



## Binary Opposition and Structuralism

'Binary opposition' is a subtle way in which texts are subconsciously interpreted by readers and listeners. The existence of 'binaries' within a text (and they exist in all texts) acts to develop often powerful layers of meaning that work to maintain and reinforce a society or culture's dominant ideologies. Such uses and interpretations occur sub-consciously because both the creator and the user of the text are a part of a context that is permeated by certain ideological beliefs and mind-set (for a fuller, step-by-step guide to binary opposition as well as ideology visit [www.englishbiz.co.uk](http://www.englishbiz.co.uk)).

- ▶ Spotting how binaries act to create layers of meaning allows you to create a highly subtle analysis and discussion (including on texts you write yourself) – and remember that subtlety always gains the highest marks.

The idea originated as part of an important 'theory of meaning' that attempted to map out how people arrive at an interpretation of either reality or ideas. The theory began life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the work of linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. Much later, these ideas were developed by two leading French philosophers, Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes who incorporated Saussure's ideas into an all-encompassing theory of meaning called structuralism.

Levi-Strauss and Barthes were fascinated by Saussure's realisation that meaning (and thus any concept of what we call reality) can exist only at the level of idea.

- ▶ At the core of this is the recognition that any meaning we attribute to a thing can neither be inherent in the thing itself nor be something we arrive at independently; instead, meaning must always be, at least in part, a 'construct' and a 'given', i.e. something we learn from others.

According to structuralism, anything that acts to signify meaning – objects from reality, words, ideas and images – can do so only through a process akin to symbolism, i.e. the meaning will, in important ways, be culturally derived (rather like a rose can connote, at a symbolic level, 'romance'). Levi-Strauss and Barthes went on to realise that meaning, in fact, results from a complex association of ideas about the thing itself plus other ideas that are the thing's 'cultural opposite', what they called its cultural or 'binary opposite'.

- ▶ When we interpret a thing, therefore, we arrive at an understanding of it not by any positive attribution of meaning to the thing itself but through a system of differences between culturally 'opposing' ideas.
- ▶ This will become more obvious if you work through the process of interpretation you yourself will be using for some everyday words and ideas. Take the word 'hero', for example. You should be able to recognise that your interpretation very much depends on several other meanings of associated ideas and words – most especially of course, the idea of 'coward'. But – and this is a very large 'but' – other cultural ideas also come into play and contribute to this word's very complex and layered meaning. For example, seemingly unrelated or distant ideas of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' have an important part to play. Thus, an innocent-seeming word like 'hero' carries with it a great deal of 'cultural baggage' and ideological power: it acts to maintain and reinforce a whole series of cultural values, including many stereotypical ones – the dominance of masculine values, for one!

Barthes suggested that all meaning operates in this way but for your purposes you should stick to those meanings that work only to reinforce a particular ideological mind-set, i.e. meanings that work to maintain, develop or reinforce key cultural ideas. Think of 'binaries' such as 'cool/geeky', 'old/young', 'beauty/ugliness' and the importance of this idea might become clear. There are thousands more.

- ▶ What cultural values do the above binary pairs help to maintain?
- ▶ Can you see how these work to reinforce cultural stereotypes that are at odds with an advanced and enlightened society such as our own?

## Jacques Derrida

A later theorist, Jacques Derrida, took Barthes and Levi-Strauss's ideas a stage further by recognising that these 'binary pairs' were never equal. He saw that within any particular culture, one 'side' of each binary pair tended to be valued or judged in a more privileged light. It was as if one half of each binary pair were somehow 'culturally marked' by a kind of 'presence' that made it more highly valued whereas its binary opposite was 'marked' by a kind of 'absence' that rendered it the less highly valued part of the binary pair.

One example Derrida gave was the culturally important 'masculinity/femininity' binary. Freudian psychoanalytical theory (named after the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud) proposed the idea that 'man' has historically – and stereotypically – been 'marked' by a positive 'presence', whereas the idea of 'woman' has been 'marked' by a negative 'absence'. This works its way through to the ways in which society still often values certain masculine values more highly than feminine values. Of course, such valuations are highly judgmental and work to maintain cultural stereotypes.

These theories provide you with a subtle way to analyse and discuss important aspects related to the way texts of all kinds are interpreted and gain meaning. Consider these cultural binary pairs: 'strength/weakness', 'wealth/poverty', 'male/female', 'gay/straight', 'hi-tech/lo-tech', 'old/young' for example and you should soon detect how important the idea of binary opposition really is. One powerful cultural binary association studied by feminists is the oddly labelled 'Madonna/whore' binary in which women tend to be characterised in either of these two ways. This is seen as an especially powerful cultural opposition that works to support stereotypical views of women in societies that perpetuate male domination or patriarchy.