

“Myth and kinship as systems of symbolic representation in the perspective of Claude Lévi-Strauss.”

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Abstract : This research paper examines the concept of semiotics as developed in modern thought, with particular reference to Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. It begins by outlining the origin and development of semiotics, emphasizing its foundation as the study of signs and sign-systems within social and cultural contexts. The paper further explores Saussure’s theoretical framework, which reconceptualizes language as a structured system and establishes the basis for semiotic analysis. Building upon this foundation, the study analyzes Lévi-Strauss’s structural approach to myth and kinship, highlighting how these function as systems of signification governed by underlying structures. Special attention is given to the concepts of bricolage and engineering, illustrating the relationship between traditional and scientific modes of knowledge. The paper argues that meaning is not fixed but is produced through relational structures and cultural contexts. Thus, semiotics emerges as a significant interdisciplinary approach for understanding human behaviour, communication, and cultural practices.

Keywords : Semiotics, Sign-System, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Myth, Kinship, Bricolage, Engineering, Structuralism, Signification

Introduction: In modern thought, the study of signs and sign-systems occupies a very important place. The fundamental assumption of this study is that a large part of human behaviour operates through systems of signs and that the processes of signification and communication are deeply connected with human life. That is, the study of signs can be understood through the forms and structures of communication and through the processes of signification. This approach assumes that human beings express meaning through systems of signs, and these signs operate within social and cultural contexts. Signs function not only in language but also in myths, rituals, customs, kinship systems and other cultural practices. Thus, sign-systems are essential for understanding how meaning is produced and communicated in society. In this way, the structural approach studies sign-systems by examining their internal relations and patterns. It emphasizes that meaning does not exist in isolation but is generated through relationships within a system. Therefore, the study of signification involves understanding both structure and context.

Origin and Development of Semiotics: The origin of the study of signification can be traced back to ancient times. However, the systematic development of sign-theory began much later. The roots of this study can be found in the philosophical traditions of around 300 BCE, especially in the works of the Stoics. After the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Skeptics also contributed to the development of ideas related to signification. Later, thinkers like Saint Augustine further developed these ideas. In the modern period, scholars such as J. Wilkins (1661) and Dalgarno (1661) also contributed significantly to the study of signs and sign-systems.

After these initial efforts, in the twentieth century, two scholars—C. S. Peirce (1839- 1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure(1857- 1913)made significant contributions to the establishment of semiotics. These thinkers, while

developing the semiotic method of study in their respective fields, attempted to establish its principles and methodology. Structural linguistics originates with Ferdinand de Saussure. Whereas traditional linguistics emphasized the ‘word’ as a grammatical unit, Saussure reconceptualized language as a structured system and sought to analyze it within social and psychological frameworks. At the beginning of the twentieth century, his renowned work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) established the foundational basis of semiotics. In this text, he systematically articulated, for the first time, the theoretical framework, scope, as well as the defining features and limitations of the semiotic method of analysis. According to him:

“A science may be conceived that examines the life of signs within a social context. Since it is a part of social psychology, it is also a part of general psychology. This approach may be identified as the semiotic method of analysis. The objective of this method is to investigate the principles governing the formation of signs and the laws that regulate their functioning. Such a science has not yet come into existence, and it cannot be said when it will come, but it will certainly become established..... Since linguistics constitutes a part of semiotics, the laws of semiotics will be equally applicable to it, enabling it to analyze broader human phenomena.”¹

In this statement of Saussure, there exists the possibility of the development of such a semiotic method of study. Claude Lévi-Strauss extends this concept of Saussure and analyzes it in the form of myth and the system of kinship relations. Here, I will conduct my study in the perspective of Lévi-Strauss’s theory of myth and kinship as systems of symbolic exchange.

Structural Analysis of Myth and Kinship in Lévi-Strauss: Claude Lévi-Strauss was a prominent structural anthropologist. He integrated anthropology with structural linguistics and analyzed anthropological elements and contexts as processes of signification. According to him, language, religion, culture, and kinship systems are understood as interrelated and complex processes because the underlying structure of these practices is analogous to that of language. As a result, instead of isolating these practices from one another, we can understand them better in relation to each other. According to Lévi-Strauss, this method can be established as structural anthropology.

From the perspective of structural linguistics, it is believed that “the nature of culture is a reflection of the structure of language, and all the elements that construct language and culture are bound within interrelated processes. In culture, just like in language, logical relations, oppositions, and correlations are dynamic. From this theoretical perspective, it is established that language forms the basis of all those complex structures that provide existence to diverse cultural structures.”²

In other words, the study of structural linguistics includes various types of communication systems in society, which operate within the broader process of communication through underlying unconscious structures.

