Structuralism and Semiotics

John William Phillips

elljwp@nus.edu.sg

What is Structuralism?

Structuralism is the name that is given to a wide range of discourses that study underlying structures of signification. Signification occurs wherever there is a meaningful event or in the practise of some meaningful action. Hence the phrase, "signifying practices." A meaningful event might include any of following: writing or reading a text; getting married; having a discussion over a cup of coffee; a battle. Most (if not all) meaningful events involve either a document or an exchange that can be documented. This would be called a "text." Texts might include any of the following: a news broadcast; an advertisement; an edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear;* the manual for my new washing machine; the wedding vows; a feature film. From the point of view of structuralism all texts, all meaningful events and all signifying practices can be analysed for their underlying structures. Such an analysis would reveal the patterns that characterise the system that makes such texts and practices possible. We cannot see a structure or a system per se. In fact it would be very awkward for us if we were aware at all times of the structures that make our signifying practices possible. Rather they remain unconscious but necessary aspects of our whole way of being what we are. Structuralism therefore promises to offer insights into what makes us the way we are.

Where does structuralism come from?

Structuralism first comes to prominence as a specific discourse with the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed a branch of linguistics called "Structural Linguistics." Saussure died before he was able to publish his material but we have the meticulously recorded notes of several of his students made during the 2nd course of 1908-1909. The theory was still at a developmental stage then--and has remained in a developmental stage ever after. There is nothing authoritative about Saussure's theory and even now it is open to debate and controversy. Yet there has been an extraordinarily diverse and fecund range of work, including a number of schools of thought in Eastern Europe, the United States, and thriving today in Japan, based upon readings of his initial insights as documented by his students. The reconstruction of his lecture courses can be found in *The Course in General Linguistics*. This is an essential read for anyone who seriously wants to understand the basis of structuralism and semiotics. For those who don't have the time, my summary of basic points follows. Bear in mind that I am reading with hindsight and have probably added some insights that are in debt to Saussure's critical heritage.

The Course in General Linguistics
Why "*general*"

Saussure's demand for a **general** linguistics is what leads to his most startling insights. Previously there had been many explanations of language but there had always been something missing and, thus, the absence of a ground to explain all of language. An empiricist like John Locke, for instance, would have explained language by claiming that words were used to refer to things or to mental images of things. All the discrete objects in the world (trees, dogs, cats and men and women) each has a word in the vocabulary that pertains to them. Some words are general (dog) and some particular (Fido). The problem with this theory is that there are some words that refer to nothing empirical in the world (virtue and crime) and some words that refer to nothing that really exists in the world (unicorns and Hamlet). Where then do words for fictional objects and transcendental concepts come from? Saussure's explanation of language, as we'll see, is quite adequate for discussing real things in the world as well as fictional objects and abstract concepts--indeed Saussure would explain everything that language can do.

The Sign

The sign is, for Saussure, the basic element of language. Meaning has always been explained in terms of the relationship between signs and their referents. Back in the 19th Century an important figure for semiotics, the pragmatic philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced *purse*), isolated three different types of sign: The **symbolic** sign is like a word in so far as it refers by symbolising its referent. It neither has to look like it nor have any natural relation to it at all. Thus the word cat has no relation to that ginger monster that wails all night outside my apartment. But its owner knows what I'm talking about when I say "your cat kept me awake all night." A poetic symbol like the sun (which may stand for enlightenment and truth) has an obviously symbolic relation to what it means. But how do such relationships come about? Saussure has an explanation. The **indexical** sign is like a signpost or a finger pointing in a certain direction. An arrow may accompany the signpost to San Francisco or to "Departures." The index of a book will have a list of alphabetically ordered words with page numbers after each of them. These signs play an indexical function (in this instance, as soon as you've looked one up you'll be back in the symbolic again). The **iconic** sign refers to its object by actually resembling it and is thus more likely to be like a picture (as with a road sign like that one with the courteous workman apologising for the disruption). Cinema rhetoric often uses the shorthand that iconic signs provide. Most signs can be used in any or all three of these ways often simultaneously. The key is to be able to isolate the different functions.

