Structuralism

Structuralism, generally described, is a twentieth-century intellectual movement associated with linguistic studies in Europe, despite its vast applicability and many adherents. An initial aim of structural linguistics was to investigate—in greater detail than previously—the way language functions as a network of signification. Structuralism’s goal also typically derives from the question whether universal truth can be revealed in this network in ways that define the constitution of thought. Structuralism focused on the whole of language, the “structure” of the totality, over its individual parts or their historical development. The principles of structuralism and its later transformations found widespread application outside of linguistics, particularly in anthropology, sociology, literary studies, semiotics, film, musicology, psychology, and philosophy.

In many ways, Emile Durkheim could be considered the father of structuralism, broadly conceived. Drawing on earlier German sociology, Durkheim brought a distinctly positivist approach to two areas of society—society and language—that would play a crucial role in later structuralism. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)*,* Durkheim emphasized that the study of society must focus only on social facts and their organization, so that one could not take recourse to innate psychology (as in Freud), philosophy of mind (as in Kant), or evolutionary change (as in E. B. Tylor) for explanation. He also argued that the collective consciousness of any group, beginning with its religious categories, was in essence nothing other than its language, or rather, the concepts that were embodied in its language. These concepts achieved a kind of structural stability—they were a product of the group and changed very slowly—that then anchored the identity of the group. The structuralism to follow was by contrast far more nativist, philosophically speaking, and tended to see positive social facts as a consequence of unconscious structures. But Durkheim’s claim that society, religion, and language were in effect versions of the same phenomenon established a significant precedent.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), a compilation produced by his students of Saussure’s lectures a decade earlier, is considered to be the foundational text for the academic formalization of structuralism. Saussure questioned the historical approaches to understanding language that had ruled the field of language study before him. He posited a new understanding of language that emphasized both its fluid, subjective nature in individual speech acts (*parole*) as well as the very slowly changing system of relations that made up a given language (*langue*). Language (*langage*) was both “diachronic,” in that it eventually changed in time through use, and “synchronic,” in that it was governed by a relatively static set of relations at any given time. And Saussure was far more interested in the later problem than in the former. Saussure argued that the relation between the “sound image” (*signifier*) and the conceptual meaning (*significant*) of any word is arbitrary. Each signifier can only be recognized by the subtle differences in sound that distinguish it from other signifiers within a language. These different yet related signifiers thus make up a structure of sound images. Every language is in the end a structure that determines the possibilities of individual speech acts. The spoken elements of this structure are coupled with written symbols. Saussure suggested that his inquiries into language might be applicable more generally to the production of meaning in other social spheres.

Nikolai Sergeyevich Trubetzkoy, one of the founders of the Prague School of linguistics, furthered a structural approach to phonology after WWI. In post-WWII New York, the émigré literary critic Roman Jakobson described Saussure’s and Trubetzkoy’s ideas about language to the émigré anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who imagined a structural approach to anthropology. Lévi-Strauss argued in his memoir *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) that civilization has not changed the essential (mathematical or structural) composition of the human mind, which he admitted was in effect a kind of Kantianism without a subject. In his *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (1950)*,* Lévi-Strauss rather remarkably claimed that, from a structural perspective, language could not have developed over time—it had to have occurred all at once. Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s work reevaluated literature from a socio-linguistic standpoint, in which the novel, for example, could be defined by the interpenetration of different *paroles*. Jacques Lacan’s elaboration of Freud transformed the latter’s ideas about instinctual life into a problem of language, so that the Father’s phallus is in fact the Father’s “non.” In *S/Z* (1970), Roland Barthes maps out the “codes” in a given story in a way that constitutes the structural nature of storytelling itself.

Despite its influence, critics attacked structuralism in the later part of the twentieth century as essentialist and limited. Some, called “poststructuralists,” acknowledged their debt to the movement but focused on the fact that no “structure” could ever be a closed system (see especially Jacques Derrida). Others, notably Noam Chomsky in linguistics, emphasized the nativist or Kantian element in language in ways that Saussure had not, so that language depended much more on innate faculties of mind. But Chomsky also argued that the innate “deep structure” of language allowed it to be “generative,” hence producing an infinite combination of linguistic possibilities out of a discernable structure. Much of Jean Genette’s work has yet to be translated from French but several of his books suggest that a conception of the hypertext, for instance, can elaborate texts as relational objects, informed by a system of references and repetitions with differences, rather than as static, stand-alone objects.

Structuralism as a movement was fairly loose. In the end, diverse ideas and practices would end up carrying the label. But there was a fairly close kinship with a philosophical current of the era—phenomenology—even as the two strains of thought remained quite distinct. What bound them together was that both were versions of a neo-Kantianism that blossomed with the Marburg School at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The Marburg School assumed that Kant’s idea of *a priori* faculties of mind was at heart sound and asserted further that human beings were symbolic animals. This assumption had profound implications in the decades to follow. The idea that human beings were essentially symbol making would be combined with the idea of innate structures of mind, so that even anthropologists critical of structuralism, such as Clifford Geertz, would still exemplify many of its tenets. Husserlian phenomenology would carry these neo-Kantian impulses further. But in both phenomenology and structuralism, the idea of a distinct and self-enclosed structure of meaning-production would emerge. Indeed such a structure was to be understood as completely separate from both human thought and from the human capacity to speak. In the late Heidegger, human beings did not produce language; it was language that produced human beings. There should be no surprise, then, that beginning in the 1950s, certain versions of structuralism flourished in theological seminaries around the world, for the idea of language as a system of meaning production without human origins exhibited clearly theological implications.

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