CHAPTER- IV

THE SIGN SYSTEM: STRUCTURALISM AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

In this chapter, focus is laid on Sign System and Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. The credit of bringing Structuralism to prominence is with this Swiss linguist.

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4.0. Preliminaries:

Saussure, Ferdinand de (1857-1913) Swiss linguist generally considered the father of structural linguistics, and of structuralism in its wider application. Saussure locates the study of linguistics in the synchronic relationships of langue rather than parole: the structural and common aspects of language responsible for its use as a medium of communication. Signs, which for Saussure are combinations of signifier and signified (something like a concept or element of thought, rather than a thing that is represented), are the product of ‘systems of differences’: a sign has the value that it does in virtue of its place in a network of other possible choices. In his famous phrase, ‘there are only differences’. A word has its place in a sentence or other stretch of discourse (its ‘syntagmatic’ relations) but also its ‘associative’ relations with other words of its family (the terms that
might be listed as partial substitutes in a thesaurus, for example). Saussure's work puts in its own vocabulary many of the distinctions of analytical semantic theory: see competence/performance, Sinn/Bedeutung, holism. His lectures were collected and published in 1916 as the Cours de linguistique générale (trs. as Course in General Linguistics, 1959).

His application of science to his examination of the nature of language has had impacts on a wide range of areas related to linguistics, including contemporary literary theory; deconstructionism (a theory of literary criticism that asserts that words can only refer to other words and that tries to show how statements about any words subvert their own meaning); and structuralism (a method of analyzing a word by contrasting its basic structures in a system of binary opposition).

De Saussure is regarded, by many, as the creator of the modern theory of structuralism, to which his langue and parole ideas are integral. He believed that a word's meaning is based less on the object it refers to and more on its structure. In simpler terms, he suggested that when a person chooses a word, he does so in the context of having had the chance to choose other words. This adds another dimension to the chosen word's meaning, since humans instinctively base a word's meaning on its difference from the other words not chosen. De Saussure's theories on this subject, which flew in the face of the positivist research method of his day, laid the foundations for the structuralist schools in both social theory and linguistics.

4.1. What is sign system?

The sign System:

Saussurean linguistics points to an analogous state of affairs within the world of language. He argued that words only work because they are somehow tied into the real world. Indeed, they operate in a separate sphere. Words do not depend on reality for their meaning-nor do they depend on intention of author or speaker. They are a self-sufficient system and once uttered they have meaning because of their place in the system and not because of what the speaker meant.
The author and reality then are not taken into account in structuralist interpretations.

Indeed, Structuralists are not much concerned with meaning either—they are more concerned with the signifier than the signified. And so, they don’t care much about the content—they are interested in the formal features that allow meaning to come about—not in the meaning/content itself.

The most elementary ideas of Saussurean linguistics are summarised here:

There is no necessary connection between words and the thing. For example, the word ‘dong’ is an arbitrary label—this can be proved by simply looking at other languages where other words like ‘chien’ are used. We might as well use ‘woofer’ or ‘furry’ for ‘dog’—it doesn’t really matter.

To reflect this, Saussure came up with this system to explain meaning. The sign is divided into two elements: “the signifier and signified”. The signifier is the material aspect of the sign—the word or paper, the spoken word, or a traffic sign or a supermarket (signs are not only linguistic). The signified is the concept that result in your mind—the idea of a dog, or a chair, or liberty or whatever.

Diagrammatically it is represented this way:

\[ \text{Sign} = (\text{signifier}/ \text{signified}) \]

A sign is composed of two elements: a red light and the idea STOP! For example; But there is no necessary connection between the two — it is purely conventional. You can imagine a society where the red light means GO AS FAST YOU CAN! Even in one society or sign system one signifier may mean many things; a red light may mean ‘brothels are near’. This last example is important, for it illustrates one of the points of structuralism; that meaning is never ‘inside’ the signifier—whatever it is light, or a poem, or a word. The meaning is dependent on context—a red light hanging over a road is likely to be a stop sign;
outside a house in a well-known area, it will probably signal that this is a house of prostitution. Saussure argued this out in a way that sounds odd, initially at least. He argued that things have meaning because of what they are not. The letter ‘c’ works because it is not any of the other letters in the alphabet. The word ‘dog’ works as a signifier because it is not the word ‘bog’, hog, fog or ‘academic’. This sounds a little funny—that the word ‘dog’ works because it is not the word ‘toaster’—but you may see his point—that meaning is defined by what the sign is not.

The two most important implications of this theory are that meaning is not inside something, but is the product of a set of relationships, often negatively defined and what we do not have direct access through language to reality itself. However, we try to access reality; it is always through language or other sign systems. You think through language—even attempting to appreciate a garden, for example, you will be thinking through words such as ‘beautiful’ or ‘picturesque’—connection without the mediation of language is not possible. Reality, the ‘referent’ in this system is there, but culture can only access through our sign systems.

Thus, according to Saussure's structural linguistics, each sign in the system of signs, which makes up a language gets, it’s meaning only because of its difference from every other sign. The word "pear" has no meaning in itself or in the intention of the speaker, but only due to the fact that it differs from other possible graphic images such as p-e-e-r, p-e-a-k, f-e-a-r, b-e-a-r, etc. In other words, it doesn't matter how the form of the signifier varies, as long as it is different from all the other signifiers in the system (langue). To the structuralist, meaning arises from the functional differences between the elements (signs) within the system (langue).

**Saussure’s Anatomy of Language: The Linguistic Sign:**

The basic element of language is the word, or linguistic sign. But what is a word? Shakespeare put it wisely, “a rose by any other name would smell as
sweet.” At face value, a word is name of some idea. Saussure went further. He recognized that this name had a voiced sound <roz>, when uttered, that was invariant across speakers. He postulated that the name had to be internalised as an “auditory image.” Just like you can imagine an image of a rose, likewise you can imagine the sound <roz> without actually saying it. Notice, there are sounds that we can say that are not words. For example, <rof> is not a word in any language. The realization that the name was mental, sound-image gave Saussure the half of the linguistic sign. He postulated that every Linguistic sign must be a union of a Sound-Image and an Idea or Concept. The table below illustrates his view:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNIFIED</th>
<th>CONCEPT</th>
<th>SIGNIFIER</th>
<th>SOUND IMAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ROSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This becomes the basic model of the sign in structuralist approach to signifying phenomena. The signifier is the vehicle for meaning and the signified is its cargo.

4.2. Structuralism: Saussure and Sign System:

The two central dichotomies that capture best the fundamental changes of direction in the development of 20th century linguistics as opposed to linguistics in the 19th century are synchrony – diachrony and language system – language use. The 19th century was the century of historical linguistics. Linguistic research was characterized by the search for regularities and laws in language change, the search for genetic links between languages (key words: family trees, Indo-European), and the reconstruction of older language periods and languages in historical-comparative linguistics (or: comparative philology) by means of comparing with each other younger language periods and languages for which written data material was available.
The 20th century, on the other hand, is the century of synchrony. This is certainly the most important aspect of the paradigm shift, which affected linguistics in the decades after 1900, a paradigm shift which is inseparably linked to the name of Ferdinand de Saussure, the famous Swiss linguist who taught at the University of Geneva a century ago.

Saussure is generally considered to be the founder of modern linguistics, more precisely the founder of structuralism, the ‘bible’ of which is the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). The *Cours* offers an introduction to general linguistics based on Saussure’s lecture materials and the lecture notes taken by his disciples and was not published until after his death (in 1913). In this book the reader will find thorough discussions of numerous ideas concerning a new approach to the study of language only some of which are found in the works of linguists at the end of the 19th century (e.g. in the writings of the German Georg von der Gabelentz and, above all, those of William Dwight Whitney, the eminent American linguist of the late 19th century).

