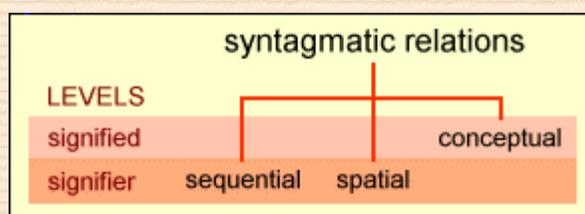


# Semiotics for Beginners

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## Syntagmatic Analysis

Saussure, of course, emphasized the theoretical importance of the relationship of signs to each other. He also noted that 'normally we do not express ourselves by using single linguistic signs, but groups of signs, organised in complexes which themselves are signs' ([Saussure 1983, 127](#); [Saussure 1974, 128](#)). However, in practice he treated the individual word as the primary example of the sign. Thinking and communication depend on *discourse* rather than isolated signs. Saussure's focus on the language *system* rather than on its *use* meant that discourse was neglected within his framework. The linking together of signs was conceived solely in terms of the grammatical possibilities which the system offered. This is a key feature of the Saussurean framework which led some theorists to abandon semiotics altogether in favour of a focus on 'discourse' whilst leading others to seek to reformulate a more socially-oriented semiotics (e.g. [Hodge & Kress 1988](#)). However, this is not to suggest that structural analysis is worthless. Analysts still engage in formal studies of narrative, film and television editing and so on which are based on structuralist principles. It remains important for anyone interested in the analysis of texts to be aware of what these principles are. Structuralists study texts as *syntagmatic* structures. The syntagmatic analysis of a text (whether it is verbal or non-verbal) involves studying its structure and the relationships between its parts. Structuralist semioticians seek to identify elementary constituent *segments* within the text - its syntagms. The study of syntagmatic relations reveals the conventions or 'rules of combination' underlying the production and interpretation of texts (such as the grammar of a language). The use of one syntagmatic structure rather than another within a text influences meaning.



Before discussing narrative, perhaps the most widespread form of syntagmatic structure and one which dominates structuralist semiotic studies, it is worth reminding ourselves that there are other syntagmatic forms. Whilst *narrative* is based on *sequential* (and causal)

relationships (e.g. in film and television narrative sequences), there are also syntagmatic forms based on *spatial* relationships (e.g. *montage* in posters and photographs, which works through juxtaposition) and on *conceptual* relationships (such as in exposition or argument). The distinctions between the modes of narrative, description, exposition and argument are not clear-cut ([Brooks & Warren 1972, 44](#)). Many texts contain more than one type of syntagmatic structure, though one may be dominant.

*Exposition* relies on the conceptual structure of argument or description. A useful discussion of the syntagmatic structure of *argument* (in relation to the mass media) can be found in [Tolson \(1996\)](#). Briefly, the structure of an argument is both serial and hierarchical. It involves three basic elements:

- a proposition or series of propositions;
- evidence;
- justifications.

[\(Tolson 1996, 29-33\)](#)

The conventions of expository prose in English have been listed as follows: 'A clearly defined topic, introduction, body which explicates all but nothing more than the stated topic, paragraphs which chain from one to the next, and a conclusion which tells the reader what has been discussed... no digression... is permitted on the grounds that it would violate unity' (R B Kaplan & S Ostler, cited by [Swales 1990, 65](#)). Such structural conventions are associated by some theorists with 'masculine' rather than 'feminine' modes of discourse ([Goodman 1990; Easthope 1990](#)). Masculine modes are held to involve clearly observable linear structures with 'tight', orderly and logical arguments leading to 'the main point' without backtracking or side-tracking. They can be seen as 'defensive' structures which seek to guard the author against academic criticism. As such these structures tend to support 'masculine' modes of discourse and to exclude 'women's ways of knowing'. Even without tying such conventions to gender bias it is clear that they facilitate certain modes of discourse and frustrate others.