Saussure departs from all previous theories of meaning by discovering that language can be examined independently of its referents (that is, anything outside language that can be said to be what language refers to, like things, fictions and abstractions). This is because the sign contains both its signifying element (what you see or hear when you look at a written word or hear a

spoken one) and its meaningful content. The sign cat must be understood as being made up of two aspects. The letters--which are anyway just marks--"C" "A" "T"--combine to form a single word--"cat." And simultaneously the meaning that is signified by this word enters into my thoughts (I cannot help understanding this). At first sight this is an odd way of thinking. The meaning of the word cat is neither that actual ginger monster nor any of the actual feline beings that have existed nor any that one day surely will--a potential infinity of cats. The meaning of the word cat is its potential to be used (e.g., in the sentence "your cat kept me up all night.") And we need to able to use it potentially infinitely many times. So in some strict sense cat has no specific meaning at all, more like a kind of empty space into which certain images or concepts or events of usage can be spilled. For this reason Saussure was able to isolate language from any actual event of its being used to refer to things at all. This is because although the meaning of a word is determined to a certain extent in conventional use (if I'd said "your snake kept me up" I'd have been in trouble) there is always something undetermined, **always something yet to be determined**, about it.

Signifier/Signified

So Saussure divides the sign into its two aspects. First there's the bit that you can see or hear. Actually you can imagine signs that are accessible to each of the senses. The laboratory technicians at Chanel, for instance, have an acute receptivity to the smallest nuanced difference between scents. In this case they are literally "readers" or "interpreters" of scent in so far as they are able to identify minute differences. So if you can see, hear, touch, taste or smell it you can probably interpret it and it is likely to have some meaning for you. Audible and visible signs have priority for Saussure because they are the types of sign that make up most of our known languages. Such signs are called "verbal" signs (from the Latin *verba* meaning "word"). The sensible part of a verbal sign (the part accessible to the senses) is the part you see or hear. This is its **signifier**. You can understand this much by looking at a word you don't understand--a word from a language you don't know, perhaps. All you get is its signifier. The following marks are the best approximation I can make to a word in an imaginary foreign language: **bluk.** It is a signifier. Already, though, notice that a certain amount of signification occurs--the foreigness is already part of its signified and the fact that we recognise it as a combination of marks that can be repeated already presents us with a potential **signified**. And, most eerily, although we only saw the mark we simultaneously heard it in our heads--not actually but that part of our brain that listens out for sounds took one look at a non-existent word and *heard something* too. The **signified** is what these visible/audible aspects mean to us. Now we know very well that some marks mean very different things to different people at different times. The word "cat" in my example means "ginger monster" to me but to my neighbour it means cuddly old much maligned softy who is only innocently going about its business. The signified is thus always something of an interpretation that is added to the signifier. Usually we individuals don't have to work too hard at interpreting signs. The groundwork has already been done--which is why "cat" pretty much nearly always means what it means. One of

the most influential aspects of Saussure's course is his explanation concerning that groundwork.

