8   Structuralism, from linguistics to anthropology

'Structuralism' refers to those theoretical perspectives which give primacy to pattern over substance. For a structuralist, meaning comes through knowing how things fit together, not from understanding things in isolation.

There are some similarities between structuralism and structural-functionalism: both are concerned with relations between things. However, there are important differences. Structural-functionalism finds order within social relations. Structuralists are generally as interested in structures of thought as in structures of society. Moreover, the structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown was based mainly on inductive reasoning. One starts with data and sees what generalizations can be made about them. Structuralists often employ a method which is primarily deductive, that is, based on certain premises. Structuralists might follow these premises and see where they lead, rather as in algebra or geometry. They often prefer to work out logical possibilities first, and then see how 'reality' fits. Indeed, for a true structuralist, there is no reality except the relation between things.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has been interested in both the internal logic of a culture and the relation of that logic to structures beyond the culture – the structure of all possible structures of some particular kind. This is especially the case in his work on kinship (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1969a [1949]; 1966a), arguably the most structured realm of culture. Yet, while Lévi-Strauss is both the best known and the most characteristic of structuralist thinkers, structuralist thought is applicable more widely. It came into anthropology through linguistics, and the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, among others, is significant in its anticipation of the structuralist anthropological enterprise. Structuralist thought has gone through anthropology to literary criticism too, but the last field will not concern us here.

If the French structuralism of Lévi-Strauss is characterized by a concern with the structure of all possible structures, then Dutch structuralism focuses more on regions, as in regional structural analysis (see also

chapter 4). British structuralism, at least in the hands of its early proponents, focuses more on particular societies. These national traditions will be touched on at the end of this chapter.

Saussure and structural linguistics

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is arguably the most important structuralist of all. However, the theory with which he is associated is not one he *wrote* on. Rather, we know it through his lectures, collected and published in his name in 1916 – three years after his death. His influence in the English-speaking world was slow to catch on. The lectures were published in English only in 1960. I shall draw here on a subsequently revised edition (Saussure 1974).

Saussure and his 'Course'

Saussure (de Saussure) was born in Geneva in 1857. He studied there (initially, physics and chemistry) and in Leipzig (comparative philology), and he taught philology in Paris before returning to his native city in 1891. In his lifetime he was best known for comparative and historical studies on Indo-European vowel systems. Some of this work seems to foreshadow structuralism: later commentators (e.g., Culler 1976: 66–7) have picked up on the fact that even in historical reconstruction Saussure saw the relation between elements of language as the key to linguistic analysis. Like his near contemporary Durkheim, he had a foot in both diachronic and synchronic camps – indeed he virtually invented the distinction. While in his published work he maintained the traditional historical view of language, in his private lectures he anticipated Boas, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown in stressing synchronic and relational elements of his subject.

The lectures Saussure gave in Geneva between 1906 and 1911 became known as the *Course in General Linguistics* or simply the *Course* (Saussure 1974 [1916]). This (along with some of the work of Edward Sapir) marks the earliest emphasis on synchronic, structural analysis in the study of language. It also marks the foundation of semiology or semiotics (the study of meaning through 'signs') and the dawn of structuralism. Saussure hints at the wider, semiological implications of his work, but his concern in the *Course* was explicitly with language. Indeed, he speaks disparagingly of the use of linguistics, for example, in reconstructing the racial history and psychological make-up of ethnic groups (1974 [1916]: 222–8).

Four key distinctions

Saussure made a number of distinctions now commonplace both in linguistics and in the social sciences: diachronic and synchronic, *langue* and *parole*, syntagmatic and associative (paradigmatic), and signifier and signified.

Saussure's distinction (e.g., 1974: 101–2, 140–3) between diachronic and synchronic studies of language was the most significant break with his contemporaries. In the *Course*, he gave at least equal prominence to the latter (language at a particular point in time), whereas linguists of his day tended to be concerned only with the former (language changes through time). In chapter 1, I described evolutionism and diffusionism as diachronic anthropological perspectives and most schools of anthropology as essentially synchronic, while allowing for an in-between set of interactive perspectives. However, for true Saussurians, there is no in-between. The synchronic/diachronic distinction is absolute.

Langue and *parole* (Saussure sometimes uses *langue* and *langage*) are the French words, respectively, for 'language' and 'speech' (e.g., Saussure 1974: 9–15). The French terms are often used in English to represent this distinction, especially in a metaphorical sense. *Langue* is 'language' in the sense of linguistic structure or grammar; and, by analogy, this can be the grammar of culture as well as of language. *Parole* means 'speech' in the sense of actual utterances; and by analogy, it refers also to the social behaviour of real individuals. A fieldworker, in either linguistics or anthropology, moves from the level of *parole* to that of *langue*, that is, from the speech or actions of Tom, Dick, or Harry to a general description of appropriate linguistic or social behaviour.

