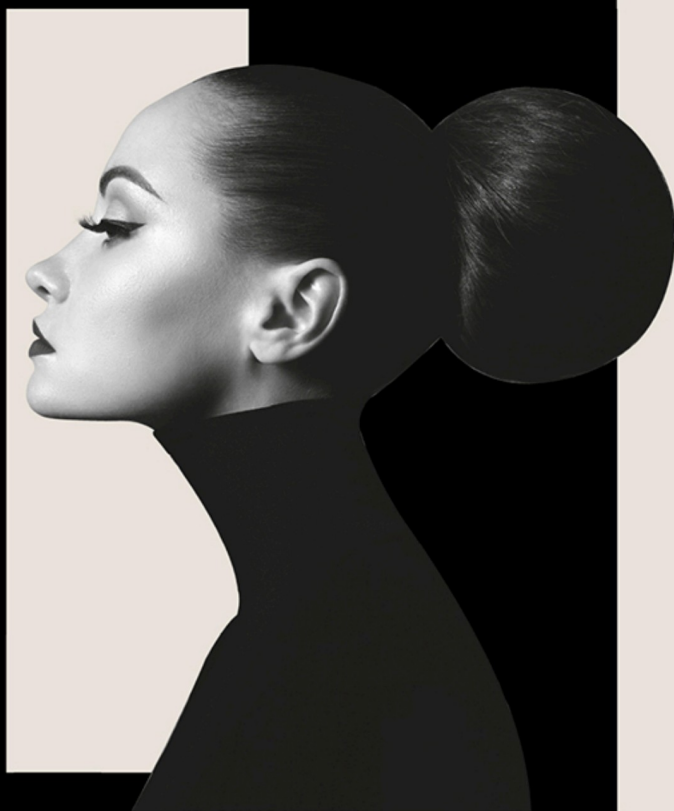


EL SISTEMA DE LA MODA

Y OTROS ESCRITOS



ROLAND BARTHES

PAIDÓS

Roland Barthes

**THE SYSTEM
OF FASHION
AND OTHER WRITINGS**

PAIDÓS

The texts in this volume have been extracted from Roland's Œuvres Complètes Barthes, published in French by Éditions du Seuil, Paris

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(Note sur la recherche des unités signifiantes dans le vêtement de mode) (pp. 856-868);

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1. THE WRITTEN DRESS

A leather belt above the waist, with a rose attached, over a flowing Shetland dress.

I. The three dresses

1.1. Image dress and written dress

I open a fashion magazine: I find two dresses different. The first is the one presented to me photographed or drawn; it is a dress-image. The second is that same dress, but this time described, transformed into language; that photographed dress on the right becomes, on the left, a leather belt *above the waist, with a rose pinned on it, over a flowing Shetland sheepskin dress*; it is a written dress. In principle, both refer to the same reality (the dress the woman was wearing that day), but in contrast, they do not have the same structure,² because they are not made from the same materials and, therefore, those materials do not maintain the same relationships with each other: in one, the materials are shapes, lines, surfaces, colors, and their relationship is spatial, while in the other, they are words, and the relationship, if not logical, is when

1. We will write *Moda* with a capital letter in the sense of *fashion*, so as to postulate maintaining the opposition between Fashion and a fad.

2. It would be better to define only things and not words; but since the term "structure" is the subject of much questioning these days, we will give it here its linguistic meaning: "an autonomous entity with internal dependencies" (L. Hjelmslev, *Essais linguistiques*, Copenhagen, Nordisk Sprog og Kulturforlag, 1959, p. 1).

less syntactical; the first structure is plastic, the second, verbal. Does this mean that each of these structures is completely confused with the general system from which it emanates: the image-dress with the photograph, and the written dress with language? Not at all: fashion photography is not just any photography; it has little to do with press photography or *amateur photography*, for example; it entails specific units and rules; it constitutes, within photographic communication, a particular language, undoubtedly possessing its own vocabulary and syntax, its own "turns of phrase," whether prohibited or recommended.³ Similarly, the structure of the written dress cannot be confused with the structure of the sentence; since if the dress coincided with the discourse, it would be enough to change one term in that discourse to change the identity of the dress described. This is not the case; it makes no difference whether the magazine writes *about summer*, *wears a tux*, or *the tux is ideal for summer*; no substantial element of the information it conveys to its readers is modified: the written dress is based on language, but also resists it, and it is constituted in this interplay. Thus, it is clear that we are dealing with two original structures, albeit derived from more common systems: here, language