System and Utterance

There is no natural or necessary reason why the non-existent word **bluk** should sound the way it does. What we call phonemes (the elements of sound that make up words) correspond to the graphemes (elements of the written words) in no natural or necessary way. The correspondence has just come about over time and repeated usage and is constantly though imperceptibly changing. Yet literate speakers of a given language hear the correspondence **immediately.** (Now the invention of recorded sound is over a century old it might be fun to chart the changes, though that, as we are just about to discover, is entirely irrelevant). This unexplained correspondence between written and spoken marks would be no big deal in itself perhaps (though I do find it eerie) if it were not for the fact that the meanings of words--the signifieds--attach to their signifiers in just such an unreliable way. There is never a natural or necessary relationship between signifier and signified. Saussure says that the relationship is entirely **arbitrary**. So where does this meaning come from? How do signifieds and signifiers come together? Saussure tells us that we must get away from thinking about the changes that occur to languages through time. Before he arrived this is pretty much what language study was about: charting changes through time. Saussure calls this **diachronic** linguistics. Instead, he advises, we should focus our attention on what makes a language what it is at any given moment, forgetting about time altogether. He called this new linguistics, which he invented, **synchronic** linguistics. **Synchronic linguistics** studies what he calls **la langue** (which is French for "language"). What he means by this is the language **system**. The word "system," in this case, suggests an arrangement of interrelated elements and accounts for the way these elements relate to each other. The elements in Saussure's language system are signs. It is because of the specific ways in which these signs interrelate in the system that it is possible to say anything at all. When we do say anything it is an instance of what Saussure calls **parole** (French for speech). An instance of **parole** can be called an **utterance.** An **utterance** is any meaningful event that has been made possible and governed to an extent by a pre-existing system of signs. There is virtually nothing in experience and certainly nothing meaningful that cannot be said to belong to one or more of these systems of signs. Let's look at some examples of types of utterance. The following are utterances: "Your cat kept me up all night"; a sonnet by Shakespeare; Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics;* Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; my suit and tie; Alexander Pope's garden in Twickenham. As such there is in each case a specific system that underlies and to an extent governs the types of utterance that can be made. What is the specific mechanism that allows systems to operate in these ways?

Difference

Up until now it might have been possible to understand the elements that make up this system, the signs themselves, as actually existing, perhaps even

physical things. Get out your dictionary and there they will all be--a finite number, listed alphabetically and related to each other in definitive ways. Let's have a look at how this works with our most simple sign "cat". We look it up and find this:

> Etymology: Middle English, from Old English *catt*, probably from Late Latin *cattus, catta* cat. Date: before 12th century.
>
> 1 a: a carnivorous mammal (*Felis catus*) long domesticated as a pet and for catching rats and mice b: any of a family (*Felidae*) of carnivorous usually solitary and nocturnal mammals (as the domestic cat, lion, tiger, leopard, jaguar, cougar, wildcat, lynx, and cheetah).
>
> 2: a malicious woman.
>
> 3: a strong tackle used to hoist an anchor to the cathead of a ship.

cat

Quite apart from the fact that the signifier appears to have three quite divergent signifieds (carnivorous mammal, malicious woman and strong tackle) we find that it belongs in a family and has already been opposed to its conventional sparring partner the mouse (as in Tom and Jerry). You wouldn't be that likely to call a malicious man a "cat" (though who knows these days) either, so it seems as if some kind of gendering has gone on too. Furthermore you can solve any worries about any of the words used to define cat by turning to their own entries in the same dictionary. If you were to be very pedantic and silly you might spend days following the trail of cross references. But these aspects are nothing to do with what holds the system together as a system. For that we must turn to something that it is not even possible to perceive and here we enter into the world of paradoxes. Saussure says that there are no actual positive existing terms in a language system--the dictionary must be an illusion then! Well, in some sense it is. Sure, the marks are there--but our understanding and our impression of them is owed to something we cannot