One of the features which Anthony Easthope characterizes as stereotypically 'masculine' is a concern for seamless textual unity ([Easthope 1990](#)). Formal writing in general tends to have less obvious 'loose ends' than does casual discourse. Whilst, for the existentialist at least, there are always loose ends in the interpretation of experience, in most expository writing 'loose-ends' are considered to be 'out of place': stylistic seamlessness, unity and coherence are expected. A writing teacher asserts that 'in a finished work... the flimsy scaffolding is taken away' ([Murray 1978, 90-1](#)). Another author, drawing attention to this, remarks: 'the seams do not (I hope) show' ([Smith 1982, 2](#)). Seamlessness has a particularly high priority in science: 'the scientific article is expected to be a finished and polished piece of work' ([Hagstrom 1965, 31](#)). A cohesive structure reinforces a sense of the argument as 'coherent'. The tidiness of academic texts may also misleadingly suggest the enduring nature of the positions which they represent.

The basic three-part structure of introduction, main body and conclusion is satirized in the sardonic advice: 'First say what you're going to say, then say it, then say what you've already said.' Whilst this formulation masks the inexplicitness of academic writing, it highlights its structural closure. Structural closure suggests that 'the matter is closed' - that the text is 'finished'. Seamlessness and sequential structures reinforce an impression of the ground having been covered, of all the questions having been answered, of nothing important having been left out. Though it is a lie, closure suggests mastery of the material through its control of form. As David Lodge puts it, 'scholarly discourse aspires to the condition of monologue inasmuch as it tries to say the last word on a given subject, to affirm its mastery over all previous words on that subject' ([Lodge 1987, 96](#)).

Of course, despite the occasional comment in reviews that a text is 'an exhaustive treatment' of its subject, no text can say everything that could be said; there is no first or last word on any subject. But competent academic writers typically learn to create an illusion of completeness which amounts to an attempt to prevent the reader from 'but-ing' in. Conventional academic textual structures frame the issues and guide the reader towards the author's resolution of them. Academic discourse uses univocal textual closure as a way of both controlling the reader and subordinating the topic to the author's purposes. Such closed textual structures can be seen as reflecting authorial attempts to create worlds whose completeness, order and clarity demand our recognition of them as somehow more absolute, more objective, more 'real', than the dynamic flux of everyday experience. Academic authors first fragment that which is experienced as seamless, and then, in conforming to various conventions in the use of the printed word, seek to give an impression of the seamlessness of their creations. The drive towards formal seamlessness suggests an imitation of the existential seamlessness, and hence 'authenticity', of lived experience.

In any expository writing, literary seamlessness may mask weaknesses or 'gaps' in the argument; it also masks the authorial manipulation involved in constructing an apparently 'natural' flow of words and ideas. For instance, the orderliness of the scientific paper offers a misleadingly tidy picture of the process of scientific inquiry. Representation always seems tidier than reality. Seamlessness in writing is a Classical and 'realist' convention which may seem to suggest 'objectivity': whereas Romantic craftsmanship typically features the marks of the maker and may even employ 'alienation' - deliberately drawing attention to the making. Robert Merton argued for the reform of scientific writing, suggesting that 'if true art consists in concealing all signs of art [the Classical convention], true science consists in revealing its scaffolding as well as its finished structure' ([Merton 1968, 70](#)). Such 'visible architecture' has similarly been commended in the practice of historians ([Megill & McCloskey 1987, 235](#)). As the linguist Edward Sapir famously remarked, 'all grammars leak' ([Sapir 1971, 38](#)). Those who would learn from semiotics should search for structural leaks, seams and scaffolding as signs of the making of any representation, and also for what has been denied, hidden or excluded so that the text may seem to tell 'the whole truth'.

Theorists often assert that, unlike verbal language, the visual image is not suited to exposition (e.g. [Peirce 1931-58, 2.291](#); [Gombrich 1982, 138, 175](#)). Syntagms are often logocentrically defined purely as sequential or temporal 'chains'. But *spatial* relations are also syntagmatic. Whilst most obviously associated with art and photography, they are no less structurally important alongside temporal syntagms in media such as television, cinema and the World Wide Web. Unlike sequential syntagmatic relations, which are essentially about *before* and *after*, spatial syntagmatic relations include:

- above/below,
- in front/behind,
- close/distant,
- left/right (which can also have sequential significance),
- north/south/east/west, and

inside/outside (or centre/periphery).