1.2. The royal dress

One might think that these two dresses share at least an identity at the level of the real dress they are meant to represent, that the described dress and the photographed dress are identical through that real dress to which both refer. Yes, equivalent,

3. Here we are touching upon the limits of the photographic paradox: being in principle purely analogical, photography can be defined as a *message without a code*; however, so to speak, there is no such thing as a photograph without meaning, which forces us to postulate the existence of a photographic code, which evidently operates only at a secondary level and which we will later call the "level of connotation" (see "Le message photographique" [OC, vol. I, pp. 941-942], and "La rhétorique de l'image" [OC, vol. I, pp. 1419-1429]). The matter is simpler for fashion design, since the *style* of a design refers to an openly cultural code.

but not identical, since just as between the image-dress and the written dress there is a difference of materials and relations and, therefore, a difference of structure, from these two dresses to the real dress there is a transition to other materials and other relations; thus, the real dress establishes a third structure, distinct from the first two even if it serves as a model for them or, more exactly, even if the model that governs the information transmitted by the first two dresses resides in this third structure. We have seen that the units of the image-dress are located at the level of forms and those of the written dress at the level of words; The units of royal dress, for their part, cannot be placed at the level of language, since, as we know, language is not a copy of reality;⁴ nor can we, however great the temptation here, place them at the level of forms, since "seeing" a royal dress, even in privileged conditions of presentation, does not exhaust its reality, much less its structure: in no case do we manage to see more than a part, a personal and circumstantial use, a certain bearing; to analyze royal dress in systematic terms, that is, formally enough to be able to account for all analogous dresses, it would be necessary to go back to the acts that governed its manufacture. In other words: in contrast to the plastic structure of the image-dress and the verbal structure of the written dress, the structure of the real dress can only be technological; the units of this structure can only be the different traces of the acts of manufacture, their completed, materialized ends: a seam is what was sewn, a cut what was cut;⁵ it is a structure that is constituted at the level of matter and its transformations, not of its representations or significations; ethnology could provide relatively simple structural models here.⁶

4. See A. Martinet, *Éléments de linguistique générale*, Paris, Colin, 1960, 1, 6.

5. Provided, of course, that these terms appear in a technological context, and that it concerns, for example, a manufacturing program; otherwise, these technical terms have a different meaning (see below, 1, 5).

6. A. Leroi-Gourhan distinguishes, for example, between straight dresses with parallel edges and open-cut, closed-cut, double-crossed, etc. (*Milieu et techniques*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1945, p. 208).

II. Shifters

1.3. Translation of structures

Thus, for the same object (a dress, a suit, a belt) we have three different structures: a technological one, another iconic, and the third verbal. These three structures do not have the same diffusion regime. The technological structure is presented as a mother tongue whose "languages" would be represented by the clothes worn, inspired by it. The other two structures (iconic and verbal) are also languages, but, if we stick to the magazine, which always claims to be talking about a real dress first, these languages would be derived languages, "translated" from the mother tongue, interposed as diffusion relays between that mother tongue and its "languages" (the clothes worn). The diffusion of Fashion in our society, therefore, depends largely on an activity of *transformation*: there is a transition (at least, according to the order invoked by the magazine) from the technological structure to the iconic and verbal structures. In the case of structures, however, this transition must be discontinuous: the real dress can only be *transformed* into a "representation" by means of certain operators, which we could call *shifters*, since they serve to transfer one structure into another, to pass, if you will, from one code to another code.⁷

1.4. The three shifters

As there are three structures, we will need to have three types of *shifters*: from the real to the image, from the real to the language, and from the image to the language. For the first translation, from the technological dress to the iconic dress, the main *shifter* is the sewing pattern, whose (schematic) drawing analytically reproduces

7. Jakobson reserves the name *shifter* for the elements that act as intermediaries between the code and the message (*Essays in General Linguistics*, Paris, Éd. de Mi-nuit, 1963, chapter 9). Here we broaden the meaning of the term.