The third distinction is between syntagmatic and associative relations (Saussure 1974: 122–7). Following Louis Hjelmslev, most structuralists of recent decades have referred to the latter as 'paradigmatic'. Syntagmatic relations are literally those within a sentence. For example, the sentence 'John loves Mary' contains three words: the subject John, the verb 'loves', and the object (of John's love) Mary. If we substitute Sally or Suzie for Mary, we can say that an associative or paradigmatic relation exists between the words 'Mary', 'Sally', and 'Suzie'. Or take traffic lights: a commonly cited cultural example. The colours green, amber, and red stand in syntagmatic relation to each other, as do their respective cultural meanings: go, get ready, and stop. In contrast, a paradigmatic relation exists between the associated elements of these two syntagms or 'sentences'. Red and stop are part of the same paradigm: a red traffic light means to stop. This example illustrates the relational character of elements in a

cultural grammar. Red does not mean stop in any absolute sense, but only within this particular framework. In a political context, for example, red means something else: Labour as opposed to (blue) Conservative or (yellow) Liberal Democrat on British politicians' rosettes; or Communist as opposed to (black) Anarchist, in flags carried by revolutionaries. (I should perhaps add that the usage of the term 'paradigm' in this paragraph is different from the Kuhnian usage explained in chapter 1; as Saussurians remind us, words also take their meanings from context.)

This leads to our final Saussurian distinction, that between signifier (the word or symbol which stands for something) and signified (the thing for which the word or symbol stands). These two elements together make up what Saussure (1974: 65–78) called the 'sign', whose salient characteristic is that it is 'arbitrary'. What he meant by this is that there is no natural relation between the phonological properties of a word and its meaning. If I speak Italian, I signify a four-footed, barking, family pet as *il cane*. If I speak French, I say *le chien*. If I speak German I say *der Hund*. If I speak English I say *the dog*. The phonetic makeup of the word, in each case, depends on which language I choose to speak. (Even the noise the animal makes is to some extent arbitrary: Italian dogs say *bau-bau*, French dogs say *oua-oua*, German dogs say *wau-wau*, and British and American dogs say *woof-woof* or *bow-wow*.) Likewise, symbolic elements of culture take their meaning both according to the given culture (say, French or British) and according to context within that culture. As Sir Edmund Leach used to say, a crown may stand for sovereignty (by metonymy – the part stands for the whole), or it may stand for a kind of beer (by metaphor – Brand X, 'the king of beers').

After Saussure

After Saussure, other linguists developed further ideas along the lines he suggested. The centre for such activity was Prague, where the Russian exile Roman Jakobson was based. Others in the 'Prague School' taught elsewhere, notably the Russian prince, Nikolai Trubetzkoy (see, e.g., Anderson 1985: 83–139). These 'functionalist' linguists, as they were sometimes called, developed complex theories of relations within phonological structures. Yet what is important for our purposes is their notion of 'distinctive features', which are analogous to what anthropologists have come to call structural or binary oppositions.

To simplify the basis of such theories, one can define the difference between two sounds in a particular language by the presence or absence of certain features. For instance, take the words *pin* and *bin* in English.

Table 8.1. *English voiced and unvoiced stops*

	Unvoiced	Voiced
Bilabial	p	b
Alveolar	t	d
Velar	k	g

P and *b* are produced in exactly the same part of the mouth (on the lips), and a deaf person reading lips cannot normally distinguish the two words. A foreigner with good hearing, but who speaks a language that does not make the *p/b* distinction, may not be able to 'hear' the difference either. More technically, English makes a distinction between the voiced bilabial stop, which linguists write /b/, and the unvoiced bilabial stop, written /p/. The difference is voicing. In saying 'bit', the English-speaker uses his or her voice on the initial sound, but does not do so in saying 'pit'. (Another subtle difference is the fact that the /p/ at the beginning of a word, in English, is also aspirated or breathed on, whereas the /b/ is not; but that need not concern us here.)

We can represent the structural relation between these two sounds along with other English 'stops' (consonants in which the flow of air in the mouth is stopped) as in table 8.1. The difference between *p* and *b* is replicated in the difference between *t* and *d*, which in turn resembles the difference between *k* and *g*. What distinguishes the first from the second in each pair is the absence of voicing. However, what distinguishes *p* from *t* from *k*, or *b* from *d* from *g*, is position in the mouth (front to back in each series, in terms of the point of articulation).

The recognition of the binary nature of voiceless/voiced distinction (i.e., the absence or presence of the feature 'voiced'), plus the recognition of the place of such a distinction in a wider system (in this case phonological) is what structuralism is all about. As we shall see, Lévi-Strauss' work in kinship, symbolism, mythology, and so on, is all based on similar principles. Fortuitously, Lévi-Strauss, a French Jew, spent the Second World War in exile in New York City, where members of the Prague School had also gone to escape Nazi persecution. Some of the early chapters of Lévi-Strauss' *Structural Anthropology* (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1945 / 1951 / 1953 / 1958]: 29–97) bear a strong influence of the Prague School, and the first of these chapters (called 'Structural analysis in linguistics and in anthropology', pp. 31–54) was first published in 1945 in the first volume of the exiled Prague School's periodical, *Word: Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York*.

Lévi-Strauss and structural anthropology

Lévi-Strauss was born in 1908, the son of an artist. He became an accomplished amateur musician, but his early academic training was in law and philosophy and his personal appraisal of his influences include geology, Freudian psychology, and Marxist theory. In 1934 he left France and went to Brazil to teach sociology, read the 1920 edition of Robert Lowie's *Primitive Society*, and ended up doing ethnographic fieldwork with the Bororo Indians.