have an impression of at all. That something is **difference**. This is what Saussure says: "A language is a system of differences with no positive terms." We recognise the marks of a language because they are marks in distinction and different from each and all of the other marks in the system. In fact we recognise marks as marks by virtue of the differences between marks rather than the marks themselves. You can see this easily with the fact that handwriting differences and quite stark differences in font on the word processor don't make any difference to the function of the mark itself--at best it is an aesthetic difference (not to say that that isn't important in its own right of course). As far as their being marks of the language system is concerned, so long as a given mark isn't bent so far as to become a different one, that is, so long as they operate within the elastic range that difference allows, then we will recognise them in a positive way. All possible marks have their possibility thanks to their differences. But what is a difference? Ah! that is a tricky one. I've already shown that the signifier is the sensible part of a sign. And we know that its signified is not itself sensible. We might call it "mental" or "intelligible" as opposed to sensible. Now the trouble with difference is that it is neither sensible nor intelligible. Saussure had drawn a curious picture designating the two realms of the mental and the audible looking a little like a seascape with the sky above the horizon. Several vertical lines cut the picture into individual segments. He meant by this to demonstrate that neither sound nor thought has any meaning but is just a mass--a meaningless continuity--without the articulation into segments that language provides. These segments are the signs, the elements of a language system, which is all very pretty but how do you then picture the difference that makes it all possible? You can never actually see, hear, touch, taste or smell a difference. Sense is stuck in the world of impressions. But if we are asked to accept that differences are what make signs possible, that the signifiers cat, bat, rat, dog, and mouse, have their distinctive qualities owing to their differences, then meaning can only come into being for us in the empty, imperceptible differences between signifiers. It is thus the system of differences that makes possible and **to a certain extent** governs meaningful experience.

"To a Certain Extent"

The earliest scholars working in the idiom of structuralism proceeded from the premise that all kinds of cultural activity could be analysed objectively on the model of the empirical sciences. The history of structuralism and semiotics shows two things in this respect. First, although the project turns out to be impossible in its ideal form, many otherwise inaccessible insights about cultural activity were made. And second, the reason for the impossibility of the structuralist project is contained in its premises from the beginning. So **ONE**: structuralism was never able to achieve its most ideal aims but has always been very illuminating anyway; and **TWO**: critical reading of the structuralist texts shows us why its task was impossible from the beginning. The reason is at first sight very trivial. The earliest structuralists were unable to take on board the importance and the difficulty of pinning down the category of **difference**. As I have already suggested signifying activities are only ever determined by the systems that make them possible **to an extent**. This is

because difference cannot be perceived, it determines nothing in a direct way, and as a principle it demands that there always was and always is something yet to be determined about any cultural activity whatsoever.

System and Difference

The scientific approach to a system would take for granted that its elements would correspond to an organised and integrated unity (or totality), such that each element in the system can be located in its place on the web of relationships between elements. Even the sub-atomic universe has elements. Once it was thought that the atom was the smallest indivisible element. (As we all now know, by splitting the atom the human species discovered how to make their biggest explosion so far--another step towards their very own big bang.) But with Saussure's system the elements themselves are impossible to locate because, as he says (and I remind you), "language is a system of differences with no positive terms." A signifying system is made up of differences. This means that each element relates not only to all the other elements but also to its own difference as well, and to this most pesky of signifiers, **difference** itself. The consequences are very far reaching but to start with we must consider this: If one element (a signifier) is related to another element (another signifier) through difference, then there is no hard and fast line that links the two. The linkage remains unstable and is subject at any given moment to the possibility of unpredictable change. In 19th century Europe the signifier *women* seems to have been attached to the signifiers *passive* and *weak* when applied in non-domestic contexts (in domestic contexts like the kitchen the reverse was true). The link was apparently inextricable. It seemed both necessary and natural. You only have to have seen any one of the mainstream cinematic releases of the last year or so to see that this link is now broken--any number of plucky post-feminist heroines characterise the standard Hollywood narrative (e.g., in *Ever After,* the recent Hollywood re-write of the Cinderella story). At least 100 years of movements associated with the liberation, separatism or equality of women has had some effect on what was once just one of the countless taken-for-granted attitudes that determine the way cultural relations are interpreted. The various ways in which these taken-for-granted aspects of culture have been questioned and even changed can help explain Structuralism's failure to deal entirely objectively with its material. Yet we can also now see how structuralism's attempts to do so can contribute to our understanding of the abitrariness of the link between signs like *man* and *woman*. Of course my example of the mainstream Hollywood narrative reveals something yet more disturbing. That is, even if apparently objectionable links can **to a certain extent** be dissolved, there seems to be no limits to the system's ability to reclaim them in some part of a tightly knit unity. It is OK for Cinderella to be plucky so long as the prince, who is her destiny in this particular myth, finds her attractive and they live happily ever after. Now the signifier *woman* is linked to *strong* and *active* in contexts beyond the domestic. Careful analysis might reveal that this change is in support of a particular ideological point of view. Such an analysis would still have recourse to many of the tried and tested methods of the structuralists.