The acts of manufacturing the garment; to which should be added the graphic or photographic procedures intended to demonstrate the technical basis of an appearance or "effect": accentuation of a movement, magnification of a detail, angle of capture.

For the second translation, from technological clothing to written clothing, the basic *shifter* is what we might call the sewing instructions or program, which, in general, is clearly distinguished from Fashion literature; its purpose is not to reflect what is made, but what is going to be made. Furthermore, the writing of sewing instructions is different from that of Fashion commentary; very few nouns or adjectives are included in their composition, and instead, verbs and measurements appear:⁸ they constitute, as a *shifter*, a transitory language, halfway between the making and the being of the garment, between its origin and its form, its technique and its meaning. It is tempting to incorporate into this basic *shifter* all those Fashion terms of obviously technological origin (*a seam, a cut*) and consider them as so many transposers of the real into the spoken; this would mean ignoring the fact that the value of a word does not lie in its origin, but in the place it occupies within the linguistic system. placed in a descriptive structure, these terms distance themselves so much from their origin (that,

at a certain point, it was sewn, cut) as well as its purpose (to participate in a combination, to stand out in an ensemble); in them the creative act is no longer felt, they no longer belong to the technological structure and they cannot be considered as *shifts*.⁹ There remains a third translation, which *fers*. allows us to move from the iconic structure to the spoken structure, from the representation of the dress to its description. As the magazine has the advantage of being able to *simultaneously* offer messages originating in those two

8. Example: "Place all the pieces on the lining you are cutting and baste. Baste a 3 cm deep vertical fold on each side, 1 cm from the shoulder edge." This is a transitive language.

9. One might think that the catalog dress is a *shifter*, since it is intended to provoke a real purchase through language shifting. In reality, the catalog dress completely obeys the rules of fashion description: the goal is not so much to describe the dress as to convince people that it is fashionable.

structures—here a photographed dress, there that same dress described—its economy in this respect is remarkable, because it employs elliptical *shifters* : in this case it is no longer a question of the pattern drawings, nor of the texts of the sewing instructions, but simply of the anaphoric elements of the language, supplied either in full degree ("*this*" tailored suit, "*the*" Shetland dress) or in zero degree (rose pinned to the belt).¹⁰ Thus, as they have well-defined translation operators, the three structures are perfectly distinguishable from each other.

III. The terminological rule

1.5. Choosing the oral structure

To study the Fashion dress would mean first studying, separately and exhaustively, each of these three structures, since a structure cannot be defined outside the substantial identity of the units that compose it: one must study either acts, images, or words, but not all three substances at the same time, although the structures they comprise serve, when intermingled, to compose a generic object that for convenience is called the Fashion dress. Each of these structures requires an original analysis and it becomes necessary to choose. In this sense, the study of the "represented" dress (through image and word), that is, the dress that the Fashion magazine deals with, presents an immediate methodological advantage over the analysis of the real dress:¹¹ the "im-

10. According to L. Tesnière (*Éléments de syntaxe structurale*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1959, p. 85), anaphora is a "supplementary semantic connection to which no structural connection corresponds." There is no structural link between the demonstrative "*this*" and the photographed business suit, but rather, so to speak, a pure and simple collision of the two structures.

11. The semantic analysis of royal dress was postulated by Trubetskoy (*Principes de phonologie*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1949, p. 19) and developed by P. Bogatyrev, *Funkcie Kroja na moravskom Slovensku* (The function of habit in Moravian Slovenia), Spisy narodopisneho odburu Matice Slovenskej, Matica Slovenska, 1937, summary in French, pp. 68 ff.