The scholar of “structural linguistics, N. S. Trubetzkoy, presents four principles:

1. Within structural linguistics, the function of linguistics began with the analysis of the conscious aspects of linguistic behavior.
2. Instead of studying these elements independently and in isolation, they are analyzed according to the relationships among them.
3. Structural linguistics also provides knowledge about their conceptual framework. In the world of languages, sounds are not merely pronounced; rather, phonemes are always part of a system. Undoubtedly, these phonemic systems and their structures appear to explain this organization.
4. The aim of structural linguistics is to discover those universal rules that are identified through deductive methods.”³

Lévi-Strauss is the main exponent of structural anthropological theory. According to him, its foundation lies in those social and mental processes that are presented not merely through the external forms of cultural institutions, but through their underlying relationships. “In his detailed exposition, he discusses Mauss’s concept of “total science” and analyzes it from the synchronic to the diachronic, from the individual to culture, from physiology to psychology, and from the external analysis of institutions to inner subjective experiences.”⁴

Structuralist anthropologists believe that, “the basis of all anthropological research lies not only in the external form of actual society and systems, but also includes the dynamic relationships among its institutions. It includes the study of relationships within these institutions, the connections between customs and social systems, the relationships between individuals and groups, and the relationships between one group and other groups.”⁵

While explaining anthropology as the study of culture and civilization, the scholar Tylor states that it is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other elements, and which an individual acquires as a member of society, just as he acquires other abilities and habits.

Within structural anthropology, the comparative evaluation of patterns of human behavior, institutions, customs, and related aspects of social institutions began to take place. With its help, we can understand the fundamental similarities among the forms of social life. Among them are many fields such as exchange systems, kinship systems, language, art, and law, which may appear different on the surface, but similarities can be observed in their underlying structures. According to structural anthropologists, “the patterns of thought and behavior of an individual are shaped, at a given time and place, by the laws of the universe, which form his unconscious processes and subsequently manifest themselves in specific behavior.”⁶

Cashandri, Court and Grani, while defining society and culture, named it a Copernican Revolution. By including the definition of society and the theory of communication, he identified its three levels:

1. Kinship system
2. Rules of marriage
3. Tradition of property ownership

From his perspective, “within kinship systems, for the purpose of protecting one’s property or wealth, a group exchanges women with other powerful groups through marriage. Through this process, kinship relations between different groups are continuously maintained. According to them, the institution of marriage functions primarily as a mechanism for preserving property within the framework of economic regulations.”⁷

Thus, from Radcliffe-Brown’s perspective, “a simple structure of mother, father, and children does not emerge solely from the biological family, as it attains meaning only through marital ties.”⁸

In anthropology, through the patterns and behaviors of marriage, “the kinship system functions as a communication process like language, establishing specific types of communication between individuals and groups.”⁹

The central theory of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss explains kinship systems; “according to his perspective, like phonemes, kinship consists of elements that carry meaning. Just as phonemes function within a system to convey meaning, the kinship system, like the system of phonemes, is constructed through ideas that arise at the level of the unconscious. As a result, the re-establishment of the kinship system and its patterns, including marriage rituals, are equally regulated through relations between different groups. Wherever socio-cultural diversity is found in different regions of the world, the kinship system also manifests itself, like linguistics, through observable behaviors in terms of functions and oppositions.”¹⁰

In other words, within the domain of human knowledge, the organization of social structure is arranged from the individual to the level of groups. “Institutions such as marriage, kinship systems, and customs, along with processes of social integration and coordination, are sustained through the stability of different types of social groups.”¹¹

From a linguistic perspective of analysis, even in the kinship system, the smallest unit is marriage, on the basis of which the entire kinship structure is built. Within kinship systems, marriage occupies a position analogous to phonemes in linguistics; just as phonemes function within a structured system to generate meaning, marriage similarly operates within a system to produce the structures of kinship relations.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in addition to kinship systems, examined the formation of myths and their modes of communication. He argued that myths are not devoid of meaning; rather, they constitute a richly constructed world of human knowledge. Therefore, myth-making may be understood as an expression of early human cognition.

In most cases, myths are explained through incomplete approaches; in fact, to understand the true nature of myth, we rely on selecting certain propositions grounded in logic. “Myth exhibits a dual structure encompassing both historical and non-historical dimensions. It is argued that the interpretation of myths pertains to the realm of parole, whereas their existence is rooted in the domain of langue. Consequently, although myths are positioned within the field of linguistics, they remain distinct owing to their unique structural nature.”¹²

Claude Lévi-Strauss regards myths as possessing a structure analogous to language and suggests that their scientific analysis should be conducted through linguistic models. He argues that the underlying structures of language reside in the human unconscious. As a consequence of this process, the occurrence of any event is understood in terms of determinism; in this context, the argument of the shaman may be examined. “The shaman narrates a myth to an ailing woman, who accepts all its mythical elements without questioning their existence. The shaman interprets this in terms of symbolic signs; in linguistic terms, this relates to the relationship between sign and meaning. The shaman utilizes the language of the ailing woman, through which the unarticulated emotions of her unconscious are expressed. Accordingly, in the shaman’s view, each event within the myth is meaningful, and at the same time, it is integrated into a unified whole.”¹³

Similar to kinship systems, mythic systems are closely linked to linguistic structures. Just as phonemes combine to form distinct patterns in language, mythemes generate diverse patterns that produce different myths. The meaning of mythemes, like that of phonemes, is context-specific. Claude Lévi-Strauss, through his analysis of American myths, proposed an effective methodological framework for identifying the underlying system of myths. In this way, Claude Lévi-Strauss, by identifying cultural signs corresponding to linguistic signs and by applying a semiotic method of analysis to cultural productions, endowed this analytical model with distinctive significance and broader scope. While epistemology had traditionally been regarded as a significant framework for understanding linguistic and philosophical problems, Claude Lévi-Strauss extended its application to engage with the problems within the discipline of anthropology.

