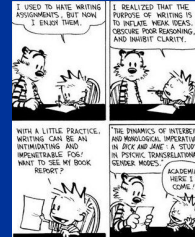# Structuralism

ANTH 348 : Ideas of Culture

For Calvin & Hobbes fans

Claude Levi-Strauss (1908 - 2009)

- *Totemism*, 1963*
- *Structural Anthropology*, Volume I, 1963
- *The Savage Mind*, 1966
- *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 1969
- *The Raw and The Cooked*, 1969
- *From Honey to Ashes*, 1973
- *Tristes Tropiques*, 1974
- *Structural Anthropology*, Volume II, 1976

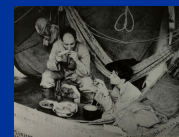*All refer to English translations of original publications in French.

Levi-Strauss on video

- Claude Levi-Strauss
- Claude Levi-Strauss: Return to the Amazon
- Anthropologist Claude Levi-Stauss dies aged 100.
- ANALYSIS: "Lévi-Strauss' work was the pinnacle of structuralism in France".

Claude Levi-Strauss

- Educated at La Sorbonne & University of Paris.
- Traveled to Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1934 to teach.
- Did fieldwork in Brazilian interior with several Indian groups: Bororo, Tupi, Nambikwara.
- Although limited, this fieldwork altered his view of "primitive" peoples.
- Taught in Sao Paulo, New School for Social Research (NY) and the College De France.

Lévi-Strauss and his wife, Dina, in their tent while doing fieldwork in Mato Grosso, Brazil.

Claude Levi-Strauss

- Influenced by writings of Emile Durkheim & Marcel Mauss.
- Also ideas of *Prague School of Structural Linguistics*, especially, Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson.
  - Emphasis on synchronic/descriptive study of language rather than the diachronic/historical study.
- Levi-Strauss sought to use linguistics as a model for other social sciences.
- Like language, *culture is a collection of arbitrary symbols*.

Claude Levi-Strauss

- Not interested in meaning of specific symbols
- Instead looking for patterned way that elements relate to one another in overall system.
- Languages are built up on contrasts between sounds (minimal pairs).
- *Phonemes* are arbitrary units of sound
- Are not meaningful by themselves & must be combined according to some pattern.

20 Vowel Phonemes for American English
AKSES Character /Phoneme Name/

24 Consonant Phonemes for American English
AKSES Character /Phoneme Name/

Claude Levi-Strauss

- Just as words are based on contrasts, so too is human thought, which he says is based on *binary opposition*.
- Levi-Strauss felt that the human mind operates along lines of contrasts – good/bad, up/down, light/dark, culture/nature.

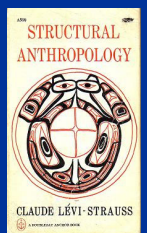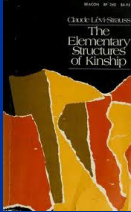| Binary Oppositions		Binary Oppositions	
Adult	Child	Masculine	Feminine
Alien	Human	Patriarchal	Matriarchal
Deceitful	Honest	Prisoner	Civilian
Dependent	Self-sufficient	Organic	Technological
Fury 161	Earth	Technology	No Technology
Industrialisation	Medieval	Violent	Harmless
Male	Female		

BINARY OPPOSITION

LOL

Claude Levi-Strauss

- *Structure* – underlying principles of social life.
  - To be found *in the mind*, not on the ground in social relations, as Radcliffe-Brown claimed.
- Levi-Strauss searched for universal structural principles in three main areas of study
  - classification systems
  - kinship systems
  - myth.

STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

Claude Levi-Strauss

- In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Levi-Strauss looked at marriage & exchange of women as commodities.
- Incest taboo necessitates selection of spouse from outside family.
- Binary distinction between kin & non-kin is resolved by reciprocal exchange of women & formation of kin networks.
- LS believed *fundamental building block of "primitive" kinship structure is the avunculate* – relationship between maternal uncle & sister's son.
- Is the "true atom of kinship" & building block of more complex systems.

Claude Levi-Strauss

- It only makes sense as part of a larger system.
- In numerous analyses of myth, Levi-Strauss tried to examine the unconscious universal patterning of human thought.
- Claims it is only found in its uncontaminated form in "primitive" society.
- In Western society it is buried under layers of cultural interference.
- Must break down myths into constituent elements and uncover the unconscious meaning found in binary relationships.
- Uncovering the hidden structural core will reveal the essential elements of human thought.

Criticisms of Structuralism

- Lack of empiricism
  - many have noted that for Levi-Strauss, empirical reality is irrelevant.
- Structural explanations are immune from falsification
  - they cannot be replicated.
- Make statements that are supposedly valid for all cultures but does so on the basis of relatively few examples.
- Some feel that Levi-Strauss had tendency to selectively cull myths from around world – without concern for any cultural, temporal, or spatial boundaries – in order to find corroborating cases.
- Claimed unitary messages are inherent in the architecture of the human mind.