Besides the all-important separation of synchrony and diachrony, and the call for the primacy of synchrony, this set of ideas includes, above all, the call for a kind of linguistics which solely concentrates on language as a closed system in which all elements are linked to one another, and in which the value (*valeur*) of every single element is defined by its place in the system alone. For example, the Simple Past in English (*she worked*) has a different status than its counterpart in German, the preterite (*Präteritum*), because it contrasts both with the Past Progressive (*she was working*) and the Present Perfect (*she has worked*). German grammar does not only lack a counterpart of the English progressive form; *Präteritum* (*sie arbeitete*) and *Perfekt* (*sie hat gearbeitet*) are in most contexts interchangeable without a difference in meaning. The different status of Simple Past and *Präteritum* within the grammars of English and German, respectively, thus partly results from the value of the Present Perfect in the English tense system in contrast to the value of the *Perfekt* in the German tense system. The
view that every linguistic sign is part of the system and has no existence outside of it is an important reason for the structuralist position that every language system needs to be considered by itself.

According to Saussure, linguistics should solely be concerned with the systematic regularities of the abstract language system that is shared by all members of a speech community (langue), and not with its concrete use by the individual (parole). What stands at the centre of structuralist linguistics is the determination and description of the individual elements of this system (on all structural levels: sounds, words and their components, sentences and their constituents), and the relationships existing between them on each of these levels. Within any system, there are two basic types of relationships between linguistic units, which have to be distinguished: relationships of choice or interchangeability on the vertical axis (paradigmatic relationships), and relationships of “chain” or combination on the horizontal axis (syntagmatic relationships). A paradigmatic relationship holds between the initial sounds of ban, can, Dan, fan, tan and van, whereas the relationship between any of these sounds and the two following sounds is a syntagmatic one.

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>man</th>
<th>Saw</th>
<th>my</th>
<th>horse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>loved</td>
<td>your</td>
<td>cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This</td>
<td>visitor</td>
<td>hit</td>
<td>our</td>
<td>baby</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Illustrates paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships on the sentence level: a choice relationship holds among the words within any of the braced brackets, a chain relationship between the words in the immediately neighbouring brackets. These relationships are found on all structural levels of language (cf. figure 1):
Saussure’s model of the linguistic sign, i.e. his model of what constitutes the nature of words (cf. figure 2), is another of his groundbreaking contributions to modern linguistics. The linguistic sign consists of two parts which are as inseparably linked to one another as the two sides of a sheet of paper: a sound or, typically, sound sequence (*signifier; signifiant*) on the level of expression and a concept (*signified; signifié*) on the level of meaning. Two kinds of relations hold between *signifié* and *signifiant*: on the one hand a reciprocal relationship, which means that the sound sequence automatically evokes the concept linked to it and vice versa (therefore the arrows in figure 2). On the other hand – and much more important still – there is a relationship of arbitrariness and conventionality. Which *signifiant* is used for which *signifié* is solely based on an ‘agreement’, a kind of ‘contract’, as it were, between the members of a speech community; neither side of the linguistic sign has any special feature that would inevitably require the assignment of a particular signifier to a particular signified, or vice versa. That is why different languages have completely different expressions – all equally appropriate or inappropriate – for the same concept (for FLOWER just take /flauə(r)/ in English or /bluːma/ in German), and why, conversely, the same sound image can refer to completely different concepts in different languages (consider /gifl/, which denotes the concept PRESENT in English as opposed to TOXIC SUBSTANCE in German).

**Figure 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object of study</th>
<th>Branches of Linguistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>Phonetics/phonology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Morphology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrase, Sentence</td>
<td>Syntax</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The importance of structuralist thinking:

The importance of structuralist thinking, as we find it in Saussure’s *Cours*, and, generally, in linguistics of the 1920s until the 1950s is largely undisputed in present day linguistics, just think of American structuralism à la Leonard Bloomfield, which is even more rigidly empirical and form-orientated than Saussure’s vision of structuralism was, or of the Prague School of functionalism, which was primarily interested in the function(s) of language and linguistic elements. The crucial difference, however, is that ever since the 1960s (starting, above all, in sociolinguistics) and especially since the 1970s (with the advent of pragmatics) and 1980s (especially due to cognitive linguistics), linguistics has significantly gone beyond the description of a linguistic system and the search for purely system inherent explanations for linguistic phenomena. Rather, it has given priority to social, functional, and cognitive aspects, as well as aspects of language (use) grounded in communicative behaviour. Typically, these new approaches do not compete, but rather complement each other very well. What all these ‘post-structuralist’ approaches have in common is that the most important Saussurean dichotomies are increasingly critically reflected, and that linguists start to emancipate, or already have emancipated, themselves from these dichotomies. In the course of the renewed interest in processes of language change, for example, the strict separation between synchrony and diachrony has largely been abandoned (which makes sense especially if we consider, for example, the immediate link between language variation and language change). It is furthermore no longer important to give priority to the system and to reduce linguistics to the study of the formal aspects, i.e. the structure, of language, which was typical of 20th century linguistics until the 1960s. Since then, research into language use (i.e. *parole* or *performance*) as depending on the individual speaker, the relevant communicative situation, and the relevant communicative goal(s) has gained significantly in importance. Therefore, at the turn of the 21st century, sociolinguistics and pragmatics also need to be counted among the disciplines constituting the core of
linguistics. A third example of the emancipation from Saussure concerns his sign model, more precisely the central role he attributes to arbitrariness. Especially since the 1980s, it is increasingly acknowledged that, both on the level of words and grammar, iconicity plays a bigger role than is traditionally assumed in Saussurean structuralism. Fourth, there is general tendency in current linguistics that the idea of dichotomies (e.g. synchrony – diachrony, language system – language use, vocabulary – grammar, written – spoken language) and sharp category boundaries (e.g. main verb versus auxiliary) can be accepted only as idealizations which are pedagogically useful, but which, apart from that, should better be given up in favour of interfaces and fuzzy boundaries (thus the growing importance of so-called “gradients”, “clines”, or “continua”).

Further properties of the sign are its mutability and immutability:

In essence, the **immutability** and **mutability** of the sign indicates that its nature is both unchanging and changing as a result of its use in communication. This is because the sign must be unchanging to be comprehensible across a language community, but it changes as it is used.

The link between the signifier and signified in the listener's mind must be the same as that in the speaker's mind, otherwise meaning is not communicated. As such, the sign must be the same in both the speaker's and listener's minds and consequently is not subject to change. Conversely, despite being socially normalised, signs change over time as they are used by speaking individuals. For example *hound* changed its pronunciation (Great Vowel Shift) and its meaning (DOG in general - special breed of hunting dog).

4.3. Structuralism and Saussure:

**Relating Saussure's theory of language to a 'literary theory':**

Ferdinand de Saussure has been called 'the father of modern linguistics'. Getting to grips with his theory of language can be 'the mother of all battles'. Here
are some ways of relating Saussure's theory of language to a 'literary theory'. These points - just one version or account of Saussure - might help explain why a literary theory informed by Saussurean linguistics would lay itself open to charges of ahistoricism, formalism, and anti-humanism. According to Saussure:

1. Language is a system made up of signs.

2. The sign is made up of the signifier (the mark or sound) and the signified (the concept or idea).

3. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. There is no reason why the word 'cat' should signify a small furry creature. Another word could serve the same function just as well. There is arbitrariness about the fit between signifier and signified.

4. It follows from this that the relationship between the sign and the referent ('reality') is also arbitrary. Signs exist independently of the objects to which they refer. They have a material reality as sounds in the air or marks on a page outside of the things they represent. The referent occupies a space in the system of signs that could be taken up by another object. Saussure's example is the 8.25 from Geneva. It remains the 8.25 from Geneva no matter when it leaves, or whether personnel and carriages change. It first into the timetable and slot for the 8.25 from Geneva. (Compare this to Foucault's idea of the 'author-function'.)