The contrast between the famous final paragraph of *Primitive Society* (Lowie 1947 [1920]: 441) and Lévi-Strauss' anthropology is interesting. Lowie ends his book with a description of 'civilization' as 'that planless hodge-podge, that thing of shreds and patches' and looks forward to a day when 'the amorphous product' or 'chaotic jumble' will be put into a 'rational scheme'. The paragraph has been much debated, and in his preface to the 1947 edition Lowie (1947: ix) was to declare that it had 'no bearing on anthropological theory'. Yet Lévi-Strauss was to succeed where Lowie dared not, in finding (or creating) the most rational of all anthropological schemes. For Lévi-Strauss, the essence of culture is its structure. This is true both for particular cultures, with their own specific configurations, and for culture worldwide, in the sense that particular cultures exist as part of a system of all possible cultural systems. Nowhere is this more true than in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Lévi-Strauss 1969a [1949]). Lévi-Strauss completed his manuscript in February 1947, exactly five months before Lowie's second preface.

Lévi-Strauss returned to France in 1939. He joined the Resistance, but his superiors thought it wiser for him, as a Jew, to leave for New York. There he met a number of the Central European linguists who were also in exile, borrowed ideas that they had developed within their discipline and applied them to anthropological data. However, it is worth remembering that much of his thought is derived directly from the tradition of Durkheim and Mauss (especially the latter, whose essay *The Gift* influenced his ideas on kinship as marital exchange). It is also important to see Lévi-Strauss as open to anthropological ideas from other countries, especially the American tradition from Boas (who, let us also remember, died in his arms), Lowie, and Kroeber. The complex web of influences on Lévi-Strauss' thinking to about 1960 is illustrated in figure 8.1.

Shortly after the War, Lévi-Strauss went back to France and established his tradition there. His Doctorat d'Etat thesis on 'the elementary structures of kinship' was published in French in 1949. The second edition appeared in French in 1967 and was finally translated for an English edition which came out two years later (Lévi-Strauss 1969a). He

Marx   1880

Durkheim   1900
                    Freud
Saussure   Boas

Mauss

                           Kroeber   1920
                           Lowie

Trubetzkoy
Jakobson   1940

                    Radcliffe-Brown
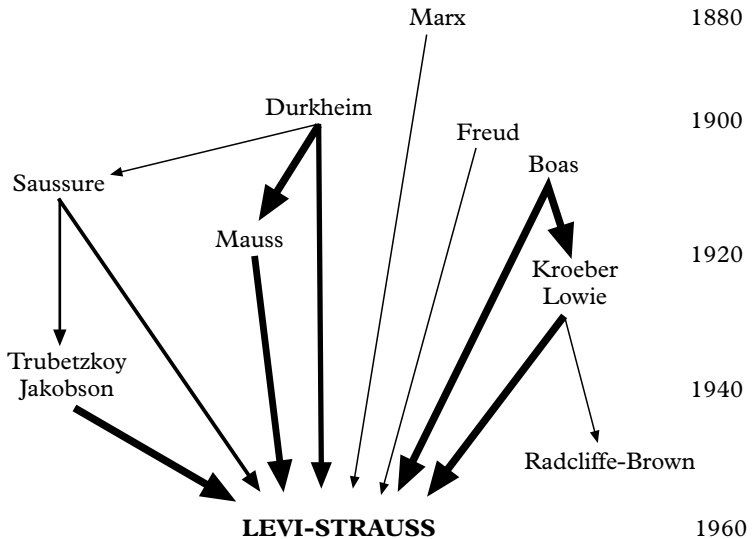
LEVI-STRAUSS   1960

Figure 8.1 Influences on Lévi-Strauss until about 1960

followed *The Elementary Structures* with a widely read travelogue, based
partly on his Brazilian fieldwork, *Tristes Tropiques* (1976 [1955]); two
brilliant contributions to the study of classification, *Totemism* (1969b
[1962]) and *The Savage Mind* (1966b [1962]); three collections of essays;
works on language and on art; and four volumes known together as the
Mythologiques. These latter, peculiarly titled works were published in
French between 1964 and 1970 and in English between 1970 and 1981: *Le
cru et le cruit* (translated as *The Raw and the Cooked*), *Du miel aux cendres*
(*From Honey to Ashes*), *L'origine des manières de table* (*The Origin of Table
Manners*), and *L'homme nu* (*The Naked Man*).

In the books on 'mythologics' or 'the science of myth' (as close as an
English translation can come), Lévi-Strauss recounts and analyses 813
Amerindian myths, from Lowland South America to the North West
Coast of North America. Their essence is contained in a fine, short work,
based on radio talks Lévi-Strauss made in Canada in 1977, *Myth and
Meaning* (1978a). As Lévi-Strauss spoke this one, rather than wrote it,
and as its original is in English rather than French, it is much easier to
follow than some of his other works. He wrote many of these in a rather
dense academic French, and his translators have almost always attempted
to render them as literally as possible. *Myth and Meaning* and *Tristes
Tropiques* are easy to read, *The Savage Mind* is perhaps the most inspiring

and indicative of his theoretical perspective, while *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* represents structuralist anthropology at its most extreme. In later years, Lévi-Strauss has produced further books on North West Coast mythology, as well as an intriguing text on human aesthetic sensibilities explored through the structural analysis of works of art and music (Lévi-Strauss 1997 [1993]).

