basically refers to the study of language through different periods in history. Thus, it studies the historical development of language through different periods of time. This branch of linguistics is the diachronic linguistics. Main concerns of diachronic linguistics are as follows:

- Describing and accounting for observed changes in particular languages
- Reconstructing the pre-history of languages and determining their connection, grouping them into language families Developing general theories about how and why language changes
- Describing the history of speech communities
- Studying the history of words

Example: The word “villain.”

Note: These notes have been taken from open sources on the Internet