Such structural relationships are not semantically neutral. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have shown how fundamental 'orientational metaphors' are routinely linked to key concepts in a culture ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Chapter 4](#)). Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen identify three key spatial dimensions in visual texts: left/right, top/bottom and centre/margin ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998](#)).

The horizontal and vertical axes are not neutral dimensions of pictorial representation. Since writing and reading in European cultures proceed primarily along a horizontal axis from left to right (as in English but unlike, for instance, Arabic, Hebrew and Chinese), the 'default' for reading a picture within such reading/writing cultures (unless attention is diverted by some salient features) is likely to be generally in the same direction. This is especially likely where pictures are embedded in written text, as in the case of magazines and newspapers. There is thus a potential sequential significance in the left-hand and right-hand elements of a visual image - a sense of 'before' and 'after'. Kress and van Leeuwen relate the left-hand and right-hand elements to the linguistic concept of 'the Given' and 'the New'. They argue that on those occasions when pictures make significant use of the horizontal axis, positioning some elements left of centre and others right of centre, then the left-hand side is 'the side of the "already given", something the reader is assumed to know already', a familiar, well-established and agreed-upon point of departure - something which is commonsensical, assumed and self-evident, whilst the right-hand side is the side of the New. 'For something to be New means that it is presented as something which is not yet known, or perhaps not yet agreed upon by the viewer, hence as something to which the viewer must pay special attention' - something more surprising, problematic or contestable ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 186-192](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998, 189-193](#)). The concepts of the Given and the New owe their origin to Hallidayan linguistics ([Halliday 1994](#)).

The vertical compositional axis also carries connotations. Arguing for the fundamental significance of orientational metaphors in framing experience, Lakoff and Johnson observe that (in English usage) *up* has come to be associated with *more* and *down* with *less*. They outline further associations:

- *up* is associated with goodness, virtue, happiness, consciousness, health, life, the future, high status, having control or power, and with rationality, whilst
- *down* is associated with badness, depravity, sickness, death, low status, being subject to control or power, and with emotion  
([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Chapter 4](#)).

For one signifier to be located 'higher' than another is consequently not simply a spatial relationship but also an evaluative one in relation to the signifieds for which they stand. Erving Goffman's slim volume *Gender Advertisements* (1979) concerned the depictions of male and female figures in magazine advertisements. Although it was unsystematic and only some of his observations have been supported in subsequent empirical studies, it is widely celebrated as a classic of visual sociology. Probably the most relevant of his

observations in the context of these notes was that 'men tend to be located higher than women' in these ads, symbolically reflecting the routine subordination of women to men in society ([Goffman 1979, 43](#)). Offering their own speculative mapping of the connotations of top and bottom, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that where an image is structured along a vertical axis, the upper and lower sections represent an opposition between 'the Ideal' and 'the Real' respectively. They suggest that the lower section in pictorial layouts tends to be more 'down-to-earth', concerned with practical or factual details, whilst the upper part tends to be concerned with abstract or generalized possibilities (a polarisation between respectively 'particular/general', 'local/global' etc.). In many Western printed advertisements, for instance, 'the upper section tends to... show us "what might be"; the lower section tends to be more informative and practical, showing us "what is"' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 193-201](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998, 193-195](#)).



The third key spatial dimension discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen is that of centre and margin. The composition of some visual images is based primarily not on a left-right or top-bottom structure but on a dominant centre and a periphery. 'For something to be presented as Centre means that it is presented as the nucleus of the information on which all the other elements are in some sense subservient. The Margins are these ancillary, dependent elements' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 206](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998, 196-198](#)). This is related to the fundamental perceptual distinction between *figure and ground* (see [Langholz Leymore 1975, 37ff](#) in relation to advertisements). Selective perception involves 'foregrounding' some features and 'backgrounding' others. We owe the concept of 'figure' and 'ground' in perception to the Gestalt psychologists: notably Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967) and Kurt Koffka (1886-1941). Confronted by a visual image, we seem to need to separate a dominant shape (a 'figure' with a definite contour) from what our current concerns relegate to 'background' (or 'ground'). In visual images, the figure tends to be located centrally.

