

MODEL AND STRUCTURE IN C. LEVI-STRAUSS'S "STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY"

This paper is concerned solely with a question of methodology. It does not attempt to assess the adequacy or interpretation of the ethnographic material brought to bear by Lévi-Strauss. I should imagine that some, at the least, of the remarks made in the following pages are already familiar to anthropologists; if they are too familiar, I apologise in advance. The paper is based exclusively on the author's Structural Anthropology, particularly chapters II to V and XV to XVI. These chapters seem to provide a clear enough picture of the methodology and presuppositions of the structural method.

The following seems to be the approach in outline. On the basis of observed facts, the structural anthropologist builds a model to explain those facts (cf. p. 280). Correlated with this model is a structure in reality, and this is what the model maps, or represents. "The structuralist's task... is to recognize and isolate levels of reality which have strategic value from his point of view, namely, which admit of representation as models, whatever their type" (p. 284). Equally, certain practices in a people, insofar as they can be brought under the concept of communication (pp. 48, 61, 83, 296 etc.), can be reckoned as a semantic system, or language. As such, it is a mapping on the social level of a structure found in the human unconsciousness (cf. p. 281). Considered as a mapping, the particular social practice in question is an arbitrary symbolization of that process. Thus, "a kinship system does not consist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals. It exists only in human consciousness: it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation" (p. 50). However, though the symbols are arbitrary from this point of view, from other points of view they may have an inherent value. Indeed certain elements in the mapping can never be reduced as a matter of fact to mere symbols. For instance the women that are used as counters in the communication system comprised by marriage "as producers of signs... can never be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens" (p. 61; cf. pp. 91-94.)

The major question one asks here is "What is the theoretical and methodological effect of the postulation of a real structure answering to a model, whether the model be the one constructed by the anthropologist or a conscious model of the particular group?" Prime attention obviously attaches to the anthropologist's model, rather than any conscious model. "For conscious models, which are usually known as "norms", are by definition very poor ones, since they are not intended to explain the phenomena but to perpetuate them" (p. 281). Equally, the anthropologist's model is, or ought to be, superior to the model that is a particular practice, since the former model is designed to explain a greater range of arbitrary mappings than the arbitrary mapping that is the latter: for instance, one model constructed by the anthropologist can explain the various models constituted by kinship, mythology and art.

One important characteristic of the anthropologist's model is that it is analytic, in the technical sense, whereby any proposed counter-example to the model in question by the very fact that if accepted it would be a counter-example is ipso facto mal-formed, either simply false or embodying a misinterpretation. (This is, strictly speaking, a consequence of analyticity of course.) It is equally the case that any of the sub-models, whether conscious models or rituals, artistic practices and myths, are analytic within their own terms, within the scope of the range of phenomena to which they are applicable, but the anthropologist's model, ranging over a wider area, is more absolutely analytic. For it is ex hypothesi the most powerful model available.

At the same time, because of the postulation of a real structure corresponding to the model, it has the appearance of an empirically verifiable, 'scientific' model. For the underlying structure is, in theory at any rate, susceptible to empirical investigation, the processes of scientific and, in the present context, psychological, verification or refutation. However, even if some one specific structure that might be postulated should be shown either to be non-existent or not of the type required by the theory, the analytic character of the model will win through, in that it can be held to be the case that, even if this one structure

does not meet the requirements, still there must be some structure answering to the model which the model maps. In this way, the structural approach hovers rather disconcertingly between the analytic and the synthetic.

This same point can be expressed in the following way: such an approach cannot be counted as a synthetic approach unless there is some method of determining what is to count as a structure appropriate to a particular model other than the method, or any method, formulated in terms of, or presupposing the terms of, the model itself.

What is the cause of this situation? Lévi-Strauss constantly draws a parallel between the structural method in anthropology and structural linguistics, and it seems to me that both methods share the difficulty that with relation to semantic systems they cannot explain in a non-tautologous fashion why it is that any system describable by the theory is significant. Since linguistics starts from a significant system, which it analyses into the constituent elements of that system (that is, phonemes as opposed to phones) and has, basically, to identify morphemes and the minimum units of significant discourse of that system, it just cannot be the case that within such a theoretical framework it can explain how it is that the marks and sound-waves in question do have significance. Similarly, philosophers have argued that there can be no criterion for truth. They presuppose a theory of meaningfulness whereby the meaningfulness of any declarative sentence in a language is exhausted by the range of states of affairs in which that sentence is true or false. Therefore, in that any proposed criterion of truth is, ex hypothesi, meaningful it must be that, within the framework of such a theory, a precondition for understanding the criterion is knowledge of what it is for a sentence of the language to be true and false. Thus any criterion for a notion expressed within the range of a theory in which that notion has been used, whether explicitly or implicitly, in order to formulate the theory is necessarily trivially tautological.

Hence, if one takes a system which is a 'language' insofar as it can be described as a system of communication, it cannot be the case that within such a theory one can explain why it is significant, why it is a semantic system: for that it is a semantic system is already presupposed for the theory to be applied to it. Therefore, to say that it is a semantic system because it maps an underlying structure is to say no more than that it is a semantic system, and this much is already guaranteed by the fact that it is a system of communication.

Yet there does seem to be a need to postulate a structure, or something that will fulfill the same role, to underly the model. For Lévi-Strauss, following Jakobson and the majority of structural linguists, represents a 'language' as a set of spatio-temporally bound phenomena, arbitrary in form (sound-waves, kinship, relations etc.) which are significant only insofar as there is something designated by each of the terms. Even in the case of the associated 'values', it is clearly the case that a token cannot achieve a value unless it is already significant, that is, in the terms of the theory in question, designates something. Here the situation is different from that suggested above. For it could be maintained that the present presupposition as to the conditions of meaningfulness belongs to a more powerful theory than that embodying structural descriptions. The latter proceeds from a consideration of actual phenomena, actual languages, actual kinship systems, whereas the former expresses a necessary condition for the possibility of these actual phenomena having the character that they do have, it expresses a necessary condition for the possibility of significance. Thus the structuralist's postulation of an underlying structure can be presented not as a trivial tautology but as an instance of a basic requirement of a yet more powerful theory which any structural model presupposes. The postulation of a structure to underly a particular model will still be a priori, but no longer tautologous.

However, it is simply not the case that in order for a symbol to be meaningful there must be something "in reality" designated by that symbol. If that were so it would be simply impossible ever to intelligibly deny that something existed. Nor would one be able (with any ease or plausibility) to explain the meaningfulness of false sentences. Much more than these considerations would be required to show that far from it being the case that a pre-

condition for meaningfulness is that there be something designated it is always the case that a precondition for the possibility of something being designated, is that the term designating (or being used to designate) be already significant. It is, however, sufficient for our purposes to observe that it is impossible for it to be necessarily the case that every significant term designates something.

Here again it has been suggested (notably by Wittgenstein) that a theory of meaning construed in terms of designation needs to be supplemented by criteria for the identification of designata other than that formulated by the theory in question.

This is as far as space permits these questions being taken. It would however be of great interest to investigate the theoretical point of the introduction of the notion of 'value' into the theory in relation to the characterization of language in terms of communication, and to examine the plausibility of the assumption that there is a single, determinate set of facts to be observed and described on the observational level (p. 280) and the interrelation between this thesis and Lévi-Strauss's suggestion that there is a basic structuring of the mind common to everyone.

What has been done in this paper is to suggest, not that a structuralist approach to explanation is incorrect, but that the postulation of structures in the real world correlated with their models is either tautologous or, at the least, dubious.

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Reference

C. Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, 1965.