Structuralism, pattern, and ideas

Structuralism in its widest sense is all about pattern: how things which at first glance appear to be unrelated actually form part of a system of interrelating parts. In structuralist theory, the whole is seen as greater than the sum of the parts, and most wholes can be broken down by appeal to the idea of distinctive features or binary oppositions. The presence or absence of one particular feature, in culture as in language, can explain a great deal. Structuralism in its 'purest' Lévi-Straussian sense shares this notion with structural (or functional) linguistics, and also with the cognitive anthropology which developed out of the Boasian tradition in North America in the 1950s and 1960s (see chapter 7). The distinctive feature of Lévi-Strauss' own contribution has been his search for the structure of all possible structures. His anthropology represents a culmination of the principle of psychic unity, or as Lévi-Strauss calls it, *l'esprit humain* – a term sometimes loosely translated as 'collective unconscious' (in opposition to Durkheim's 'collective consciousness').

   Structuralism in anthropology concerns not merely social structure or structural form in their Radcliffe-Brownian senses, but also the structure of ideas. In Lévi-Strauss' work especially, structures are said to be built on a rational rather than an empirical foundation. That is, a Lévi-Straussian thinks out the logical possibilities for something, and only then looks for examples in ethnography. Take one of Lévi-Strauss' own analogies: the structure of crystals (Lévi-Strauss 1966a: 16). When a physicist studies the mathematical properties of a crystal, he or she is probably not concerned with specific real crystals (which will have flaws in them), but rather with some ideal, perfect crystal. The formation of real crystals is dependent on the effects of variations in heat and pressure, the presence of foreign bodies, and so on. One does not find an absolutely perfect crystal in nature; one finds it in the mind. Lévi-Strauss, therefore, is concerned with ideal structures of society, and in two senses: (1) in the sense of what is in *his* mind, and (2) in the sense of what is in the minds of the people with whom ethnographers work. Not surprisingly, other anthropologists did not take much to the first sense, but they have taken to the second. Yet it is the first sense which is more interesting here. In

Lévi-Strauss' vision, it is important for the anthropologist to hold a view of society which takes in every logical possibility.

It need hardly be said that Lévi-Strauss' output has been varied, complex, and often obscure to the uninitiated, but let me illustrate his contribution through three classic examples: elementary structures of kinship, the culinary triangle, and the Oedipus myth.

Elementary structures of kinship

In his early work (1969a [1949]) Lévi-Strauss was concerned with how rules of marriage affect, and even create, social structure. His 'alliance theory' (*alliance* being a French word for marriage) was set against the then current emphasis in British anthropology on 'descent theory', and true to form he sought to explain descent groups not as the basis of society but as elements in relations of marital exchange which exist between the groups.

As we saw in chapter 3, Lévi-Strauss argued in *The Elementary Structures* that the incest taboo is the essence of culture, and he virtually equated this taboo with the rules governing marriage. He then defined the relations between all human kinship systems, partly by exploring the nature of 'elementary' systems and partly by recourse to the ways in which ethnographic details of 'complex' systems can be seen as reflections of 'elementary' principles of kinship. Essentially, elementary structures are those with positive marriage rules (one must or should marry someone belonging to a particular class of kin, e.g., that of the cross-cousin), while complex structures are those with negative marriage rules (one must not or should not marry someone belonging to a particular class of kin, such as close relatives or members of one's own clan). It does not matter whether we are talking about 'real' or 'classificatory' cross-cousins, because in fact these are imaginary structures. Likewise, it matters little whether people really marry the way they are supposed to marry. Lévi-Strauss was concerned with the 'system of systems' which entails all logical possibilities, and with the formal, almost mathematical relationship of one system to another. He was not directly concerned with the operations of real kinship systems, because no society ever reaches the level of perfection described in his scheme – a point which was lost on his British and British-trained followers-turned-critics (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1966a; Korn 1973; Needham 1973). In more general terms, Lévi-Strauss' structuralism is mainly concerned with culture as an abstraction – not people's actual behaviour, but the idealized pattern it approximates.

Figure 8.2 shows the relations among kinship systems according to Lévi-Strauss' theory of alliance. I should add, though, that this is my