In one particular visual form - that of visual advertisements in print - relationships can be investigated, for instance, between key elements of *content* such as *product*, *props*, *setting* and *actors* ([Millum 1975, 88ff](#); see also [Langholz Leymore 1975, 64ff](#) and [Leiss et al. 1990, 230ff](#)), and between key aspects of *form* such as *headline*, *illustration*, *copy* and *logo/slogan* ([Millum 1975, 83](#)).

Turning from spatial to sequential syntagms brings us to *narrative* (which, as noted, may even underlie left/right spatial structures). Some critics claim that differences between narratives and non-narratives relate to differences among media, instancing individual drawings, paintings and photographs as non-narrative forms; others claim that narrative is a 'deep structure' independent of the medium ([Stern 1998, 5](#)). *Narrative theory (or narratology)* is a major interdisciplinary field in its own right, and is not necessarily framed within a semiotic perspective, although 'the analysis of narrative is an important branch of semiotics' ([Culler 1981, 186](#)). Semiotic narratology is concerned with narrative

in any mode - literary or non-literary, fictional or non-fictional, verbal or visual - but tends to focus on minimal narrative units and the 'grammar of the plot' (some theorists refer to 'story grammars'). It follows in the tradition of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp and the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Christian Metz observed that 'a narrative has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world' ([Metz 1974, 17](#)). There are no 'events' in the world - narrative form is needed to create an event. Perhaps the most basic narrative syntagm is a linear temporal model composed of three phases - *equilibrium-disruption-equilibrium* - a 'chain' of events corresponding to the beginning, middle and end of a story (or, as Philip Larkin put it, describing the formula of the classic novel: 'a beginning, a *muddle* and an end'; *my emphasis*). In the orderly Aristotelian narrative form, *causation* and *goals* turn *story* (chronological events) into *plot*: events at the beginning cause those in the middle, and events in the middle cause those at the end. This is the basic formula for classic Hollywood movies in which the storyline is given priority over everything else. The film-maker Jean-Luc Godard declared that he liked a film to have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order; in 'classical' (realist) narrative, events are always in that order, providing continuity and closure. Roland Barthes argued that narrative is basically translatable - 'international, transhistorical, transcultural' ([Barthes 1977, 79](#)) and Barbara Stern comments that 'plots can be actualized in any medium capable of communicating two time orders (film, dance, opera, comic strips, interactive media, and so forth) and can be transposed from one medium to another' ([Stern 1998, 9](#)). Some theorists argue that the translatability of narrative makes it unlike other codes and such commentators grant narrative the privileged status of a 'metacode'.

Andrew Tolson notes that insofar as they are formulaic, 'narratives reduce the unique or the unusual to familiar and regular patterns of expectation' ([Tolson 1996, 43](#)). They provide structure and coherence. In this respect they are similar to [schemas](#) for familiar events in everyday life. Of course, what constitutes an 'event' is itself a construction: 'reality' cannot be reduced objectively to discrete temporal units; what counts as an 'event' is determined by the purposes of the interpreter. However, turning experience into narratives seems to be a fundamental feature of the human drive to make meaning. Some theorists have argued that 'human beings are fundamentally story-tellers who experience themselves and their lives in narrative terms' ([Burr 1995, 137](#)).