Developments in Structuralism

How Structuralism Works

Saussure's *Course* has had many different kinds of influence on Humanities scholarship in the 20th Century. He seems to have touched on so many different concerns that his influence is indicative of a fairly general condition. Because his overt concern is language there have been some mistaken assumptions made about what the implications of structural linguistics are. People have attempted to find a correlation between linguistic structures and cultural structures as if language itself determined cultural and even social experience. This attitude can be called linguisticism (the attempt to explain everything according to an understanding of language and its structures). Many trends after Saussure can be seen to be working on the assumption that there is no social or cultural experience outside the structures that language makes possible. In fact, as developments in linguistics show, the category *language* cannot contain what Saussure was interested in, despite his own assertions. By making his linguistics a general one, instead of an empirical one, he had to find his explanatory terms in phenomena that are not restricted to languages alone. If they apply to language, then, that just makes language one phenomenon among others that can be understood through structuralism. What then are the key explanatory terms of structuralism? Time for a summary and a little exercise:

An Exercise in Structuralism
Synchrony/Diachrony

A distinction must be made between the way languages appear to us (as changing through time) and as they are at any given time (governed by systematic relations not affected by time passing). **Synchronic** linguistics is supposed to study the systematic aspects of language rather than the **diachronic** aspects. This will not be the only occasion where an attempt at a scientific understanding of something finds it convenient to discount time. We can learn a lesson here: ignore it at your peril.

System/Process

Structuralism assumes that for every process (an utterance for instance) there is a system of underlying laws that govern it. The system arises contingently (there are no natural or necessary reasons for the relations within it to be as they are).

Paradigm/Syntagm

Language can be analysed according to two different poles, or **axes**. On the **syntagmatic axis** we have the visible or audible utterance itself, e.g., "the cat sat on the mat" (yes, I know, there's that pesky cat again). On the

paradigmatic axis we have the way that our utterance remains tied to and governed by the system to which it belongs. **Paradigm** comes from a Greek word, *paradeigma*, meaning *example*. An utterance is an example of one of the uncountable possibilities that the system makes possible. I could for instance have said, "the dog sat on the mat." This would have represented a slightly unexpected choice but perfectly legitimate. Try "the log sat on the mat." Notice that my examples relate to each other either according to their signifiers (dog and log) or according to their signifieds (cat and dog). The **system** into which the **paradigmatic axis** dips governs all possible relations between signifiers and signifieds. Poets, we notice, are often inclined to look out for the unlikely ones, for the more obvious your utterance is the more it will sound like a cliché (the moon in June). Roman Jakobson suggested that the functions of language could be understood according to the way the **paradigmatic** and **syntagmatic** axes of language interact. We'll have more on that later. For a graphic reminder watch this:

The cat sat on the mat.
The dog sat on the mat.
The log sat on the mat.

On the **syntagmatic axis** one of these sentences can be **selected**. One of the other two lying dormant on the **paradigmatic axis** can possibly be **substituted** for the first. If we put them all together (as I have) this **projects** aspects of the **paradigmatic axis** onto the **syntagmatic axis.** I thus draw attention to the systematic aspects of language. If you ignore this you might have an image of a cat, a dog and a log all sitting on a mat. Most texts can be read according to the way that systematic aspects are manifested on the syntagmatic axis (which is strictly all we see). Take the following Poem by William Blake.