"prisoner" places in the hands of the analyst what human languages deny to the linguist: pure synchrony; the synchrony of Fashion changes suddenly every year, but during that year it remains absolutely stable; if we choose the dress from the magazine, therefore, we will be able to work on a state of Fashion without having to artificially segment it, as the linguist is forced to do with the tangle of messages. The choice remains between the image-dress and the written (or, more accurately, described) dress; once again, from a methodological point of view, what tips the balance here is the structural "purity" of the object:¹² the real dress is weighed down by practical purposes (protection, modesty, adornment); such purposes disappear from the "represented" dress, which neither protects nor covers nor adorns, but at most signifies protection, modesty, or adornment; However, the dress-image retains a value that risks significantly hindering the analysis: its plasticity. The written dress is the only one that has no practical or aesthetic function: it is precisely constituted with a view to a meaning: if the magazine describes a certain dress with words, it is only to convey information whose content is: *Fashion*. Thus, it can be said that the essence of the written dress is fully included in its meaning; it is there that we have the best chance of finding semantic pertinence in all its purity: the written dress is not encumbered by any parasitic function, nor does it involve imprecise temporalities: hence, we have chosen to explore its verbal structure. This does not imply that our intention is to analyze the language of Fashion, without further ado; the nomenclature with which we will work constitutes, of course, a specialized area within the vast territory of the French language, but this area will not be studied from the perspective of language, but solely from the perspective of the structure of the dress to which it tends. The object of our analysis is not a part of a subcode of French, but rather—so to speak—the supercode that

12. These reasons are contingent on the operational method; the underlying reasons, concerning the essentially *spoken* nature of Fashion, were already given in the prologue, pp. 1-14.

We will see,¹³ they are dealing here with an object, the dress, which is already in itself a system of signification.

1.6. Semiology and sociology

Although the choice of oral structure in our case responds to reasons inherent to its object, it finds some support in the field of sociology; firstly, because the dissemination of Fashion in magazines (that is, largely through text) has become massive; in France, half of women usually read publications dedicated, at least in part, to Fashion;¹⁴ Thus, the description of fashionable dress (and no longer its realization) is a social fact, so that even if fashionable dress were purely imaginary (without influence on real dress), it would still be an incontestable element of mass culture, comparable to popular novels, comics, and cinema; secondly, because the structural analysis of written dress can effectively prepare the inventory of real dress that sociology will need the day it intends to study the circuits and rhythms of diffusion of real Fashion. However, in the case at hand, the objectives of sociology and semiology are radically different: the sociology of Fashion (although it has yet to be done)¹⁵ starts from a *model*, initially

13. See below, chapter 3.

14. "Le marché français du vêtement féminin prêt à porter", supplement to *L'industrie du vêtement féminin*, 1953, no. 82, p. 253.

15. From a very early stage—since Spencer—fashion has been a privileged sociological object; first, because it constitutes "a collective phenomenon that immediately reveals to us [...] the social nature of our behavior" (J. Stoetzel, *La Psychologie sociale*, Paris, Flammarion, 1963, p. 245); second, because it presents a dialectic of conformity and change that can only be explained sociologically; and finally, because its diffusion seems to respond to those mediated circuits studied by P. Lazarsfeld and E. Katz (*Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1955). However, the actual diffusion of models has not yet been the subject of comprehensive sociological research.

imagined (the dress conceived by the *fashion group*), whose realization follows (or must follow) through a series of real dresses (problem of the dissemination of models); its objective, therefore, is to systematize behaviors that can be related to social conditions, standards of living, and roles played. Semiotics follows a very different path; it describes an imaginary dress from beginning to end, or, if you prefer, purely intellectually; it does not lead to the recognition of practices, but rather images. The entire sociology of Fashion is oriented toward real dress, and semiotics toward a set of collective representations. Consequently, the choice of the oral structure does not lead us to sociology, but rather toward that *sociology* postulated by Durkheim and Mauss;¹⁶ the function of the description of Fashion is not only to propose a model for the real copy, but also, and above all, to widely disseminate Fashion as a *meaning*.

1.7. The corpus

After choosing the oral structure, what corpus should we work with?¹⁷ So far, we have only discussed fashion magazines; this is because, on the one hand, the descriptions of literature itself, although very important in several great writers (Balzac, Michelet, Proust), are too fragmentary and variable in their historical period to be delimited; and, on the other hand, the descriptions provided by department store catalogs can easily be assimilated to descriptions of fashion; thus, fashion magazines constitute the best corpus. All fashion magazines?

Not at all. Two limitations can be imposed in the case at hand, authorized by the objective pursued, which is to reconstruct a formal system and not to describe a specific Fashion.