Coherence is no guarantee of referential correspondence. The narrative form itself has a content of its own; the medium has a message. Narrative is such an automatic choice for representing events that it seems unproblematic and 'natural'. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress argue that the use of a familiar narrative structure serves 'to naturalize the content of the narrative itself' ([Hodge & Kress 1988, 230](#)). Where narratives end in a return to predictable equilibrium this is referred to as narrative *closure*. Closure is often effected as the resolution of an opposition. Structural closure is regarded by many theorists as reinforcing a preferred reading, or in Hodge and Kress's terms, reinforcing the status quo. According to theorists applying the principles of Jacques Lacan, conventional narrative (in dominant forms of literature, cinema and so on) also plays a part in the

constitution of the subject. Whilst narrative appears to demonstrate unity and coherence within the text, the subject participates in the sense of closure (in part through identification with characters). 'The coherence of narrative reciprocally reinscribes the coherence of the subject', returning the subject to the pre-linguistic realm of the Imaginary where the self had greater fixity and less fluidity than in the Symbolic realm of verbal language (Nichols 1981, 78).

The writing style of professional historians has traditionally involved a variant of the nineteenth-century 'realist' novelist's omniscient narrator and fluent narrative. Historians have only fragmentary 'sources', but 'the style exerts pressure to produce a whole and continuous story, sustaining the impression of omniscience, leaping over evidential voids' (Megill & McCloskey 1987, 226). Narrative may imply continuity where there is none. Foucault's poststructuralist history of ideas is radical in insisting instead on 'ruptures', 'discontinuities' and 'disjunctions' (Foucault 1970). Reflecting on his explorations of historiography in his book entitled *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White observes that 'narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form... but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications' (White 1987, ix). He adds that 'real life can never be truthfully represented as having the kind of formal coherency met with in the conventional, well-made or fabulistic story' (*ibid.*).

The structuralist semiotician's inductive search for underlying structural patterns highlights the similarities between what may initially seem to be very different narratives. As Barthes notes, for the structuralist analyst 'the first task is to divide up narrative and... define the smallest narrative units... Meaning must be the criterion of the unit: it is the functional nature of certain segments of the story that makes them units - hence the name "functions" immediately attributed to these first units' (Barthes 1977, 88). In a highly influential book, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp interpreted a hundred fairy tales in terms of around 30 'functions'. 'Function is understood as an act of character defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action' (Propp 1928, 21). Such functions are basic units of action. The folktales analysed by Propp were all based on the same basic formula:

The basic tale begins with either injury to a victim, or the lack of some important object. Thus, at the very beginning, the end result is given: it will consist in the retribution for the injury or the acquisition of the thing lacked. The hero, if he is not himself personally involved, is sent for, at which two key events take place.

He meets a donor (a toad, a hag, a bearded old man, etc.), who after testing him for the appropriate reaction (for some courtesy, for instance) supplies him with a magical agent (ring, horse, cloak, lion) which enables him to pass victoriously through his ordeal.

Then of course, he meets the villain, engaging him in the decisive combat. Yet, paradoxically enough, this episode, which would seem to be the central one, is not irreplaceable. There is an alternative track, in which the hero finds himself before a series of tasks or labours which, with the help of his agent, he is ultimately able to

solve properly...

The latter part of the tale is little more than a series of retarding devices: the pursuit of the hero on his way home, the possible intrusion of a false hero, the unmasking of the latter, with the ultimate transfiguration, marriage and/or coronation of the hero himself. (Jameson 1972, 65-6)

As Barthes notes, structuralists avoid defining human agents in terms of 'psychological essences', and participants are defined by analysts not in terms of 'what they are' as 'characters' but in terms of 'what they do' (Barthes 1977, 106). Propp listed seven *roles*: the *villain*, the *donor*, the *helper*, the *sought-for-person (and her father)*, the *dispatcher*, the *hero* and the *false hero* and schematized the various 'functions' within the story as follows:

1	Initial Situation	Members of family of hero introduced.
2	Absentation	One of the members absents himself from home.
3	Interdiction	An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
4	Violation	An interdiction is violated.
5	Reconnaissance	The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
6	Delivery	The villain receives information about his victim.
7	Trickery	The villain attempts to deceive the victim.
8	Complicity	The victim submits to deception, unwittingly helps his enemy.
9	Villainy	The villain causes harm or injury to members of the family.
10	Lack	One member of a family lacks something or wants something.
11	Mediation	Misfortune is known. Hero is dispatched.
12	Counteraction	Seekers decide to agree on counteraction.
13	Departure	The hero leaves home.
14	1st function of donor	Hero is tested, receives magical agent donor or helper.
15	Hero's Reaction	Hero reacts to action of the future donor.
16	Receipt of Magic Agent	Hero acquires the use of magical agent.
17	Spatial Transference	Hero is led to object of search.
18	Struggle	Hero and villain join in direct combat.
19	Branding	Hero is branded.
20	Victory	Villain is defeated
21	Liquidation	Initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.
22	Return	The hero returns.
23	Pursuit	A chase: the hero is pursued.
24	Rescue	Rescue of hero from pursuit.
25	Unrecognized	The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another arrival country.

26	Unfounded claims	A false hero presents unfounded claims.
27	Difficult task	A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
28	Solution	The task is resolved.
29	Recognition	The hero is recognized.
30	Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed.
31	Transfiguration	The hero is given a new appearance.
32	Punishment	The villain is punished.
33	Wedding	The hero is married and ascends the throne.

This form of analysis downplays the specificity of individual texts in the interests of establishing *how* texts mean rather than *what* a particular text means. It is by definition, a 'reductive' strategy, and some literary theorists argue that there is a danger that in applying it, 'Russian folk tales become indistinguishable from the latest episode of *The Sweeney*, from *Star Wars* or from a Raymond Chandler novel' (Woolacott 1982, 96). Even Barthes noted that 'the first analysts of narrative were attempting... to see all the world's stories... within a single structure' and that this was a task which was 'ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference' (Barthes 1974, 3). Difference is, after all, what identifies both the sign and the text. Despite this objection, Fredric Jameson suggests that the method has redeeming features. For instance, the notion of a grammar of plots allows us to see 'the work of a generation or a period in terms of a given model (or basic plot paradigm), which is then varied and articulated in as many ways possible until it is somehow exhausted and replaced by a new one' (Jameson 1972, 124).

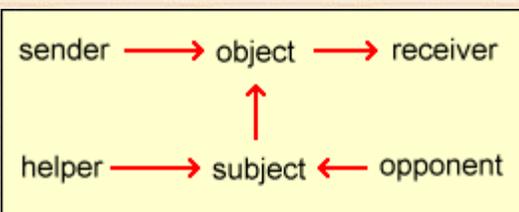
Unlike Propp, both Lévi-Strauss and Greimas based their interpretations of narrative structure on underlying oppositions. Lévi-Strauss saw the myths of a culture as variations on a limited number of basic themes built upon oppositions related to nature versus culture. Any myth could be reduced to a fundamental structure. He wrote that 'a compilation of known tales and myths would fill an imposing number of volumes. But they can be reduced to a small number of simple types if we abstract from among the diversity of characters a few elementary functions' (Lévi-Strauss 1972, 203-204). Myths help people to make sense of the world in which they live. Lévi-Strauss saw myths as a kind of a message from our ancestors about humankind and our relationship to nature, in particular, how we became separated from other animals. However, the meaning was not to be found in any individual narrative but in the patterns underlying the myths of a given culture. Myths make sense only as part of a system. Edmund Leach makes this clearer by relating it to information theory (Leach 1970, 59). If we imagine that we are shouting a message to someone almost out of earshot, we may need to shout the message many times with changes of wording so as to include sufficient 'redundancy' to overcome the interference of various kinds of 'noise'. Some of the versions heard will lack some of the elements originally included, but by collating the different versions the message becomes clearer. Another way of looking at it is to see each mythical narrative as a different instrumental part in a musical score, and it is this elusive 'score' which Lévi-Strauss pursues. He treated the form of myths as a kind of language. He reported that his initial method of analysing the structure of myths into 'gross constituent units' or

'mythemes' involved 'breaking down its story into the shortest possible sentences' ([Lévi-Strauss 1972, 211](#)). This approach was based on an analogy with the 'morpheme', which is the smallest meaningful unit in linguistics. In order to explain the structure of a myth, Lévi-Strauss classified each mytheme in terms of its 'function' within the myth and finally related the various kinds of function to each other. He saw the possible combinations of mythemes as being governed by a kind of underlying universal grammar which was part of the deep structure of the mind itself. 'The study of myths is to Lévi-Strauss what the study of dreams was to Freud: the "royal road" to the unconscious' ([Wiseman & Groves 2000, 134](#)).