5. Language can be divided into langue (the system of language, the language as a system of forms) and parole (the combination and use of those forms).

6. Saussure is interested in langue, in general rules and codes rather than parole, particular cases of language in action.

7. Language can be looked at in a synchronic way, that is a study of the linguistic system in a particular state, a snapshot, without reference to time, or in a diachronic way, that is a study of its evolution in time, an historical perspective.

8. Saussure chose to look at language through a synchronic study of langue.
9. Some consequences - or extrapolations, perhaps - of this approach to language are:

a. that 'history' and 'reality' can appear to get left out, thus those theorists who adopt Saussure's linguistics as a way of reading culture and literature are accused of being ahistorical, and

b. that identity is seen to be constructed negatively, as the result of difference, rather than positively. If in language identity is relational, if A is A because it is not B, etc., then perhaps the same is true of culture in general. One thinks here of the New Historicism theory of self-fashioning developed by Stephen Greenblatt, or, for an earlier literary instance, the way in which Philip Sidney, in his Apology for Poetry, defined poetry in terms of what it was not, i.e. theology, history, philosophy etc. Claude-Lévi Strauss, a Belgian anthropologist, provides the missing link between Saussure's linguistics and structuralist literary theory. He drew on Saussure in his work on kinship systems, which he compared to languages. Each component of a culture signified, or meant something, only in relation to other components, and within the context of the system as a whole.

10. How do we get from language to culture and literature? The shift from language to other 'signifying practices' can be justified with reference to Saussure. In approaching language, in trying to devise a science of language as a system of signs, Saussure related his project to other activities, thus paving the way for the kind of interdisciplinary adaptation of his theories that we might find in the writings of Lévi-Strauss on kinship, or the early work of Roland Barthes on wrestling and dance. The idea that one could analyse a cultural formation - read it - in the way that one interpreted signs is at the root of Saussure's enterprise. He prepared this rich cross-cultural and interdisciplinary terrain for semiology, the science of signs, when he wrote:
Language is a system of signs that express ideas and is thus comparable to the system of writing, to the alphabet of deaf-mutes, to symbolic rituals, to forms of etiquette, to military signals, etc. It is but the most important of these systems.

We can, therefore, imagine a science which would study the life of signs within society. We call it semiology, from the Greek ‘semeion’ (‘sign’). It would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist we cannot say what it will be; but it has a right to existence; its place is assured in advance. Linguistics is only part of this general science; and the laws which semiology discovers will be applicable to linguistics, which will thus find itself attached to a well-defined domain of human phenomena. (Course in General Linguistics, p. 16)

Let's start by talking about structuralism in general as a philosophical stance or worldview. Structuralists are interested in the interrelationship between UNITS, also called "surface phenomena," and RULES, which are the ways that units can be put together. An example is Tinkertoys. The "units" in a tinkertoy set are all the parts in the box: the various coloured rods of different lengths, the various kinds of connectors and wheels and attachments; the "rules" of tinkertoy construction is that rods go into holes. That's the structure of tinkertoys: everything you can make out of tinkertoys, whatever that may be, is made by using the units according to the rules. A structuralist analysis of tinkertoys wouldn't look at what you made (a building, a race car, a windmill, etc.) but would look only at the structure governing every possible combination of tinkertoy elements. And that structure is that rods go into holes.

That's what structuralist analysis does, whatever it's analysing: looks at the units of a system, and the rules that make that system work, without regard for any specific content. In language, for instance, structuralists (like Saussure) the units are words (or, actually, the 31 phonemes which make all the sounds of words in English) and the rules are the forms of grammar, which order words. In different languages the grammar rules are different, as are the words, but the
structure is still the same in all languages: words are put together within a grammatical system to make meaning.

An example of this idea of structure can be found in the game of "Mad Libs." In class students read an example, which asked for various nouns, adjectives, verbs, proper names, and exclamations. When plugged into a story, these randomly chosen parts of speech made a very silly narrative--but one which was recognizable as a narrative because the parts of speech were appropriately placed: nouns went where nouns go, and verbs where verbs go, etc. In a sentence, any noun can replace any other noun and not change the grammatical structure: the sentence "My bag ate my books" might not make any rational sense, but it's recognizable as a sentence because the parts of speech are all in the right places. Here's an example of this using literature. I'll give you three characters: princess, stepmother, and prince. Now you tell me the story. Many of you said "Cinderella," and others came up with other story titles. From a structuralist point of view, Cinderella is the same story as Snow White and as lots of other Disney stories and fairy tales: a princess is persecuted by a stepmother and rescued (and married) by a prince. The "units" here are the characters, and the "rules" are: stepmothers are evil, princesses are victims, and princes and princesses have to marry. Whatever details or added elements you supply, the basic structure of this story is always the same. And that's exactly, what structuralist analyses of literature or myth or other forms of narrative, are analysing.

Structuralists believe that the underlying structures which organize units and rules into meaningful systems are generated by the human mind itself, and not by sense perception. As such, the mind is itself a structuring mechanism which looks through units and files them according to rules. This is important, because it means that, for structuralists, the order that we perceive in the world is not inherent in the world, but is a product of our minds. It's not that there is no "reality out there," beyond human perception, but rather that there is too much "reality" (too many units of too many kinds) to be perceived coherently without some kind of "grammar" or system to organize and limit them.
So structuralism sees itself as a science of humankind, and works to uncover all the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel—in mathematics, biology, linguistics, religion, psychology, and literature, to name just a few disciplines that use structuralist analyses.

Structuralist analysis posits these systems as universal: every human mind in every culture at every point in history has used some sort of structuring principle to organize and understand cultural phenomena. For instance, every human culture has some sort of language, which has the basic structure of all language: words/phonemes are combined according to a grammar of rules to produce meaning. Every human culture similarly has some sort of social organization (like a kind of government), some sort of system for who can marry whom (usually referred to as a kinship system), and some sort of system for exchanging goods (usually referred to as an economic system). All of these organizations are governed, according to structuralist analyses, by structures, which are universal.

For a more formal definition: a structure is any conceptual system that has the following three properties:

1. Wholeness. This means that the system functions as a whole, not just as a collection of independent parts. With the tinkertoy set, it's hard to play with just the individual items; you need the whole set, with all the rods and holes, and the rules they follow, in order to make stuff at all.

2. Transformation. This means that the system is not static, but capable of change. New units can enter the system, but when they do they're governed by the rules of the system. With the tinkertoys, one can substitute a blue wheel for a yellow one, or an orange rod for a purple one, but rods still go into holes in order to create something. With tinkertoys, you could add any rods (of the right diameter) and any holes (ditto) and the system still works. Another example is the word "office"—normally it's a noun, but a Kinko's commercial has made it a verb, as in "a new way to office." The
commercial creates a new word, "to office," and we know what it means because the structure it fits into hasn't changed.

3. Self-Regulation. This is related to the idea of transformation. You can add elements to the system, but you can't change the basic structure of the system no matter what you add to it. The transformations of a system never lead to anything outside the system. We can add things to the tinkertoy set and never alter the fundamental rule that rods go into holes. (Stay tuned, though; poststructuralist theories will challenge this point).

**Why are we studying Saussure?**

Why are we studying Saussure, a linguistic theorist, in a literature class? When we discard the assumptions of liberal humanism, we start our new conceptions of how literature operates by noting that, first and foremost, literature is made of language; to understand how literature works, we must therefore have some ideas about how language itself works. Saussure, as a structuralist, is interested in language as a system or structure. His ideas apply to any language--English, French, Farsi, computer languages--and to anything we can call a "signifying system". He describes the structures within any language, which make meaning possible, but he's not interested in what particular meanings get created. Like all structuralists, he's not interested in the details of what fills up the structure, the specifics of speech or writing, but only in the design of the structure itself.