16. "Essai sur quelques formes primitives de classification", *Année sociologique*, vol. 6, 1901-1902, pp. 1-72.

17. *Corpus*: "an intangible synchronous compilation of statements that are worked on" (A. Martinet, *Éléments*, p. 37).

The first selection concerns time; if what we are looking for is a structure, it is important above all to work solely on a state of Fashion, that is, on a synchronicity. And, as already stated, the synchronicity of Fashion is determined by Fashion itself: it is the fashion of a season.¹⁸

We have chosen magazines from the 1958-1959 season (June to June) as our subject matter, but the date is obviously of no methodological importance; we could have chosen any other year, because what we wish to describe is not a specific Fashion, but Fashion; as soon as it is compiled, removed from its season, the material (the statement) becomes inscribed in a purely formal system of functions;¹⁹ therefore, no indication will be found here of any contingent Fashion, nor, a fortiori, of any history of Fashion: the aim has not been to deal with any substance of Fashion, but only with the structure of its written signs. Likewise (and this will be the second selection imposed on the corpus), emptying all the magazines of a season would only be of interest if one wished to capture the substantial differences (ideological, aesthetic, or social) between them; From a sociological point of view, this would constitute a major problem, since each magazine refers both to a socially defined public and to a specific corpus of representations, but this differential sociology of publications, publics and ideologies is not the declared objective of this work, which exclusively aims to find the (written) "language" of Fashion.

Consequently, we have examined only two magazines (*Elle* and *Jardin des Modes*), without neglecting to mention other publications (especially *Vogue* and *Echo de la Mode*),²⁰ as well as the pages of the magazines

18. There are seasonal fashions, internal to the season; but here the seasons do not so much constitute a diachronic series as a table of different meanings, internal to the lexicon of a season; it is clear that the synchronic unit is the "line," which has an annual character.

19. Occasionally we have resorted to other synchronicities, when we needed a control or an example of interest.

20. The choice, however, is not arbitrary: *Elle* and *Echo de la Mode* are apparently more popular magazines than *Jardin des Modes* and *Vogue* (see M. Crozier, *Petits fonctionnaires au travail*, CNRS, 1955, 126 pp., appendix).

manuals that some newspapers dedicate to Fashion. For the semiological project, the important thing is to constitute a corpus reasonably saturated with all possible *differences* in clothing symbols; conversely, it does not matter whether such differences are repeated to a greater or lesser extent, since meaning is produced in difference and not in repetition; an unusual Fashion feature has as much structural importance as a frequent Fashion feature, a gardenia as a long skirt; our objective is *to distinguish* units, not count them. 21 From the corpus thus reduced, we have finally eliminated all annotations that could imply purposes other than meaning: advertising claims, even if they take the form of Fashion reports, and technical instructions for manufacturing the dress. We have also not taken into consideration makeup or hairstyles, because these elements entail specific variants that would have overloaded the inventory of the dress itself. 22

1.8. The terminology rule

We will deal here only with the dress described. The prior rule, which determines the constitution of the corpus to be analyzed, is *to consider no material other than the word supplied by the Fashion magazine*. Without a doubt, this considerably restricts the materials for analysis; on the one hand, we eliminate all recourse to additional documents (dictionary definitions, for example) and, on the other, we deprive ourselves of all the richness of the photographs; in short, this means considering the Fashion magazine only

21. Frequency disparity is sociologically important, but not systematically so; it informs us about the "tastes" (obsessions) of a magazine (and therefore of an audience), not about the general structure of the object; the frequency of use of signifying units is only of interest if we wish to compare different magazines with each other (see V. Morin, *Khrouchtchev en France. Analyse de presse*, third-cycle doctoral thesis, Paris, Sorbonne, 1965, communicated manuscript).