A good example of the Lévi-Straussian method is provided by Victor Larrucia in his own analysis of the story of 'Little Red Riding-Hood' (originating in the late seventeenth century in a tale by Perrault) ([Larrucia 1975](#)). According to this method the narrative is summarized in several columns, each corresponding to some unifying function or theme. The original sequence (indicated by numbers) is preserved when the table is read row-by-row.

1 Grandmother's illness causes mother to make Grandmother food	2 Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH) obeys mother and goes off to wood	3 LRRH meets (Wolf as) friend and talks	
4 Woodcutter's presence causes Wolf to speak to LRRH	5 LRRH obeys Wolf and takes long road to Grandmother's	6 Grandmother admits (Wolf as) LRRH	7 Wolf eats Grandmother
		8 LRRH meets (Wolf as) Grandmother	
	9 LRRH obeys Grandmother and gets into bed	10 LRRH questions (Wolf as) Grandmother	11 Wolf eats LRRH

Rather than offering any commentators' suggestions as to what themes these columns represent, I leave it to readers to speculate for themselves. Suggestions can be found in the references ([Larrucia 1975](#); [Silverman & Torode 1980, 314ff](#)).



The Lithuanian structuralist semiotician Algirdas Greimas proposed a grammar of narrative which could generate any known narrative structure ([Greimas 1983](#); [Greimas 1987](#)). As a result of a 'semiotic reduction' of Propp's seven roles he identified three types of narrative syntagms:

*syntagms performanciels* - tasks and struggles; *syntagms contractuels* - the establishment or breaking of contracts; *syntagms disjonctionnels* - departures and arrivals ([Greimas 1987](#); [Culler 1975, 213](#); [Hawkes 1977, 94](#)). Greimas claimed that three basic binary oppositions underlie all narrative themes, actions and character types (which he collectively calls 'actants'), namely: *subject/object* (Propp's *hero* and *sought-for-person*), *sender/receiver* (Propp's *dispatcher* and *hero* - again) and *helper/opponent* (conflations of Propp's *helper* and *donor*, plus the *villain* and the *false hero*) - note that Greimas argues

that the hero is both *subject* and *receiver*. The *subject* is the one who seeks; the *object* is that which is sought. The *sender* sends the object and the *receiver* is its destination. The *helper* assists the action and the *opponent* blocks it. He extrapolates from the *subject-verb-object* sentence structure, proposing a fundamental, underlying 'actantial model' as the basis of story structures. He argues that in traditional syntax, 'functions' are the roles played by words - the *subject* being the one performing the action and the *object* being 'the one who suffers it' (Jameson 1972, 124). Terence Hawkes summarizes Greimas's model: a narrative sequence employs 'two actants whose relationship must be either oppositional or its reverse; and on the surface level this relationship will therefore generate fundamental actions of disjunction and conjunction, separation and union, struggle and reconciliation etc. The movement from one to the other, involving the transfer on the surface of some entity - a quality, an object - from one actant to the other, constitutes the essence of the narrative' (Hawkes 1977, 90). For Greimas, stories thus share a common 'grammar'. However, critics such as Jonathan Culler have not always been convinced of the validity of Greimas's methodology or of the workability or usefulness of his model (Culler 1975, 213-214, 223-224).

Like Greimas, in his book *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969), the Bulgarian Tzvetan Todorov also offered a 'grammar' of narrative - in this case based on the stories of Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353). For Todorov the basic syntactic units of narrative consist of *propositions* (such as *X makes love to Y*) which can be organized into *sequences*. A proposition is formed by the combination of *character* (noun) with an *attribute* (adjective) or an *action* (verb). In *The Decameron*, *attributes* consisted of states, internal properties and external conditions; there were three basic actions ('to modify a situation', 'to transgress' and 'to punish'). *Sequences* were based on temporal relations, logical relations and spatial relations. Each story within *The Decameron* constituted a kind of extended sentence, combining these units in various ways (Hawkes 1977, 95-99).