Kinship systems

```
                          Kinship systems
                                |
              ┌─────────────────┴─────────────────┐
      Elementary structures              Complex structures
              |                                   |
    ┌─────────┼─────────┐              ┌──────────┴──────────┐
 Direct or   Delayed  Generalized   Crow-Omaha or        Complex
restricted   direct    exchange     semi-complex         systems
 exchange   exchange                  systems

(MBD/FZD    (FZD       (MBD        (Extensive,      (Prohibitions
marriage)  marriage)  marriage)    lineage-based    on marriage)
                                   prohibitions
                                   on marriage)
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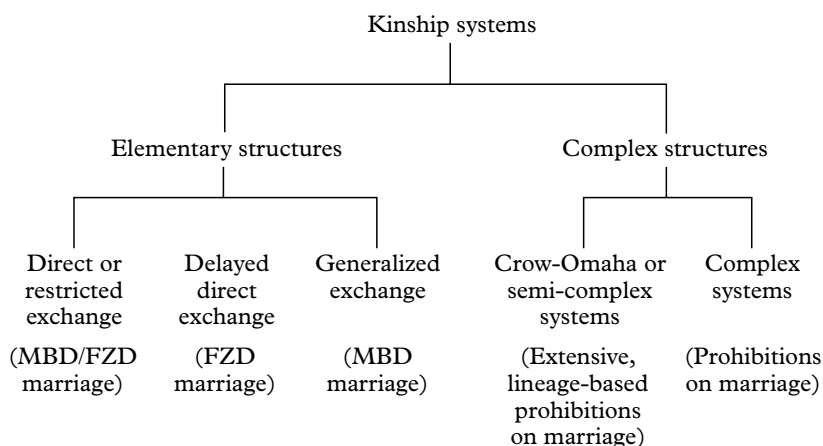
Figure 8.2 Lévi-Strauss' classification of kinship systems

preferred, simplified representation of the essence of his theory. Lévi-Strauss' own diagrams, representing relations between descent and residence (1969a: 216) and cycles of exchange (1969a: 465), are rather different.

Elementary structures include systems of direct exchange, where a group may 'take' wives from the same group it 'gives' wives to. The simplest type is one involving marriage between a man and his mother's brother's daughter (MBD) or father's sister's daughter (FZD), as in some parts of South America and Australia. Elementary structures also include systems of delayed direct exchange. Repeated father's sister's daughter marriage would, if it could be sustained in a real society, create such a structure. However, as Lévi-Strauss' chief critic among alliance theorists, Rodney Needham (1962), showed, such societies remain ethnographically rare if not non-existent. This is for rather technical reasons – among these the demographic unlikelihood of people keeping track of cross-cutting lineage and generational ties when no advantage to them or their society would be gained. In contrast, systems of generalized exchange, such as those involving marriage to the category of the mother's brother's daughter, are very common in parts of Asia. Here it is not necessary to keep track of generation, because one may repeat the marriage of one's parents. For example, if I as a male member of Group A marry a woman of Group B, my son (also Group A by patrilineal descent) may marry a woman from Group B too (such as his actual mother's brother's daughter or anyone classified as such).

Complex structures comprise those systems of Europe, Japan, most of

Africa, and so on, where no such 'elementary' patterns are to be found: one marries anyone, provided he or she is not a close relative. However, some societies, especially in Native North America and West Africa, have such an extensive array of negative marriage rules that their systems, from an individual though not a lineage point of view, come to resemble those of generalized exchange. For example, among the Samo of Burkina Faso, a man must not marry a member of his own patrilineal group, or his mother's, his father's mother's, or his mother's mother's patrilineal group. These 'semi-complex' or 'Crow-Omaha' systems (called after two Native North American peoples) thus lie in-between the more typically complex and the elementary ones (see Héritier 1981: 73–136).

Lévi-Strauss' work on kinship had a profound effect on British anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s, as Leach, Needham, and others sought to apply his methods to the study of particular kinship systems based on alliance. The British structuralists antagonized both Lévi-Strauss, through their rejection of his abstract search for universal patterns, and the structural-functionalists, through their emphasis on alliance over descent (see, e.g., Barnard and Good 1984: 67–78, 95–104). While few in Britain or North America accepted Lévi-Strauss' emphasis on universal structures of kinship in the human mind, the empirical basis of his theory was widely debated (cf., e.g., Hiatt 1968; Lévi-Strauss 1968).

The culinary triangle

One of the most indicative of Lévi-Strauss' excursions into the universality of the human mind is that of our second example: the 'culinary triangle', based on Jakobson's 'consonant triangle' and 'vowel triangle'. Lévi-Strauss first published on the idea in an article in 1965, and this was followed by several discussions, notably in the conclusion to the third volume of the *Mythologiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1978b [1968]: 471–95).

Lévi-Strauss claims that whereas the relations between consonants p, t, and k, and between vowels u, i, and a, can be defined according to relative loudness and pitch, similar relations between states of food substances and between styles of cooking can be defined according to degree of transformation and the intervention of culture. The argument is obscure but interesting. In the 'primary form', the two axes, normal/transformed and nature/culture, distinguish raw from cooked from rotted food (see figure 8.3). In the 'developed form', these same axes distinguish roasted from smoked from boiled food. In terms of means, roasting and smoking are natural processes, while boiling is cultural in that it needs water and a container. In terms of ends, roasting and boiling are natural (boiling is a process similar to rotting), while smoking is cultural (cooked, as opposed

PRIMARY FORM

Culture ⟵──────⟶ Nature

Normal

RAW

Transformed   COOKED ──────── ROTTED

DEVELOPED FORM

RAW

Roast

–   –
Air   Water
+   +
Smoked   **Boiled**
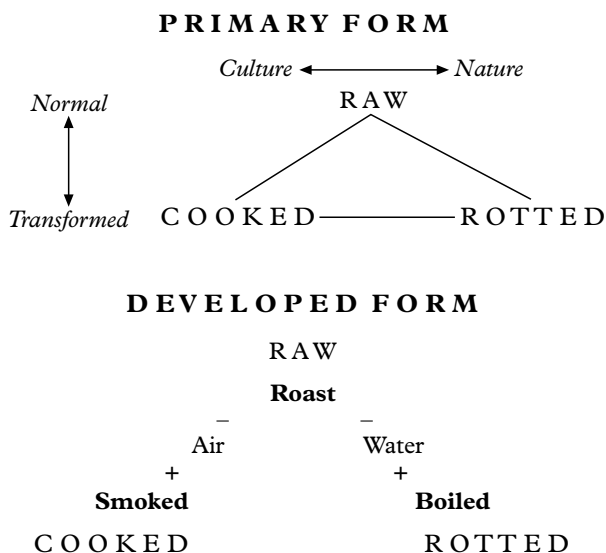COOKED   ROTTED