22. Fashion statements will be cited without reference, in the style of grammar examples.

margins, where it seems to duplicate the image. But this impoverishment of the material, besides being methodically inevitable, perhaps has its compensation: reducing the dress to its oral version amounts to encountering a new problem, which we could formulate thus: *what happens when an object, real or imagined, is converted into language?* Or, granting the translation circuit that lack of vector already mentioned: ... *when does the encounter between an object and a language occur?* If the dress in Fashion seems a derisory object in the face of such a broad interrogation, consider that the same relationship is established between the world and literature: is literature not, precisely, that institution that seems to convert reality into language and implicate its entire being in this conversion, just as our written dress? Furthermore, is not

IV. The description

1.9. Literary description and description of Fashion

Fashion and literature do, in fact, share a common technique whose purpose is to appear to transform an object into language: *description*. This technique, however, is exercised very differently in both cases. In literature, description relies on a hidden object (whether real or imaginary) that it must endow with existence. In Fashion, the described object is actualized, given separately in its plastic form (if not real, since it is merely a photograph). The functions of description in Fashion, therefore, are limited, but at the same time also original, for the same reason: since it is not obliged to offer the object itself, the information communicated by language, except for pleonasms, is by definition precisely what photography or illustration cannot convey. The importance of written dress confirms beyond a doubt that language has specific functions that the image, regardless of its development in contemporary society, is incapable of assuming. What, then, are the specific functions of language in relation to the image in the specific case of written clothing?

1.10. Immobilization of the levels of perception

The first function of the word is to immobilize perception at a given level of intelligibility (or, as information theorists would say, comprehensibility). We know, in fact, that an image inevitably entails several levels of perception, and that the image reader enjoys a certain freedom to choose the level at which to stop (even if they are not aware of this freedom). The choice is certainly not unlimited: there are *optimal levels*, where the intelligibility of the message is maximum. But from the grain of the paper to the peak of the collar, and from that collar to the dress in its entirety, every glance projected onto the image irrevocably implies a decision; the meaning of an image is never certain.²³ Language suppresses this freedom, but also this uncertainty; it translates a choice and imposes it, it orders the perception of that dress to stop there (that is, neither here nor there), it fixes the level of reading on its fabric, its belt, the accessory that adorns it. Every word thus has a function of authority, insofar as it chooses, so to speak, by delegation of power in place of the eye. The image establishes an infinity of possibilities; the word establishes a single certainty.²⁴

1.11. Knowledge function

The second function of speech is a function of knowledge. Language allows us to transmit information that photography dilutes or eliminates: the color of a fabric (if the photograph is in black and white), the nature of a detail inaccessible to the eye (a *fancy button*, a *knit stitch*), the existence of an element hidden because of the flat nature of the image (the back of a dress); in a way

23. Ombradanne's experience on the perception of the film image is well known (see E. Morin, *Le Cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*, Éd. de Minuit, 1956, p. 115; Spanish translation: *El cine o el hombre imaginario*, Barcelona, Paidós, 2001).

24. That is why all press photographs have captions.

In general, language adds *knowledge to the image*.²⁵ As Fashion is an initiatory phenomenon, the word plays a natural role in it. It has a didactic function: the Fashion text represents, in a certain way, the authoritarian word of someone who knows everything that is hidden behind the confused or incomplete appearance of visible forms; it constitutes a technique of opening up to the invisible, almost comparable, in a secularized form, to the sacred aura of divinatory texts; all the more so because knowledge of Fashion is not gratuitous, but rather, for those who exclude themselves from it, carries with it a sanction: the dishonorable mark of being unfashionable.²⁶ Evidently, this function of knowledge is only possible because the language that supports it constitutes in itself a system of abstraction; Not because the language of fashion intellectualizes dress—in many cases, on the contrary, it helps to explain it much more concretely than photography, restoring to certain notes all the density of a gesture (*wearing a rose*)—*but* because it allows us to handle discrete concepts (*whiteness, fluidity, softness*) and not physically complete objects; the abstraction of language allows us to identify certain functions (in the mathematical sense of the term), it provides dress with a system of functional oppositions (for example, *fantasy/classic*), which the real or photographed dress cannot manifest with the same clarity.²⁷

1.12. Emphasis function

It also happens—and often—that the word seems to duplicate elements of the dress that are perfectly visible in the photograph:

25. From photography to drawing, from drawing to diagram, from diagram to language, there is a progressive investment of knowledge (see J.-P. Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, 247 pp.).