In a more popular context, Umberto Eco also focused on a finite corpus based on a single author - deriving a basic narrative scheme in relation to the James Bond novels (one could do much the same with the films):



- M moves and gives a task to Bond.
- The villain moves and appears to Bond.
- Bond moves and gives a first check to the villain or the villain gives first check to Bond.
- Woman moves and shows herself to Bond.
- Bond consumes woman: possesses her or begins her seduction.
- The villain captures Bond.
- The villain tortures Bond.
- Bond conquers the villain.
- Bond convalescing enjoys woman, whom he then loses.

(Eco 1966, 52)

Unlike Propp and Greimas, Eco goes beyond the reductive formalism of structural analysis, making links with the broader context of literary and ideological discourses

[\(Woollacott 1982, 96-7\).](#)

Syntagmatic analysis can be applied not only to verbal texts but also to audio-visual ones. In film and television, a syntagmatic analysis would involve an analysis of how each *frame*, *shot*, *scene* or *sequence* related to the others (these are the standard levels of analysis in film theory). At the lowest level is the individual *frame*. Since films are projected at a rate of 24 frames a second, the viewer is never conscious of individual frames, but significant frames can be isolated by the analyst. At the next level up, a *shot* is a 'single take' - an unedited sequence of frames which may include camera movement. A shot is terminated by a cut (or other transition). A *scene* consists of more than one shot set in a single place and time. A *sequence* spans more than one place and or/time but it is a logical or thematic sequence (having 'dramatic unity'). The linguistic model often leads semioticians to a search for units of analysis in audio-visual media which are analogous to those used in linguistics. In the semiotics of film, crude equivalents with written language are sometimes postulated: such as the frame as morpheme (or word), the shot as sentence, the scene as paragraph, and the sequence as chapter (suggested equivalences vary amongst commentators) (see [Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 39ff](#)). For members of the Glasgow University Media Group the basic unit of analysis was the *shot*, delimited by cuts and with allowance made for camera movement within the shot and for the accompanying soundtrack ([Davis & Walton 1983b, 43](#)). Shots can be broken into smaller meaningful units (above the level of the frame), but theorists disagree about what these might be. Above the level of the sequence, other narrative units can also be posited.

Christian Metz offered elaborate syntagmatic categories for narrative film ([Metz 1974, Chapter 5](#)) For Metz, these syntagms were analogous to sentences in verbal language, and he argued that there were eight key filmic syntagms which were based on ways of ordering narrative space and time.

- The *autonomous shot* (e.g. establishing shot, insert)
- The *parallel syntagm* (montage of motifs)
- The *bracketing syntagm* (montage of brief shots)
- The *descriptive syntagm* (sequence describing one moment)
- The *alternating syntagm* (two sequences alternating)
- The *scene* (shots implying temporal continuity)
- The *episodic sequence* (organized discontinuity of shots)
- The *ordinary sequence* (temporal with some compression)

However, Metz's '*grande syntagmatique*' has not proved an easy system to apply to some films. In their study of children's understanding of television, [Hodge and Tripp \(1986, 20\)](#) divide syntagms into four kinds, based on syntagms existing in the same time (*synchronic*), different times (diachronic), same space (syntopic), and different space (*diatopic*).

- *Synchronic/syntopic* (one place, one time: one shot)
- *Diachronic/syntopic* (same place sequence over time)
- *Synchronic/diatopic* (different places at same time)

- *Diachronic/diatopic* (shots related only by theme)

They add that whilst these are all *continuous syntagms* (single shots or successive shots), there are also *discontinuous syntagms* (related shots separated by others).

Beyond the fourfold distinction between frames, shots, scenes and sequences, the interpretative frameworks of film theorists differ considerably. In this sense at least, there is no cinematic 'language'.



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