Saussure is the one, who has provided us with a structuralist analysis of language as a signifying system.

**Section I: The Nature of The Linguistic Sign.**

Language is based on a NAMING process, by which things get associated with a word or name. Saussure says this is a pretty naive or elementary view of language, but a useful one, because it gets across the idea that the basic linguistic unit has two parts.
Those two parts Saussure names the "concept" and the "sound image". The sound image is not the physical sound (what your mouth makes and your ear hears) but rather the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes. An illustration of this is talking to yourself--you don't make a sound, but you have an impression of what you're saying.

The linguistic SIGN (a key word) is made of the union of a concept and a sound image. The union is a close one, as one part will instantly conjure the other; Saussure's example is the concept "tree" and the various words for tree in different languages. When you are a speaker of a certain language, the sound image for tree in that language will automatically conjure up the concept "tree." The MEANING of any SIGN is found in the association created between the sound image and the concept: hence the sounds "tree" in English mean the thing "tree." Meanings can (and do) vary widely, but only those meanings, which are agreed upon and sanctioned within a particular language, will appear to name reality.

A more common way to define a linguistic SIGN is that a SIGN is the combination of a SIGNIFIER and a SIGNIFIED. Saussure says the sound image is the SIGNIFIER and the concept the SIGNIFIED. You can also think of a word as a signifier and the thing it represents as a signified (though technically these are called sign and referent, respectively).

The SIGN, as union of a SIGNIFIER and a SIGNIFIED, has two main characteristics.

1. The bond between the SIGNIFIER (SFR) and SIGNIFIED (SFD) is ARBITRARY. There is nothing in either the thing or the word that makes the two go together, no natural, intrinsic, or logical relation between a particular sound image and a concept. An example of this is the fact that there are different words, in different languages, for the same thing. Dog is "dog" in English, "perro" in Spanish, "chien" in French, "Hund" in German.
This principle dominates all ideas about the STRUCTURE of language. It makes it possible to separate the signifier and signified, or to change the relation between them. (This makes possible the idea of a single signifier, which could be associated with more than one signified, or vice-versa, which makes AMBIGUITY and MULTIPLICITY OF MEANING possible.)

Language is only one type of semiological system (the word "semiological," like the word "semiotic," comes from the Greek word for "sign"). Any system of signs, made up of signifiers and signifieds, is a semiotic or SIGNIFYING SYSTEM. Think, for example, of football referee signals, baseball signs, astrological signs. Any time you make up a secret code or set of signals you are making your own signifying system.

There may be some kinds of signs that seem less arbitrary than others. Pantomime, sign language, gestures (what are often called "natural signs") seem to have a logical relation to what they represent. The tomahawk chop used by Atlanta Braves fans, for example, seems to imitate the action of chopping, and thus would be the most "natural" way to designate the idea of chopping. But Saussure insists that ALL SIGNS ARE ARBITRARY; the tomahawk chop only has meaning because a community has agreed upon what the gesture signifies, not because it has some intrinsic meaning.

Saussure discusses whether symbols, such as the use of scales for the idea of justice, are innate or arbitrary, and decides that these too are arbitrary, or based on community agreement. He also dismisses onomatopoeia (words that sound like what they mean, like "pop" or "buzz") as still conventional, agreed-upon approximations of certain sounds. Think, for example, about the sounds attributed to animals. While all roosters crow pretty much the same way, that sound is transcribed in English as "cock-a-doodle-do" and in Spanish as "cocorico." Interjections also differ. In English one says "ouch!" when one bangs one's finger with a
hammer; in French one says "Aie!" (Curse words work the same way. Come up with your own examples).

Admittedly, Saussure is not very interested in how communities agree on fixing or changing the relationships between signifiers and signifieds. Like all structuralists, he focuses on a SYNCHRONIC analysis of language as a system or structure, meaning that he examines it only in the present moment, without regard to what its past history is, or what its future may be. (Analyses which do take time into account, and look at the history of changes within a structure, are called DIACHRONIC).

2. The second characteristic of the SIGN is that the signifier (here, meaning the spoken word or auditory signifier) exists in TIME, and that time can be measured as LINEAR. You can't say two words at one time; you have to say one and then the next, in a linear fashion. The same is true for written language: you have to write one word at a time (though you can write over an already written word) and you generally write the words in a straight line.

This idea is important because it shows that language (spoken language, anyway) operates as a linear sequence, and that all the elements of a particular sequence form a chain. The easiest example of this is a sentence, where the words come one at a time and in a line, one after the other, and because of that they are all connected to each other.

Section II: Linguistic Value.

According to Saussure's picture, thought is a shapeless mass, which is only ordered by language. One of the questions philosophers have puzzled over for centuries is whether ideas can exist at all without language. (Think, for example, about Helen Keller before she learned language--did she think?) Saussure says no ideas pre-exist language; language itself gives shape to ideas and makes them expressible. In other words, from Saussure's point of view, thought cannot exist without language. This leads to an important structuralist and
post-structuralist idea; that language shapes all our conceptions of our reality and ourselves. Sound is no more fixed than thought, though sounds can be distinguished from each other, and hence associated with ideas. Sounds then serve as signifiers for the ideas, which are their signifieds. Signs, in this view, are both material/physical (like sound) and intellectual (like ideas). This is important to Saussure because he wants to insist that language is not a thing, a substance, but a form, a structure, a system. His image is that thought and sound are like the front and back of a piece of paper (and the paper is the linguistic sign); you can distinguish between the two, but you can't separate them. Saussure talks about the system of language as a whole; as LANGUE (from the French word for language), and any individual unit within that system; (such as a word) as a PAROLE. Structuralist linguistics is more interested in the LANGUE than in any PAROLE. (Peter Barry, in Beginning Theory, talks about literary systems, like genre categories, as a form of LANGUE, and individual literary texts as examples of PAROLE). The arbitrary nature of the sign explains why language as a system (LANGUE) can only arise in social relations. It takes a community to set up the relations between any particular sound image and any particular concept (to form specific PAROLES). An individual can't fix VALUE for any signifier/signified combination. You could make up your own private language, but no one else would understand it; to communicate, two or more people have to agree on what signifiers go with what signifieds. And again, Saussure as a structuralist is not really interested in how this happens. Other theorists of language, such as 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, focus on how these agreements come about.

VALUE is thus defined as the collective meaning assigned to signs, to the connections between sfrs and sfds.

The VALUE of a sign is determined, however, not by what signifiers get linked to what particular signifieds, but rather by the whole system of signs used within a community. VALUE is the product of a system or structure (LANGUE), not the result of individual sfr-sfd relations (PAROLE).
Saussure distinguishes between VALUE and SIGNIFICATION. SIGNIFICATION is what we commonly think of as "meaning," the relationship established between a signifier and a signified. VALUE, by contrast, is the relation between various SIGNS within the signifying system. As Saussure says on p. 650b:

"Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others." (p. 650b)

VALUE is always composed of two kinds of comparisons among elements in a system. The first is that dissimilar things can be compared and exchanged, and the second is that similar things can be compared and exchanged. A good example of this is money. A dime is a signifier connected to a signified of 10 cents of something. The VALUE of a dime is established because it can be exchanged for something dissimilar--a piece of gum--or something similar--ten pennies. (Coins are also good examples of the arbitrary nature of signs. A dime is worth 10 cents because we all agree that it is, not because the materials in the coin have some absolute value of 10 cents).