Figure 8.3 The culinary triangle

to raw or rotted). Boiling and roasting of meat are further contrasted in that boiling conserves all the juices (and therefore is naturally plebeian), and roasting destroys some of the meat (and in hierarchical societies, it is associated with high status – the wealthy can afford to be wasteful). While the culinary triangle is one of the most famous examples of structuralist interpretation in anthropology, unfortunately Lévi-Strauss' attempts to generalize about egalitarianism and hierarchy have only lead to puzzlement and ridicule (see Leach 1970: 28–34).

Leach (1976b: 55–9) once analysed aspects of costume and colour symbolism in the same way, but there is a crucial difference between his thinking and that of Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss' argument is intended to apply universally, whereas Leach's is both comparative and culture-specific. In India, for example, a bride traditionally wears a multi-coloured sari, and a widow wears a white sari. In the West, a bride traditionally wears a white dress, and a widow wears a black dress. The cultural rules are different, though in each case colour symbolizes an activity. Moreover, we cannot say merely that white is for marriage or life, and black is for death in Western culture taken as a whole. In some Christian churches, a priest or minister wears white or coloured garments when engaged in ritual activities, and black in non-ritual contexts. In other Christian churches, the equivalent person may wear black when engaged in ritual activities and ordinary, multi-coloured clothes otherwise. The

wearing of white or black in these cases is not only culture-dependent; it is also dependent on very specific culturally significant activities. This is where British structuralism, which emphasizes cultural diversity as well as cross-cultural commonalities of social and symbolic structures, parts company with Lévi-Straussian structuralism with its emphasis on cultural universals embedded in the psychic unity of humankind.

The Oedipus myth

Our third example is Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the myth of Oedipus. There are, of course, a number of different versions of the story, and there are related myths which, in true *Mythologiques* fashion, can be further analysed as permutations of the key myth. Leach (1970: 62–82) does this in his well-known rendition. Here I will recount the version implied by Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1955]: 213–18), with his Latinized Greek names for the protagonists, and simply outline his central explanation.

The main characters are all related (see figure 8.4). Cadmos is the son of the king of Phoenicia. His sister, Europa, is carried off by Zeus, king of the gods, so Cadmos is sent to look for her. However, the Delphic oracle tells him to stop and follow a cow, then to build a city where the cow stops. So he does. Where the cow stops, he founds the city of Thebes. Later, Cadmos kills a dragon. He sows the teeth of the dragon onto the ground, and up come the Spartoi (or *sparti*, which means 'sown'), born from the teeth. Five of the Spartoi help Cadmos to build Thebes. Then they kill each other.

Cadmos subsequently has other exploits, marries a goddess, and has five children, among them Polydorus, who becomes king of Thebes. Polydorus has a son called Labdacos, who succeeds him. Labdacos has a son called Laios, and Laios marries Jocasta. Laios is told by an oracle that he will have a son who will kill him, so, when Oedipus (his son) is born, Laios leaves him exposed, tied to the ground by his foot, on top of a hill. Eventually, a shepherd finds Oedipus and takes him in, and Oedipus is adopted by Polybus, king of Corinth. Later Oedipus is told by the oracle that he will kill his father, so he vows never to return to Corinth again. Instead, he goes to Thebes.

On the way to Thebes he meets Laios (his true father), has a quarrel, and kills him. Later he meets the Sphinx, who has a habit of asking passers-by her riddle, and then killing them if they do not know the answer. None of them do, except Oedipus. The riddle is 'What is it that speaks with one voice, yet becomes four-footed, then two-footed, then three-footed?' The answer, Oedipus knows, is 'man' – who starts as a 'four-footed' baby, then walks on two feet, and finally, in old age, with a
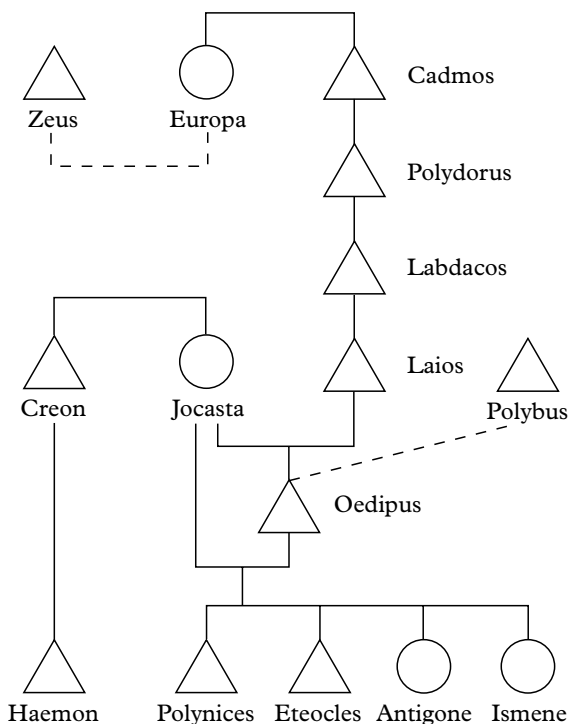
Figure 8.4 Kin relations among characters in the Oedipus myth

stick. So instead of the Sphinx killing Oedipus, Oedipus kills the Sphinx. (In some versions, the Sphinx kills herself.)

Oedipus' reward for killing the Sphinx is the hand in marriage of the widowed queen of Thebes, who is really his mother Jocasta. Oedipus means 'swollen foot'; and Jocasta realises he is 'the child grown into an adult' – the answer to the Sphinx's riddle. Realising too that she has committed incest with him, she kills herself. Then Oedipus blinds himself to become 'the old man' of the riddle. He goes off and is eventually swallowed into the earth, and Thebes comes under the rule of a new king, Creon, Jocasta's brother: Jocasta and Oedipus had had four children – Polynices, Eteocles, Antigone, and Ismene; Antigone and Ismene have gone off to lead Oedipus into the countryside and when they return, they find their brothers quarrelling – Eteocles is defending his crown, and Polynices is outside the city attacking it; eventually, both brothers die, and their mother's brother Creon becomes king. Now, Eteocles has killed his brother Polynices, whom Antigone was very fond of, so Creon, the new king, forbids Antigone to bury her brother Polynices because he,