THE SICK ROSE

O Rose, thou art sick!

The invisible worm,

That flies in the night,

In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy;

And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy.

The principles of selection and substitution allow us to draw up a provisional chart identifying aspects that are systematically linked to the rose and those that are systematically linked to the worm:

The Sick Rose (BY WILLIAM BLAKE 1757–1827)

O rose thou art sick,
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy

Remember that the structuralist is interested as much in what is not evident as what is. The gaps on the rose side can be filled in. Against "invisible" we add "visible." Against "flies" we add "unmoving." Against "howling storm" we add "calm." And against "finding out" we add "being found out." The whole thing adds up to an active yet invisible protagonist getting the blame for the sickness of a visible yet passive (and passionate) victim.

Rose	**Worm**
passive	**active**
visible	invisible
unmoving	that flies
calm	howling storm
thy bed	the night
crimson	dark
joy	love
life	destroy
being discovered	finding out
sick	*well*

Now we have a fairly thorough representation of the systematic aspects of this poem (it is an easy one to do because Blake is a good poet). Notice that we haven't concerned ourselves with the business of **interpreting** the poem. I could have said it is an allegory for syphilis. But what my analysis is teasing out are the conditions that make such allegorising possible. Now look at something weird. The signifier (the visible part of the sign) could be placed on the left hand side with the rose. The signified, on the other hand, could quite easily be placed on the right hand side with the worm (which is invisible). We could then argue that the rose represents the poem "The Sick Rose" and the worm represents the interpretation we give it (thus making it sick). However, notice too that the speaker (the one who says "Oh Rose . . . ") is the one who is really doing all this "finding out" in so far is it is his (why did I gender the speaker?) interpretation of the rose's sickness (it was the invisible worm, I'm sure of it). A vicious cycle is in place. The speaker interprets the sickness of the rose as being caused by an invisible worm, which we interpret as syphilis. Whatever the case the function of the invisible party remains enigmatic (a signified is always invisible--any thing you put in its place will become yet another signifier). What makes all this speculation possible is the **system** of concepts that allows us to think in certain patterns. I interpreted the speaker as male not because I thought that he was Blake (in his typically lyric style). Because the rose is passive and lying in a crimson bed, and because love is in some sense implied, I am making a judgement based upon conventions and filling in yet more missing parts.

Rose	**Worm**
passive	**active**
visible	invisible
female	*male*
rose	*speaker*
signifier	*signified*
poem	*interpretation*

So, fundamentally, the structuralist sees nothing but signifiers and relations between signifiers. It takes a great deal of sophistication to see that the one thing that makes it all possible is always imperceptible. It is the absent signified that would ground the whole process if only it could be made visible without actually becoming just another signifier.

Structural Linguistics and Anthropology

Whatever interpretation we put on (or "find out" in) "The Sick Rose" we can see that it will have been possible owing to analogical structures. Roses become sick because some germ or bug infects them. People become sick when some germ or bug infects them. By extension we might find that societies become sick when some germ or bug (evil intentions) infect them. Our thinking about all kinds of thing is infected too by structures and patterns that we find repeated in lots of different situations. The signified, that is, the meaning, of anything seems to come out of a pre-existing system the makes it possible and governs it. Structural analysis thus aims to "find out" the systems of thought that govern the ways we construct our world and interpret our experience. Structural analysis, however, as it was first set up, aimed to do this while remaining unaffected by social and/or cultural systems themselves. That is, they aimed for a purely scientific perspective that would not be governed or controlled by underlying structures. The most striking results in a field other than linguistics emerges with the work of the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss. He thought that linguistics was the first discipline among the humanities (or social sciences, as some parts of the humanities like to be known) to be established on purely scientific principles.

Please go on to read about Claude Levi-Strauss and Structural Anthropology or you may jump ahead to Roman Jakobson's account of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes at: Aphasia. You may want to follow the following web page links to discover more:

Introduction to Semiotics