Words work the same way. A word can be "exchanged" for something similar--another word, a synonym--or for something dissimilar--an idea, for example. In both cases (coin or word), it is the system itself which creates value, and sets up the ways that exchanges can be made. A signifier, such as a coin or a word, when considered alone, has only a limited relation to its own signified; when considered as part of a system, a signifier has multiple relations to other signifiers in the system.

The most important relation between signifiers in a system, the relation that creates VALUE, is the idea of DIFFERENCE. One signifier has meaning within a system, not because it's connected to a particular signified, but because it is NOT any of the other signifiers in the system. The word "cat" has meaning, not
because of the animal it's associated with, but because that word is not "hat" or "bat" or "car" or "cut."

You might think about the letters of the alphabet in this context. The sound "t-t-t-t", made with the tip of the tongue against the teeth, is represented in English with the symbol "T." Because the connection between sound and concept, or signifier and signified, is ARBITRARY, that sound "t-t-t-t" could just as easily be represented by another symbol, such as "D" or "%". Further, within the alphabet, "T" has meaning because it is NOT "A" or "B" or "X." Saussure calls this a negative value, wherein something has meaning or value because it is NOT something else within a system. (Positive value, on the other hand, is established in the sfr/sfd connection; a sign has positive value in and of itself because of the connection of its two parts, but has negative value within a signifying system). Another good example of this is the digital languages recognized by computers, which consist of two switch positions, off and on, or O and 1. O has meaning because it is not 1, and 1 has meaning because it is not 0.

**Difference:**

The system of linguistic units depends thus on the idea of DIFFERENCE; one unit has VALUE within the system because it is not some other unit within the system. As the computer example shows, this idea of DIFFERENCE depends upon the idea of BINARY OPPOSITES. To find out what a word or sign is not, you compare it to some other word or sign. (And because language exists in time and space, you can only do this comparison one word at a time, hence always forming binary pairs, pairs of two.) A binary pair shows the idea of difference as what gives any word value: in the pair cat/cats, the difference is the "s"; what makes each word distinct is its difference from the other word.

**Syntagmatic and Associative Relations:**

In this section, Saussure says more about how he thinks the structure of language, or of any signifying system, operates. Everything in the system is based
on the RELATIONS that can occur between the units in the system. These relations, as we've already noted, consist mainly of relations of DIFFERENCE. In this section Saussure talks more about the rules that may connect units together. The most important kind of relation between units in a signifying system, according to Saussure, is a SYNTAGMATIC relation. This means, basically, a LINEAR relation. In spoken or written language, words come out one by one (see above, the second characteristic of the linguistic sign). Because language is linear, it forms a chain, by which one unit is linked to the next.

An example of this is the fact that, in English, word order governs meaning. "The cat sat on the mat" means something different than "The mat sat on the cat" because word order--the position of a word in a chain of signification--contributes to meaning. (The sentences also differ in meaning because "mat" and "cat" are not the same words within the system).

**English word order has a particular structure:** subject-verb-object. Think of this sentence: "The adjectival noun verbed the direct object adverbially." Other languages have other structures; in German, that sentence might be "The adjective noun auxiliary verbed the direct object adverbially main verb." In French it might be "The noun adjective verbed adverbially the direct object." In Latin, word order doesn't matter, since the meaning of the word is determined, not by its place in the sentence, but by its cases (nominative, ablative, etc.)

Combinations or relations formed by position within a chain (like where a word is in a sentence) are called SYNTAGMS. Examples of SYNTAGMS can be any phrase or sentence that makes a linear relation between two or more units: under-achiever; by the way; lend me your ears; when in the course of human events. The terms within a syntagm acquire VALUE only because they stand in opposition to everything before or after them. Each term IS something because it is NOT something else in the sequence. Again, think of coins: a dime is a dime because it's not a quarter or a nickel or a penny or a $100 bill.
SYNTAGMATIC relations are most crucial in written and spoken language, in DISCOURSE, where the ideas of time, linearly, and syntactical meaning are important. There are other kinds of relations that exist outside of discourse. Signs are stored in our memory, for example, not in syntagmatic links or sentences, but in ASSOCIATIVE groups. The word "education", for example, may get linked, not to verbs and adjectives, but to other words that end in ":-tion": education, relation, association, deification. We may store the word education" with other words that have similar associations: education, teacher, textbook, and college, expensive. Or we may store words in what looks like a completely random set of linkages: education, baseball, computer games, psychoanalysis (things I like). The idea of ASSOCIATIVE groups or linkages makes us think of pigeonholes, and what pigeonholes we put certain words or ideas in; when we pull out that word or idea, all the other things in that pigeonhole come tumbling out with it.

ASSOCIATIVE relations are only in your head, not in the structure of language itself, whereas SYNTAGMATIC relations are a product of linguistic structure. Think of the columns of a building (or the rods in a Tinker-Toy "building"). The columns form syntagmatic, or structural, relation when you think about where in the building the columns are, what they support, what they're connected to. The columns form associative relations when you think of what else the columns make you think of: phallic symbols, rockets, popsicles, or whatever.

Syntagmatic relations are important because they allow for new words--neologisms--to arise and be recognized and accepted into a linguistic community. "To office," for example, (now used in a Kinko's commercial) has meaning because the noun "office" can be moved to the position of verb, and take on a new syntagmatic position and relation to other words. Associative relations are important because they break patterns established in strictly grammatical/linear (syntagmatic) relations and allow for metaphoric expressions.
4.4. Saussure and his Linguistics’ World

The following should not be supposed to represent a definitive explanation. Almost all served definitions are over-simplified. I have served it as a help in entering the discourse.

The fundamental philosophic position behind a science of semiotics is that language and history precede the self. We are born into a world where language is already there and history has already decided how language will be used. (This sounds inflexible. If everything is already decided, how can new meanings be generated? The structuralist argument is that history can change the rules, but individuals cannot.)

The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, having lost faith in philology and the historical (diachronic) study of language, argued for studying language as it exists as a system at a particular point in time (synchronously). He argued for dividing language into three levels, language, by which he meant the human -

(Diagrammatic presentation Synchronic and Dychronic features of language)
-capacity to evolve sign systems, langue, what we think of as a language, such as English or French, and parole, any individual speaker's particular use of the language. Saussure was chiefly interested in langue as an a-historical phenomenon.

A sign is something, which stands for something else. The most common signs are words in language, but traffic signals, punctuation, and visual markers may also be signs. At a broader level, clothing, gestures and even sentences or whole texts may be signs in a larger sign system. In Kurt Vonnegut's novel The Sirens of Titan, the earth and all of human history have been created by a travelling alien to represent a single word: "Greetings," being sent from one super-civilization to another.

**Linguistic signs (words):**

A spoken language sign is composed of one or more phonemes (material sounds that the voice constructs out of the flow of air across the vocal chords and through the mouth.) The sign may also be represented by graphemes, written representations of letters. A system of graphemes is sometimes called a second-order sign system since it represents the first order system (phonemes.) Phonemes or graphemes may be combined to construct morphemes (syllables or words) and these in turn may be combined to form lexemes (unit of content meaning.) The act of joining morphemes to create units of meaning is called Semiosis.

**Difference:**

Signs are distinguished from each other by their difference. Thus the sign "dog" is differentiated from "hog," "dig," or "log" by a single letter. The knowledge of any term is dependent on knowledge of the system.

**The Binary Nature of Signs:**

Signs are composed of two distinct but inseparable parts, the signifier, and the signified.
**Signifier:** The materially produced representation. **DOG**

**Signified:** The mental concept to which the signifier refers. Four-legged barking animal.

**Signs may be transitive, intransitive or transcendental:**

**Transitive:** "dog" refers to an object in the external world.

**Intransitive:** "and" refers to a grammatical function.

**Transcendental:** "God" does not refer to a verifiable object in the external world

**Signs are arbitrary:**

There is no necessary relationship between the sign "dog" and the four legged barking animal to which it refers.