Table 8.2. *Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the Oedipus myth*

I	II	III	IV
Cadmos seeks Europa who is ravished by Zeus			
		Cadmos kills the dragon	
	The Spartoi kill each other		
	Oedipus kills Laios		Labdacos='lame' Laios='leftsided'
		Oedipus kills the Sphinx	
			Oedipus='swollen foot'
Oedipus marries Jocasta despite taboo			
	Eteocles kills Polynices		
Antigone buries Polynices despite taboo			

having tried to take the crown from Eteocles, is now a traitor. There is an elaborate state funeral for Eteocles, but Polynices is condemned to lie unburied. Antigone, however, manages to sneak out and bury Polynices secretly. (In retribution, Creon has Antigone buried alive, walled up in a cave, though she manages to hang herself. Her beloved cousin Haemon, and his mother, commit suicide too, and the story goes on.)

Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1955]: 214) attempts to explain the complexities of the Oedipus myth with a simple diagram, the main features of which are shown in table 8.2. Column I gives details of violations of taboos, specifically taboos of incest and the burial of kin, or in Lévi-Strauss' words 'the overrating of kinship'. Column II gives details of 'the underrating of kinship', the same thing 'inverted': fratricide and parricide. Column III concerns the killing of monsters, by men. The dragon was a male monster who had to be killed in order for humankind to be born from the earth. The Sphinx was a female monster who was unwilling to allow humans to live. In Lévi-Strauss' words, this column represents the 'denial of the autochthonous origin of man' (in other words, the denial of aboriginal association of humankind with the earth). Column IV concerns the meaning of the names of some of the characters. All the meanings are related to difficulties in walking straight or standing upright. They imply that the humans who bear these names are still attached to the earth. The Spartoi

were born of the earth without human aid; and in contrast, Oedipus was exposed at birth and staked to the ground. Therefore his foot became swollen, and he was, though born of woman, not fully separated from the earth. So this column, Lévi-Strauss says, indicates 'the persistence of the autochthonous origin of man'. In other words, column IV is the opposite of column III. What is more, column III stands in relation to column IV as column I stands in relation to column II.

The point of all this is that myths are made up of elements known as 'mythemes' (by analogy with phonemes), which myth-makers arrange and rearrange to create meaning, often unconsciously. Myths do not just tell stories; they express symbolic truths, sometimes specific to cultures or culture areas and sometimes universal. The same mythemes may be found in different myths, and may be transposed in myths which occur in different cultures. In any given telling, they may be 'read' either dia-chronically (here, top to bottom, one column at a time or through all the columns) or synchronically (across the columns, showing relations from column to column). Lévi-Strauss himself has always been content to see myth analysis for its own sake, though it has the potential to provide clues to other aspects of culture. It has indeed found use too in the analysis of dreams and dream sequences (e.g., Kuper 1979b).

Structuralism and national traditions of anthropology

While it is easy to think of Lévi-Strauss as the paradigmatic structuralist and his universalistic concerns the epitome of structuralist theory, his thought has both paralleled and influenced structuralist anthropologists working from different premises. Many do not accept his emphasis on psychic unity, favouring either regional or culture-specific foci.

Dutch structuralism emerged from studies of language, culture, and society, by Dutch academics and civil servants in the early twentieth-century Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). This form of structuralism, described in chapter 4, emphasizes structures which are unique to culture areas or regions (e.g., J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong 1977 [1935]). J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong and other early Dutch structuralists developed their ideas partly independently of Lévi-Strauss, and even anticipated him, especial-ly in studies of kinship. Later Dutch anthropologists utilized Lévi-Straus-sian methods and replicated Lévi-Straussian studies of mythology and symbolism, generally within a regional framework. Such a regional ap-proach was characteristic of anthropology, especially in Leiden, for sev-eral decades.

Although Lévi-Strauss, rather like Lévy-Bruhl, has often commented on distinctions between 'elementary' structures and 'complex' ones,

'cold' societies and 'hot' ones (with reference to the relative 'heat' of historical change), and societies with mainly 'concrete' and those with 'abstract' thought, his entire approach is predicated on reasoning from the general to the specific. British structuralists have tended to work the other way round, and that is why even those Britons who have been much influenced by Lévi-Strauss' work have found themselves expressing fundamental disagreements with his methodology. This is somewhat true with Leach, but even more so with Rodney Needham (e.g., 1962) in his work on kinship. In the 1970s and 1980s as Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford, Needham went on to write prolifically on language, religion, symbolic classification, emotion, and what might best be called anthropological philosophy. Sadly, after his disagreements with Lévi-Strauss Needham hardly ever, in this later, non-kinship work, referred to him. Some of Needham's works still carried structuralist theory with them (e.g. Needham 1979), while others obscured it or cast it aside in favour of an emotional variety of interpretivism almost unique to Needham's anthropology (e.g., 1981).