In his work *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss reinterpreted modern and so-called primitive societies by situating them within new contexts and assigning them new meanings. In this work, the notion that tribal societies are deficient in the production and transmission of knowledge, whereas modern developed societies are highly advanced in this respect, is rejected as unfounded. He argues that the knowledge systems of early societies were equally comprehensive and coherent in responding to their needs and environmental challenges as contemporary scientific knowledge. Accordingly, he suggests that the pursuit of objective knowledge remains an underexplored domain, within which early humans have often been overlooked. Even where they exhibited an interest in such

phenomena comparable to that of modern science, they employed similar intellectual efforts and observational methods.

The basic premise of science is that nature possesses an inherent order. Theoretical science seeks to systematize reality, and if systematics is understood as the process of organizing, it may itself be regarded as synonymous with theoretical science. This suggests that both systematics and science share a common objective: the pursuit of order. Therefore, a tribal thinker, Fletcher, presents the view that all sacred things should have their definite place. All sacred entities are organized within a particular system and function to sustain the cosmic order to which they belong within the structure of the universe. This means that the knowledge systems and linguistic structures of tribal societies, through their symbols and methods, seek to discover an order in the universe in the same way that modern scientific explanations constantly strive to find a system or order. Thus, the knowledge systems and linguistic structures of tribal societies cannot be regarded as incomplete, inadequate, or irrational; rather, like contemporary knowledge systems, they have consistently generated meaningful intellectual engagement with the issues and concerns of their time.

In the view of Claude Lévi-Strauss, no civilization or social group, at any historical stage, can be regarded as ignorant, incomplete, underdeveloped, or uncivilized. Instead, they develop distinct symbolic structures that are shaped in accordance with the material conditions and epistemological requirements of their respective historical contexts. Moreover, he accords greater significance to the tribal mind, as it is credited with uncovering the foundational and original principles underlying human language and systems of knowledge. Conversely, modern scientific knowledge systems, through the reconfiguration of those foundational principles, are generating new conceptual frameworks and advanced technological innovations. Claude Lévi-Strauss used the terms ‘bricoleur’ and ‘engineering’ respectively for these two systems.

The bricoleur and the engineer exist simultaneously in a relationship of both similarity and difference. The similarity between them is that they construct such discourses that fulfill the epistemological and practical needs of their time. The key inference is that the bricoleur selects and employs facts and references without any prior assumptions, whereas the engineer simultaneously seeks an intermediary (interlocutor)—a structured domain within which his tools, epistemological framework, and power remain operative up to a given point in time. Which he has to resolve at that particular time; therefore, he always raises universal questions and presents his own one-sided answers to them. In contrast, the bricoleur remains oriented toward that dimension of the universe which lies beyond human subjectivity; his relation to the cosmos is not one of questioning, but of seeking consonance with its vastness. Thus, Lévi-Strauss argues that whereas the fundamental impulse of engineering lies in mastering or controlling the processes of the universe, that of the bricoleur is oriented toward establishing consonance with it. In conclusion, whereas the engineer positions himself outside the processes of the universe, the bricoleur actively conceives of himself as an integral part of it.

Viewed from this perspective, the mythical world cannot be reduced to a domain of superstitions or anti-scientific notions; instead, it constitutes an epistemological formation informed by the intellectual operations of the bricoleur, which, through the structural logic of myth, articulates universal propositions grounded in a scientific rationale. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that, owing to their association with imaginative constructs, their linguistic expressions must be interpreted as symbolic structures rather than as straightforward literal statements. For this reason, the processes of meaning-construction and communication in myth cannot be interpreted in the same manner as linguistic systems; instead of being fixed and univocal, they operate as dynamic processes characterized by multiplicity of meanings and contextual variability.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it may be asserted that within Lévi-Strauss's anthropological framework, myths, customs, beliefs, religious rituals, artistic forms, systems of exchange, kinship structures, and diverse modes of social behavior constitute forms of bricoleur-like constructions. These may be interpreted as processes of 'engineering' the social, cosmological, and epistemological ideas specific to their respective historical contexts. Thus, the contemporary engineer cannot be regarded as inherently more knowledgeable or proficient than the primitive bricoleur; instead, he rearticulates their fundamental dispositions and capacities within a new scientific framework by means of technical and epistemological structuring. It is evident that although these two processes share commonalities in purpose and inquiry, they diverge significantly in terms of method and perspective. In such a context, it would be untenable to privilege one as exclusively valid and true, to construct epistemological and technical frameworks solely upon it, and to relegate the other to a position of incompleteness, inadequacy, or ignorance. Thus, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss seeks to develop a science of the operations of knowledge systems that can investigate the relationship of affinity and equilibrium between the processes of bricolage and engineering.

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