**Signs are conventional.**

The sign "dog" is understandable only because we have agreed that "dog" will refer to four-legged barking animals. We might have chosen any other combination of letters, "chien" for instance.

**The intentionality of signs:**

Signs are intentional. They are sent by a sender who wishes to communicate and understandable only to those who understand what is coded in the sign. For instance, smoke in a forest may be nothing more than the indication of a fire, or it may be a sign from one lover to another that the way is clear.

**The persistence of signs:**

Although signs are arbitrary and conventional, they are always already there. The sign "dog" was arbitrarily chosen before any of us was born, and the
agreement that it should represent a four-legged barking animal was made before our arrival. This doesn't mean that it cannot change, only that we cannot individually change it by an act of will.

The slippage of signs:

The relationship between the signifier and the signified is not fixed. Dictionary meanings indicate the most common relationships between signifiers and signifieds in any particular period. Quite often, however, new signifieds alter the meaning of a sign. "Gay" for instance, has recently come to mean "homosexual" rather than "happy." The signified has slipped out from under the signifier. (Language is always engaged in slippage.)

The signifier and the signified to Derrida:

Jacques Derrida points out that the signified is always itself composed of signifiers. Thus my term "four-legged barking animal" operates as the signified of "dog," but is itself a series of signs composed of several signifiers with their own signifieds. In this way, definition is always either infinite or circular.

Semiosis:

Semiosis is the arrangement of morphemes into larger units of sense. As such, it functions in two ways. It combines elements syntagmatically in a horizontal relationship of contiguity (makes a sentence) and selects elements paradigmatically in a vertical relationship of selectivity (chooses which signs to use). The term "Semiosis" is used quite differently by certain post-structuralists-
Semiosis always precedes the fundamental narrative elements *mimesis* (showing) and *diegesis* (telling).

Any large arrangement of semiotic units constitutes a *discourse*. In the broader sense, a discourse consists of the vocabulary, the system of pronunciation, the grammar and syntax and the rules for generating meanings that belong to any group. Thus we may speak of the discourse of the lower class, or the discourse of sports announcers, or the discourse of medicine, or the discourse of fashion. There are no privileged discourses. Another way of saying this is that there is no correct English, no fixed rules about how language may be used. Some discourses are preferable to others under certain conditions, but all discourses are culturally determined, and rely on their power to coerce speakers to enter them.

### 4.5. Interpreting Reality as a Centred Structure or as a System of Differences:

The word "structure" has had many interpretations, particularly since the birth of the movement in critical theory called "structuralism" in the 1950s. Structuralism posited that texts, societies, and nature are constituted and represented by fixed relationships between signs.
According to structuralism, the signs with which human beings constitute reality are defined (they are given meanings) by their relationships to other signs within an overall structure. The overall system of relationships with which we represent reality obeys a coherent set of rules. This set of rules presupposes a "centre," Jacques Derrida suggests, a single concept that guarantees the logical coherence of the rules.

According to Aristotle, for example, reality is a structure, which is constituted by rational forms. The relationships between these forms can be described by a coherent set of rules, which has the law of non-contradiction and the Prime Mover (God) at its centre. According to Descartes, nature and science are logical structures that Science can describe with a coherent set of rules and that has as its centre God-given reason. For some Romantics, nature is a structure guaranteed at its centre by the artist's unique self. For many philosophers, philosophy is a structure governed by a coherent set of rules whose centre is logic. Other exemplary, centred structures are the rituals of the Catholic Church with Jesus Christ at their centre (at least as interpreted by some church fathers), Japanese Tanka poetry as interpreted by Tsurayuki with genuine emotion at its centre and Haiku as interpreted by Basho with impersonality at its centre.

If we use Saussurean vocabulary to describe the signs that make up structures (sign = signifier + signified), then structuralists posit that all reality (physical, social, or verbal) is, like a written text, structured as a coherent set of relationships between signifiers (the part of the sign that we perceive). The totality of relationships between a structure’s signifiers determines their meanings, their signified. All signifieds are thus mediated by the overall structure. They are mere representations, which can change. But the centre of the structure, which determines all these meanings, cannot be mediated, since it is unchangeable.

For example, Basho constitutes haiku as a coherent structure that is defined by two different signs, the "outside world" (nature or society) and the "inside world" (the soul). These different signs are linked by impersonality, which
constitutes the structure’s centre. Although the "outside world" can be represented by different signs (a solitary tree, cherry blossoms, picnic plates etc.) and the "inside world" can be represented by different people, the impersonality that they share must never change, if haiku is to be haiku.

Unfortunately, structuralism’s presupposition that reality is a structure with a centre tends to reduce signs (people, things, words) to mechanical functions whose meanings and actions are rigidly defined by fixed social, psychological, or religious structures and rules. Basho thus realized, at the end of his life, that the structure he called haiku could not eliminate emotion and be totally impersonal, that it could actually produce emotion. Basho’s realization put into question his description of the haiku’s structure by showing that its supposed centre, impersonality, was deceptive. The structure with which he described haiku partially misrepresented his haikus.

Structuralism tended to represent people as marionettes whose thoughts and actions are rigidly determined by fixed social, psychological, or religious structures. As we have seen, such a presupposition is unacceptable to those who, like Pascal and Nietzsche, feel that reason cannot construct a coherent, centred representation of the world. As Pascal put it:

"Nature is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere."

Pascal and Nietzsche treat all representations of reality by means of centred structures as deceptive.

Jacques Derrida, who is associated with the movement called deconstruction, has argued that language not only constructs centred structures that represent relations between signs; it deconstructs these centred structures. Maupassant's narrator constructs and deconstructs centred structures (supernatural, social, psychological) that explain his strange perceptions and actions. This process of construction and deconstruction occurs over and over again in historical time or in the cultural space of a diverse world. The centres that
people construct in order to give stability to their relations within the world and meaning to their lives (such as God, Science, or the Market) are deconstructed when these centres change over historical time or when reality is seen from the point of view of a different culture in a different part of the globe.

As noted above, many of the philosophers whom we have read, except Pascal and Nietzsche, represent reality by means of centred, rational structures. When we compare these centred structures over historical time, we can see that this centre is constantly changing in terms of its nature and function: from Plato’s remembered, rational "forms," to Aristotle’s perceived "forms," to Descartes’s divine "natural light," to Nietzsche’s ironic artist and herd.

Derrida redefines the notion of structure within what he calls a "system of differences." In a system of differences, signs never have a single meaning since the system has no centre or structure; rather, signs have multiple and incompatible meanings. In a system of differences, the origin of any structure (arche), such as Maupassant’s invisible being in *The Horla*, is always uncertain. So too is the structure's destination (telos), its goal. If we interpret a literary text as a system of differences, then there is no over-arching structure that would enable us to identify the text’s author (the origin of the text) or the author’s intention (the goal of the text). So too, *The Horla* provides us with insufficient evidence to decide whether the narrator is the author of his diary or whether society, the unconscious, or a supernatural being is the true author of the diary.

Derrida, like Nietzsche, expresses his theory in terms of signs, language. Like the structuralists, Derrida uses the vocabulary of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In Derrida’s system of differences, each signified is really another signifier which in turn refers to another signifier *ad infinitum*, without ever arriving at a fixed meaning. Imagine looking up a word (signifier) in a foreign dictionary and not understanding all the words in the definition (the signified). So you treat the words in the definition as signifiers and look them up, but their definitions (their signified) use other words you do not understand and have to look up, and so on *ad infinitum*. This infinite regression shows that signs have
meanings only in relation to other signs. They do not have inherent or "proper" meanings. Each time we think we have the meaning of reality or life, we simply fall back into what Nietzsche calls a lie, self-deception, hypocrisy.