26. See below, 2, 3; 15, 3.

27. With regard to photography, language would play a role quite analogous to that of phonology with respect to phonetics, since the former allows the phenomenon to be identified "as an abstraction extracted from the sound or set of functional characteristics of a sound" (NS Trubetsky quoted by E. Buyssens, "La nature du signe linguistique", *Acta Linguistica*, II, 2, 1941, pp. 82-86).

the large collar, the lack of buttons, the flared skirt line, etc. This happens because the word also has a function of emphasis; the photograph presents a dress without privileging any of its parts, which is consumed as an immediate whole; the commentary, on the other hand, can highlight certain elements of that whole to affirm its value: it is the explicit *note* (*Note: the bias-trimmed neckline*, etc.).²⁸ This emphasis is based, of course, on an intrinsic characteristic of language: its discontinuity; the dress described is a fragmentary dress; it constitutes, with respect to the photograph, the result of a series of choices, of amputations; of this *flowing Shetland dress with a high belt and a pinned rose*, we are told certain parts (the substance, the belt, the decoration) and others are omitted (the sleeves, the collar, the shape, the color), as if the woman dressed in this way were only wearing a rose and a fluidity. It turns out that written dress is not limited by matter but by value; if the magazine tells us that the belt is made of leather, that leather (and not the shape, for example) has absolute value; if it tells us about a rose on a dress, that rose is as important as the dress; a collar, a gather, when *spoken*, becomes a dress with full status, just like a coat. Applied to dress, the order of language sifts the essential from the accessory; but it is a severe order, which condemns the accessory to the nothingness of the nameless.²⁹

This emphasis on language serves two purposes. On the one hand, it allows for the relaunching of the general information provided by photography, when this, like any set of information, tends to wear thin: the more photographed dresses I see, the more the information I receive becomes trivialized; the written notation helps to reinforce the information; furthermore, when it is explicit (*note...*) it does not usually allude to eccentric details, whose informative intensity is already guaranteed by their novelty, but to elements so commonly expressed

28. In fact, every comment by Moda is an implicit *note* ; see below, 3, 9.

29. By antiphrasis, what we call *an accessory* in Fashion is often the essential, since the spoken system's task is precisely to make *almost nothing significant*. *Accessory* is a term derived from the real, economic structure.

subject to the variation of Fashion (collars, trims, pockets)³⁰ that it becomes necessary to recharge the message they contain; Fashion acts in this case like language itself, for which the novelty of a turn of phrase or term always constitutes an emphasis intended to compensate for the wear and tear of its system.³¹ And, on the other hand, the emphasis of language in naming certain clothing features retains a perfect functionality; the description does not aspire to isolate specific elements to accentuate their aesthetic value, but simply to confer analytical intelligibility to the motifs that make a collection of details an organized whole: the description is here an instrument of structuring; it allows, above all, to orient the perception of the image: in itself, a photographed dress does not begin or end anywhere; none of its limits are privileged; it can be contemplated indefinitely or for an instant; It is given a durationless look because it itself lacks a regular itinerary;³² now, that same dress (nothing else is seen), when described, begins with its belt, continues with a rose, and ends in Shetland; the garment itself is barely mentioned. So that, by introducing an organized duration into the representation of the dress in Fashion, the description institutes, so to speak, a protocol of unveiling: the dress is unveiled in a certain order, and that order inevitably implies certain

1.13. Purpose of the description

What purposes? We must be aware that, from a practical point of view, the description of a fashion dress is of no use.

30. These are the types of clothing that best lend themselves to variation significant (see below, 12, 7).

31. See A. Martinet, *Éléments*, 6, 17.

32. An unreliable experiment, carried out in the United States by a clothing firm (cited by A. Rothstein, *Photo-Journalism*, New York, New York Photographic Book Publishing Co, 1956, pp. 85 and 89), has nevertheless attempted to reconstruct the path of the gaze that "reads" the representation of a human silhouette: the privileged reading area, where the gaze would most frequently be focused, would be the neck, in anatomical terms, and therefore in terms of clothing: it is also true that the firm in question sold shirts.