In other countries structuralism caught on in various ways between the 1950s and 1970s, but the Dutch and British traditions have remained the prime exemplars respectively of the regional and culture-specific versions. Belgian anthropology has some parallels with anthropology in Holland. Belgian structuralist Luc de Heusch has applied a regional-structural methodology to the study of political processes, kinship transformations, myth, sacrifice, and symbolism in Central Africa (e.g., de Heusch 1982 [1972]) and in Africa more widely (de Heusch 1985). Roy Willis, a British anthropologist and translator of both de Heusch and Lévi-Strauss, has done similar work in Central Africa (see Willis 1981) and has postulated a common structural basis (but with crucial culture-specific differences) for animal symbolism in African societies outside that region (Willis 1974). As we saw in chapter 6, Sir Edmund Leach and Marshall Sahlins also applied a structuralist approach to the study of social transformations. These writers have all added a historical dimension to Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, giving rise to theories of social transformation which both influenced and drew from processualist and Marxist anthropology from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Meanwhile back in France, Louis Dumont, a student of Mauss and one-time colleague of Evans-Pritchard at Oxford, developed a distinct but seminal, regional-structural understanding of social hierarchy in India (see especially Dumont 1980 [1967]). His work has had its followers, and its critics, in all countries in which the study of the Indian subcontinent is a particular focus. Meanwhile in the United States, studies in ethnoscience and cognitive anthropology developed through interests in

human universals, linguistic models, and culture-specific semantic structures which parallel 'structuralism' proper in other countries. Lévi-Strauss himself has frequently praised Americans outside the structuralist tradition as we usually think of it, for their contributions towards his own theories. In Australia and South America too, the intrinsic structuralist thought of the indigenous populations has lent itself well to the development of structuralist ideas among local anthropologists.

Other French anthropologists developed different strands of thought, most broadly structuralist but others less so. Furthermore, the structure of French academia itself, based on research 'teams' (*équipes*) rather than broad-based teaching departments, fostered the creation of diverse ethnographic and theoretical micro-traditions. Lévi-Strauss and Dumont were key foci, but so too were, for example, Marxist theorists such as Maurice Godelier and Claude Meillassoux (chapter 6).

Concluding summary

Structuralism emphasizes form over content, and in a sense denies that there can be content without form. Structures in language at any level (e.g., phonological, morphological, syntactic) have potential analogies in culture of almost any sphere (e.g., kinship, cooking, mythology). Because of this, structuralism made an easy transition from the linguistics of Saussure and the Prague School to the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and his followers.

While the influence of Lévi-Strauss has always remained paramount, structural anthropology is a complex tradition. Theoretical stances have always been defined partly by national concentrations of interest, though national boundaries have never been able to contain good ideas (or indeed bad ideas), and structuralism throughout its history has been both an international and a transdisciplinary phenomenon.

FURTHER READING

Culler's *Saussure* (1976) and Leach's *Lévi-Strauss* (1970) are good introductions to the respective ideas of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. The best source on Saussure's key ideas, however, is the *Course* itself (Saussure 1974 [1916]).

The two volumes of Jakobson's selected writings (1962, 1971) give an idea of Jakobson's influence on Lévi-Strauss. Steiner's *The Prague School* (1982) is another useful source.

There are numerous biographical and analytical studies of Lévi-Strauss, such as those by Boon (1973), Badcock (1975), Sperber (1985 [1982]: 64–93), and Henaff (1998 [1991]). See also *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Lévi-Strauss and

Eribon 1991 [1988]), Lapointe and Lapointe's bibliography (1977), and Pouillon and Maranda's (1970) two-volume collection of papers dedicated to Lévi-Strauss. The A. S. A. conference volume, *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* (Leach 1967), also makes interesting reading. It includes Lévi-Strauss' famous analysis of the story of Asdiwal (a North West Coast myth recorded in four versions by Franz Boas), as well as several critiques of Lévi-Strauss' work.

A readable introduction to structuralism in anthropology generally is Leach's *Culture and Communication* (1976b). For a broader understanding of structuralism through key texts, see de George and de George's *The Structuralists: From Mauss to Lévi-Strauss* (1972). For references to poststructuralist and interpretivist critiques of structuralism, see chapters 9 and 10.