In the article cited above, Derrida applies his deconstructive approach to the writing of the ethnologist (anthropologist) Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss wanted to put into question "ethnocentrism": the notion that the system linking all of the world's cultures is a structure with a centre, which is Western culture. All cultures tend to be ethnocentric: to assume that their culture is at the centre of the world and that all other cultures are marginal. The most dominant ethnocentric culture has been ours, Western culture (especially Europe and the US). In Western culture, we tend to presuppose that non-Western cultures, such as oriental and African cultures, are inferior. In reaction to Western ethnocentrism, much contemporary thought has tried to decentralize western culture and revalue non-western cultures by treating the world as a system of differences rather than as a centred structure.

For Derrida, we can never entirely escape ethnocentrism (or centred structures). When we question the centrality (superiority) of Western culture, we tend to replace it with the centrality (superiority) of non-Western culture. Or we imagine a world in which all cultures are defined by their difference, their "diversity." We replace one deceptively-centred structure with another. As a result, we must use ethnological discourse strategically or ironically. In putting into question (deconstructing or ironically undercutting) Western modes of representing reality, we must remember that we are also falling into other forms of ethnocentric discourse, which also need to be questioned (deconstructed or ironically undercut). Like Nietzsche’s artist, we know we are misrepresenting the world; we represent the world ironically. Unlike Nietzsche’s artist, however, Derrida can never entirely escape from society’s domination; he is never entirely free to create something entirely new.

In his writings, Derrida often shows that the binary oppositions with which we construct reality (nature vs. culture, black vs. white, Western vs. non-Western,
male vs. female etc.) are really misrepresentations. Pascal performed a similar deconstruction of the binary opposition between part and whole. If man is no more than a point in relation to the infinitely large, but if he is a universe in relation to the infinitely small, then he is both part and whole; or rather, he is neither. The rational distinction between part and whole with which philosophy and religion have always described man, like the distinction between nature and culture, is in error.

Binary distinctions between nature and culture, part and whole, are primarily products of social convention, not accurate representations of reality. As has been suggested by our reading of Japanese and Romantic poems, the nature/culture opposition is defined in many different ways throughout the world and throughout history. The nature/culture opposition is a function of different cultural conventions.

We might ask at this point:

1. If it is true that no truth can be located at the centre of reality, does this not mean that all truth relative?
2. Is it all a game?
3. Can we just abandon objectivity and subjectivity altogether and say whatever we want, since all statements are equally true and false?

This is not the conclusion Lévi-Strauss that Derrida or Lévi-Strauss comes to. Lévi-Strauss continued to act as a scientist who is seeking empirical (objective) truth about real native cultures. But at the same time he repeatedly argued that the totality of reality is out of the reach of his borrowed signs, like those that constitute the nature/culture opposition.

Derrida calls the latter hypothesis "freeplay" and attributes it to Nietzsche. In board games with fixed (finite) rules, any player can be replaced by a substitute, indeed, by an indeterminate number of substitute players, as long as
these players respect the finite rules of the game. And any game can be replaced with another game.

Language and science for Derrida are in fact caught between two interpretations:

1. The sense that they are adding on more and more meaning and getting closer and closer to truth and reality;

2. The sense that they are arbitrarily substituting one sign for another, one theory for another, in a free-play that never gets any closer to truth or reality.

As a result, when we interpret a text or reality, we can describe objectively some of their (finite) structures (grammatical, social, etc.). But in our interpretation of texts or of reality as overall systems of difference, we always remain caught between two readings: 1) we are getting closer and closer to the significance of the system, its centre: truth or reality; 2) we are simply substituting one reading for another, neither of which is closer to reality or truth, in a free-play of signs.

1. In your own words, explain how Derrida's notion of reality as a system of differences differs from the notion of reality as a structure.

2. In your own words, contrast Derrida to Plato, Aristotle, or Descartes.

3. Pick any literary, pictorial, or photographic work of art that we have studied during this semester and explain how all of its parts can be interpreted as part of a structure with a centre. How might this centre be deconstructed?

As Shakespeare concluded that there is a weakness in each man, there are limitations of structuralism, or in a number of critical theories too, some calling themselves structuralists, others being called poststructuralists, appeared in the late 1960s. Strongly influenced by Nietzsche and Freud, these critical theoreticians questioned whether the meanings or actions of people, things, or
signs are ever totally determined by a single coherent structure. They did so by putting into question the centres that make structures coherent.

By putting into question the centres of structures, poststructuralists put into question the power of social, psychological, or religious structures to totally determine the actions of a particular individual or the meanings of a particular sign. In so doing, they reopened the question of human freedom.

4.6. Linguistics, Structuralism and Poststructuralism:

What defines a word, for Saussure, is not its relation to some eternal essence. Saussure, like Plato before him, says words name ideas, not things. But what defines a word for Saussure is not its relation to some eternal essence, as was Plato's claim; rather, what defines a word is the relation in which it stands to other words in the system. Furthermore, these relations are negative, not positive. ["In language there are only differences without positive terms." "The important thing in the word is not the sound alone but the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others." "Their most precise characteristic is being what the others are not."] [From Teach Yourself Postmodernism: Structuralism claimed that in language no sign had a positive meaning on its own terms. Meaning was always a product of difference. Take the consonants "b" and "t". Place between them all the possible vowels in English. In each case the sound produced creates a distinct word. "Bat" is what it is by not being the words "Bet," "Bit," "Bot" [bought], "But." [Example of a person with an accent saying, as one hears it, "He's a bat boy." When, of course, the person means "bad boy".]

And what's true of sounds is true of ideas. ["Ready-made ideas do not exist before words."] Different languages produce different concepts. The French speaker not only speaks differently from the American, but also thinks differently. [river/stream fleuve/riviére] Rivers are bigger bodies of flowing water; streams by comparison are smaller. But in French, fleuves flow into the sea, and rivières flow
into *fleuves.* Strictly speaking, there is no word in English that means the same as the French words.

**The Principles of Saussure’s Linguistics:**

The first principle of Saussure's linguistics is the arbitrariness of the sign. This means several things. First, there is no natural connection between the signifier and the signified. (Plato was wrong about that.) There are only conventional relations between words and meanings. There is nothing in nature or in logic that requires English speakers to use the word "dog" for dogs. [hund, chien, etc.]

Furthermore, for Saussure, the conventions that tie the signifier to the signified are also arbitrary. That means that they, too, are determined not by facts in "reality" but by other facts in the linguistic system, as we saw with the "river/riviére" example. What all this means is that there are no essences, no fixed universal concepts." (Plato was wrong about that too.)

Saussure's science of linguistics is also radical because of the way it seems to overthrow realism (the view that there is a real world out there that can be known by the human mind) and to replace it with a linguistic relativism (what we can know is the system of concepts generated by the arbitrary structures of language).

And finally, it is radical in the way it seems to demote human individuality and freedom in the social world. Individuals cannot interfere with language. ["The individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community."]

**Language, Meaning and Structure (How to Learn Postmodernism):**

We use language to organize - and even construct - reality. Language enables us to give meaning to the world. Reality cannot be readily separated from the way we represent it, or the stories we tell about it. Language therefore plays an active role in forming our perceptions of reality.
Meanings happen only in relation to structures. No single thing "gives off" a meaning of its own accord: it does so only through its relationship to other things. Verbal and written language provides the clearest demonstration of these structural or relational properties of meaning. Studying how language works can provide an understanding of how all-cultural products create meaning.

**Words and things:**

Common sense tells us that the world is made up of independently existing things that naturally fit the names we have given them. This implies, for example, that there is something about a rose that makes the word "rose" inevitably the right one. But, with Saussure, there is no direct or causal relation between a rose and the letters r-o-s-e. Any other collection of letters could conceivably have done the job just as well. It is purely a matter of social convention that roses are called roses. Thus Saussure argued against the assumption that language is made up of individual units that have natural attachments to objects and ideas.

