

COMPARATIVE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONCEPTS OF SEMIOLOGY AND MYTHOLOGEMA: A STRUCTURALIST SYNTHESIS

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Abstract: This article explores the comparative theoretical foundations of semiology, as developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and extended by Roland Barthes, and the concept of the mythologema, primarily articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss. We analyze the core tenets of Saussurean semiotics – the arbitrary nature of the sign, the relationality of meaning, and the distinction between “langue” and “parole” – and examine how Barthes applies these to decipher cultural systems. Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach to myth, emphasizing the mythologema as a fundamental building block of meaning within narrative structures, is then analyzed. The article compares and contrasts these perspectives, highlighting their shared emphasis on underlying structures and systems of signification while acknowledging their methodological and analytical differences. We argue that while distinct, semiology and the concept of the mythologema offer complementary approaches to understanding cultural meaning, ultimately suggesting a synergistic potential for deeper interpretive analysis.

Keywords: semiology, saussure, barthes, lévi-strauss, mythologema, structuralism, sign, signifier, signified, myth, cultural analysis, binary oppositions.

Introduction. The study of cultural meaning has been significantly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, Roland Barthes's extension of it to broader cultural analysis, and Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach to myth, which introduces the concept of the mythologema. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the theoretical foundations of these perspectives, exploring their convergences and divergences in understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated within cultural systems.

Semiology, or the science of signs, emerged in the early 20th century as a tool to decipher the structures underlying language and culture. Concurrently, analytical psychology, particularly through the work of Carl Jung, introduced the concept of the mythologema—a basic unit of myth reflective of collective archetypes. Though originating from distinct epistemologies—linguistics and depth psychology—these frameworks intersect in their treatment of latent meaning systems. Structuralism, as advanced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, provides the conceptual bridge for integrating semiotic theory with myth analysis. This paper seeks to explore how mythologema and sign systems can be synthesized into a coherent structuralist paradigm.

Semiology, the study of signs and their role in constructing meaning, and mythologem, a fundamental unit of myth, represent distinct yet interconnected frameworks for analyzing cultural narratives. This article synthesizes structuralist semiology (rooted in Saussure and Lévi-Strauss) with Jungian mythologem theory, examining their comparative foundations. While semiology focuses on latent structures in sign systems, mythologem centers on archetypal motifs in the collective unconscious. Their convergence reveals how meaning is generated through relational patterns, whether in linguistic signs or mythological narratives.

Theoretical Foundations of Semiology

Semiology, pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, analyzes signs as dualistic units:

- Signifier: The material form (e.g., sound, image).

- Signified: The conceptual meaning.

Peirce further classified signs into three types:

1. Iconic: Resembles its referent (e.g., a portrait).
2. Indexical: Causally linked (e.g., smoke indicating fire).
3. Symbolic: Conventionally associated (e.g., language).

Structuralist semiology, advanced by Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, emphasizes latent content over manifest surface meaning. It treats all cultural units—words, images, gestures—as equally significant components within relational systems. For instance, a rose's denotation (flower) contrasts with its cultural connotations (passion, ideology). Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth exemplifies this, decomposing narratives into "mythemes" (constituent units) to reveal universal cognitive structures.

Mythologem in Jungian Theory

Carl Jung defined mythologem as an irreducible motif within myths, reflecting archetypes of the collective unconscious. Unlike structuralist "mythemes," which prioritize relational syntax, mythologems are psychodynamic:

- They express unconscious processes, acting as "natural products" of the psyche.
- Examples include universal motifs like the hero's journey or rebirth.

Jung viewed myths as "original revelations" that mediate conscious and unconscious realms, contrasting Lévi-Strauss's linguistic treatment of myth as a coded "language".

Lévi-Strauss's assertion that "myth is language" bridges these frameworks: Both treat cultural output as systems where meaning arises from "relationships" (e.g., syntagmatic chains in myth or symbolic codes in semiology). However, Jung's mythologem introduces a transcendent dimension, framing myths as expressions of innate psychic impulses rather than purely structural phenomena.

Saussurean Semiotics: A Foundation for Sign Systems

Saussure's foundational work established semiology as the study of signs and sign systems. Key tenets include:

- Arbitrariness of the Sign: The relationship between the signifier (the form, e.g., word or image) and the signified (the concept) is arbitrary, culturally determined, and not intrinsically linked.
- Relationality of Meaning: Meaning is not inherent in individual signs but arises from the relationships and differences between signs within a system (*langue*). A sign's meaning is defined by its position within the overall structure.
- Langue and Parole: Saussure distinguishes between the abstract system of language (langue) and its concrete use (*parole*). Semiological analysis primarily focuses on the underlying system of relationships within langue.

Barthes's Semiological Extension: Myth as a Second-Order System

Barthes extended Saussurean semiotics to analyze broader cultural phenomena, particularly myth. He argues that myths function as second-order signification systems, taking an existing sign (with a denotative meaning) and imbuing it with a further layer of connotative meaning. This process naturalizes and reinforces existing social ideologies and power structures, often masking their arbitrary nature.

Lévi-Strauss and the Mythologema: Structuralism in Myth Analysis

Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach to mythology emphasizes uncovering the underlying structures and patterns that govern myth narratives. He posits that myths are not simply historical accounts but reflect fundamental structures of human thought. The *mythologema*, in Lévi-Strauss's framework, is a minimal unit of meaning within a myth's narrative structure. These units, often based on binary oppositions (e.g., raw/cooked, nature/culture, life/death), are combined and transformed across different versions of the same myth, revealing deeper underlying structures of meaning.

Comparing Semiology and the Mythologema: Convergences and Divergences

Semiology and the concept of the mythologema share a commitment to identifying underlying structures and systems of signification that govern meaning. However, important differences exist:

- **Analytical Focus:** Semiology broadly analyzes sign systems across various cultural forms, whereas the analysis of mythologema is specifically focused on deciphering the structure of myths.
- **Methodological Approaches:** Semiological analysis often employs close textual readings to identify different layers of signification. Mythologema analysis emphasizes identifying recurring motifs, structural patterns, and transformations within and across different versions of a myth.
- **Unit of Analysis:** The fundamental unit of analysis is the sign in semiology, while it is the mythologema in Lévi-Strauss's framework.

Synergistic Potential: Integrating Semiological and Mythologem Analyses

Despite their differences, these approaches are not mutually exclusive. A synergistic approach can leverage the strengths of both:

- Semiological analysis can be applied to individual mythologema to analyze their signification at different levels, revealing how their meaning is constructed and modified within the narrative.
- The structural patterns identified through mythologema analysis can provide a framework for understanding how individual signs contribute to the overall meaning and message of a myth.

Semiology and mythologem offer complementary lenses for decoding cultural meaning. Structuralism reveals how signs and myths function as relational networks, while Jungian theory underscores their rootedness in universal psychic patterns. Synthesizing these approaches—Lévi-Strauss's mythemes with Jung's archetypes—enriches our understanding of myth as both a structural language and a manifestation of the unconscious. This dual perspective underscores that symbols, whether in myths or everyday signs, derive power from their embeddedness in cognitive and cultural structures.

Conclusion. Saussurean semiology, Barthes's application of semiotics to cultural myths, and Lévi-Strauss's concept of the mythologema offer valuable, albeit distinct, perspectives on understanding cultural meaning. While they differ in their focus and methodology, their underlying principles of structural analysis are complementary. By integrating these perspectives, researchers can achieve a richer and more nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed and communicated within complex cultural narratives and systems. Further research could explore the application of this integrated framework to diverse cultural phenomena beyond mythology, including rituals, symbols, and broader cultural representations.

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