not at all; one cannot make a dress by relying solely on its description. Fashionable. The purpose of a sewing instruction is transitive: it is to make something; that of a written dress seems purely reflexive: the dress seems *to speak to itself*, to refer to itself, enclosed in a kind of tautology. The functions of description, whether of fixation, exploration, or emphasis, never aspire to anything other than to manifest a certain being of the Fashionable dress, and this being can only coincide with Fashion itself; it is true that the dress-image can *be Fashionable* (indeed, it is by definition),³³ but it cannot directly *be Fashion*: its materiality, its very totality, its evidence, if I may say so, make the Fashion it represents an attribute and not a being; *this* dress, which is represented to me (and not described), can perfectly well be other things apart from a Fashionable dress; it can be warm, extravagant, pleasant, modest, protective, etc., *before* being Fashionable; On the contrary, that same dress, described, can only be Fashion itself; no function, no accident disturbs the evident nature of its being, since functions and accidents, if mentioned at all, derive from a declared intention of Fashion.³⁴ In short, the very purpose of description is to orient the immediate and diffuse knowledge of the dress-image towards a mediate and specific knowledge of Fashion. Here the notable difference, of an anthropological order, which opposes looking and reading resurfaces: the dress-image is looked at, the described dress is read, and probably these two uses correspond to two distinct audiences; the image dispenses with the purchase, replaces it; one can become intoxicated with images, identify oneself dreamily with the mannequin and, in real terms, follow Fashion only by purchasing a few *boutique accessories*; the word, on the contrary, strips the dress of all corporeal actuality; being nothing more than a system of impersonal objects

33. The opposition between a noun (*Fashion*) and an adjective (*fashionable*) would better reflect the opposition between being and attribute; but French has no adjective corresponding to the noun "*Fashion*."

34. The functionalization of the Fashion dress (*a ball gown*) is a phenomenon of connotation; it is therefore entirely part of the Fashion system (see below, 19, II).

Written encourages purchase. The image evokes fascination, the word, an appropriation; the image is complete, it is a saturated system; the word is fragmentary, it is a disposable system: together, the second serves to *disappoint* the first.

1.14. Language and Speech, Dress and Clothing

The relationship between dress-image and will be better understood written dress, between the represented object and the described object, if we refer to a conceptual opposition that has been classic today since Saussure formulated it:³⁵ that of language and speech. *Language* is an institution, an abstract body of restrictions; *speech* is the momentary part of that institution that the individual takes and updates for his communicative needs; language emanates from the mass of words emitted and, nevertheless, all speech is taken, in turn, from language: this dialectic is, in history, that of structure and event and, in communication theory, that of code and message.³⁶ Now, with respect to the dress-image, the written dress possesses a structural purity almost equivalent to that of language with respect to speech: the description is based, necessarily and sufficiently, on the manifestation of the institutional restrictions that make *this* dress, represented here, fashionable; It is not affected in any way by how a specific individual wears the dress, even if it is "institutional," like the *cover girl*.³⁷ This is an important difference, and we could agree to call, whenever necessary, the structural, *institutional* form of dress (the one that corresponds to language) and that same updated, individualized, worn form (the one that corresponds to speech) "*costume* ." Of course, the dress described is not entirely general; it is still

35. F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot, 4th ed., 1949, Chapter III (Castilian translation: *Course in General Linguistics*, Madrid, Alianza, 1998).

36. A. Martinet, *Éléments*, 1, 18. The identity between code and language, between message and word, has been discussed by P. Guiraud, "La mécanique de l'analyse quantitative en linguistique", in *Etudes de linguistique appliquée*, no. 2, Didier, 1963, p. 37.

37. On the *cover-girl*, see below, 18, 11.

chosen; it is, if you will, an example of grammar, not grammar itself; but at least, to put it in the language of information, it carries no *noise*, that is, nothing that disturbs the pure meaning it conveys: it is *meaning*, in its entirety: the description is speech without noise. This opposition, however, is only valid at the level of the clothing system; since, at the level of the linguistic system, it is obvious that the description itself is based on a particular speech (that of *this* Fashion magazine, on *this* page); it is, if you will, an abstract dress entrusted to a concrete speech; the written dress is an institution (or "language") at the level of the dress, at the same time as an act ("speech") at the level of language. This paradoxical status is important: it will govern the entire structural analysis of the written dress.