Because there is no natural or inevitable bond between words and things, Saussure saw language as an arbitrary system. From this starting point, structuralist - and eventually postmodernist - theory abandons any question of the "truth" of language: it argues that language can never be a transparent or innocent reflection of reality.

Saussure argued that verbal and written language offered the best model of how signs made meaning through a system of arbitrary social conventions. Linguistics could therefore provide a strong basis for a scientific study of the life of signs in society.

Sign is defined by Saussure as an object, word, image, or whatever, together with its meaning. Put more technically, it is the unit of meaning produced by the relation of a signifier to a signified.

**Signifier:** The material object, the sounds that words make, the letters on a page, etc.
Signified: The concept or mental image to which the signifier gives rise.

Signifier: "a bunch of red roses"

Signified: "romance or passion" signified by the bunch of red roses. The signified is what is meant by the sign. The signifier is what means it.

As we saw in the case of the relationship between words and objects, the relationship between the signified and its signifier is arbitrary. For example, there is no "natural" reason why a bunch of red roses should signify passion - it is solely a matter of convention. Culture had coded roses in this way, and we have come to take this coding for granted.

Now, the arbitrary relationship between the sign and its meaning does not suggest that you can make signs mean anything that you want them to. Individuals can neither invent signs of their own out of nothing, nor read signs in any way they please. You are never at liberty to create purely personal interpretations of things. Understanding is always in some sense constrained by rules and conventions. It is not down to my own (personal) decision that if I send red roses to someone they will most likely interpret my gesture as a romantic (or corny) one. I have not personally endowed roses with romantic connotations; they have been coded well in advance of my own amorous wishes.

So structuralism (and Semiology) argues that the meanings of signs go far beyond individual intention. This insight is significant for the fields of art and literature, since it calls into question the modernist, romantic view of unique, original works of art being created by individual acts of genius.

It is also important that roses are on the correct side of the arbitrary distinction we make between flowers and weeds. Few people would receive a bunch of weeds as a sign of affection. 85

The source of meaning is not in nature or in the author. Structuralism and poststructuralism both reject the significance of personal intentions or individual
experience in the creation of meaning. What counts for both is not intentional self-expression but the operation of the languages we inherit: the means of representation both exceed and precede decisions made by individual human beings.

Plato (427-347) said words do not name things in the world; words, according to Plato, name concepts (ideas) which themselves are abstractions, designating essences, namely, that which a number of individuals have in common by virtue of which they are identifiable. There can be many different kinds of triangles - acute, right, isosceles - but the word "triangle" denotes what all triangles have in common, namely, three sides and three angles; that is, it designates triangle's triangularity. Similarly, the "dog" must denote what all dogs have in common, namely, dogness. These essences, by the way, are not merely abstractions for Plato. They are real - in fact, more real than are the many physical manifestations of them that exist on earth, which are nothing but mere copies of the real thing, which exists in a Platonic heaven of ideas as an eternal, unchanging truth.

Essentialism = a belief in the priority of essences. An essence would be something like a Platonic Form -- a definition, a formula, a set of characteristics that stabilizes objects in the world.

Sartre's motto: "existence precedes essence" = there is no such thing as a human essence or a human nature that determines what and who we must be. For Roland Barthes (1915-1980), essentialism is just a bourgeois ideology attempting to squeeze reality into its own mould and freeze it there. [And Plato, then?]

Barthes attacked "the voice of the natural". There is a tendency for the dominating social forces to generate the myth that the rules, mores, and institutions of that society are "nature's way" (or, in an earlier generation, "God's way"). The implication is that these moral codes and institutions cannot be called into question except by weirdoes, "perverts".
For Barthes, there are no essences; there is no nature in the human world. What exist for us are signs, and systems of encoding and decoding signs. There can be no innocent presentations of the human world.

He treats the "world of fashion" as system of signs: "This year flower prints will show a hint of elegance". The signifier is the flower print dress. The signified is elegance.

4.7. Influence of Saussure and Linguistics:

Saussure made the study of language more scientific by dividing the field into its component parts. He also specified the linguistic field as being concerned with the way language worked as a sign system with a particular structure and with specific rules of operation.

Two of Saussure's ideas proved of great use to thinkers in other fields such as philosophy, history, and sociology. The first was that language is a self-sufficient system of interconnected terms whose value derives entirely from their functions within the system, not from their relation to objects or ideas outside it. This insight allowed other thinkers to argue that human knowledge and human consciousness in social life occurs within language or discourse. Knowledge of reality is frequently more a matter of the interconnections among terms in the particular discourse (of economics, politics, or science, for example) than of the connection between the terms of the discourse and objects in the extra-discursive world. The second influential idea was that difference makes identity possible. There is no substance in language apart from the differential relations among the terms, none of which otherwise have an identity of their "own." All traditional notions of a natural substance in philosophy, social thinking, political theory, and other fields could now be rethought as effects of differential relations.

Saussure's discoveries influenced work in other fields directly and by analogy. In the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, both kinds of influence are evident. Lévi-Strauss noted, for example, that numerous different myths, when studied together, reveal a common structure. Myths are sign systems in which
terms have different values in relation to one another. Those values often consist of oppositions between terms such as the raw and the cooked or nature and culture. Myths functioned to resolve contradictions in human culture by constructing stories in which opposed and contradictory possibilities are mediated and their opposition resolved in a way that provides a solution to some conceptual problem or conflict of values in that particular culture. The myth of Oedipus, for example, resolves the dilemma of human origins by positing a mediation between the supposed earthly origins of human life and the fact that all humans are the product of human sexual relations. The tale is a version of the opposition between nature and culture.

Many mythic stories revolve around the incest taboo, which forbids marriage between members of the same family. In his famous study of human kinship systems (The Elementary Structures of Kinship, 1949), Lévi-Strauss noted that all human societies enjoin incest. If one studies kinship structurally as a system of relations between terms in which one element has meaning through its relation to all the other terms, then the incest taboo must be understood as a function of the larger kinship system. Kinship is like language in two respects. It is a system of communication among different tribal groups, and it is a language, in which value is determined by function. The value of the incest taboo is that it forbids marriage within a clan or family, but as a result, it has the function of obliging marriage between members of different clans, tribes, and family groups. The result is a form of communication through marriage that binds different people together. The larger function of this language like kinship system is to work to prevent conflict; strife is less likely between groups connected by marriage.

Lévi-Strauss's work had an impact on literary and cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and historiography. Roland Barthes argues in Mythologies (1957) that culture (in the form of movies, advertisements, commodities, books of photography, wrestling matches, travel guides, and so on) resembles language in
that it operates through signs that create meaning. Barthes distinguishes between
signifiers such as the photo of a black French colonial soldier on the cover of a
magazine saluting the French flag and the signifieds such an image generates.
Such signifieds have several levels, from the elementary—the image signifies the
loyalty of the colonial subject—to the more complex and abstract—the idea of
imperialness that is sanctioned and communicated by the image. In his later work
in literary criticism, Barthes studies literature in a similar manner, noting how
writers operate within systems of meaning that rely on the differences between
terms to make signification possible.

The impact of Saussure is also evident in the work of literary critics Julia
Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov argues in The Poetics of Prose (1971)
that fictional narratives can be understood in structuralist terms. A diverse set of
short stories by the same writer can be interpreted as having a similar internal
structure. The tales of Henry James, for example, all deal with an absence at the
centre of the tale. Kristeva in Semanalysis (1967) uses structural linguistics to
argue that works of literature have different levels—the phenotext and the
genotext—that resemble Saussure's distinction between langue and parole.

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