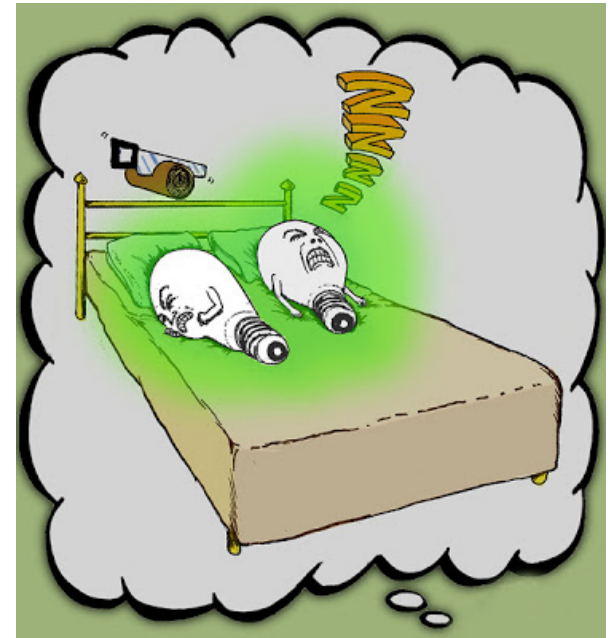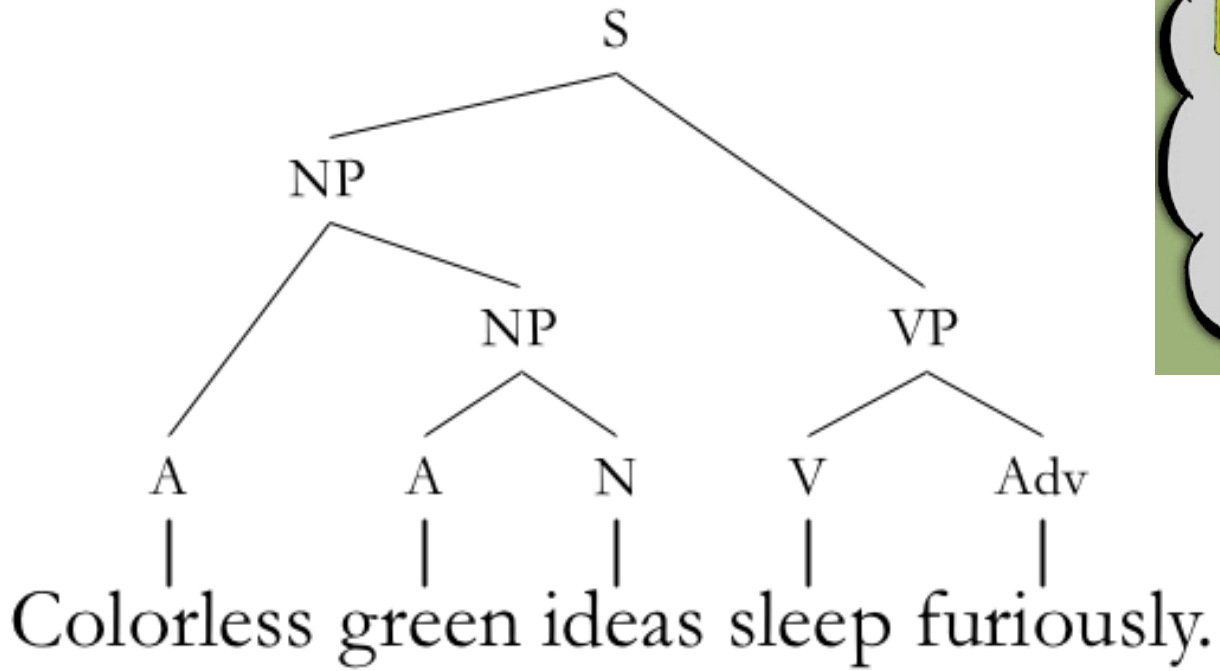# Semiotics

Paradigm to Syntagm

SYNTAGM

Lecture (65)
ANALYSING STRUCTURES

Analysing Structures

- Structuralist analysis focuses on the structural relations which are functional in the signifying system at a particular moment in history.

- It involves identifying the constituent units in a semiotic system (such as a text or socio-cultural practice), the structural relationships between them:

  - oppositions,

  - correlations and logical relations

  - the relation of the parts to the whole.

Analysing Structures

Tree diagram:

```
                    S
          _____/ _____
        NP                   VP
      /    \              /      \
     A      NP           V        Adv
     |     /  \          |         |
     |    A    N         |         |
     |    |    |         |         |
Colorless green ideas  sleep  furiously.
```

Q.1

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

Saussure emphasized that meaning arises from the differences between signifiers; these differences are of two kinds:

- *syntagmatic* (concerning positioning)

- *paradigmatic* (concerning substitution).

- The plane of the syntagm is that of the combination of 'this-and-this-and-this' (as in the sentence, 'the man cried')

- the plane of the paradigm is that of the selection of 'this-or-this-or-this' (e.g. the replacement of the last word in the same sentence).
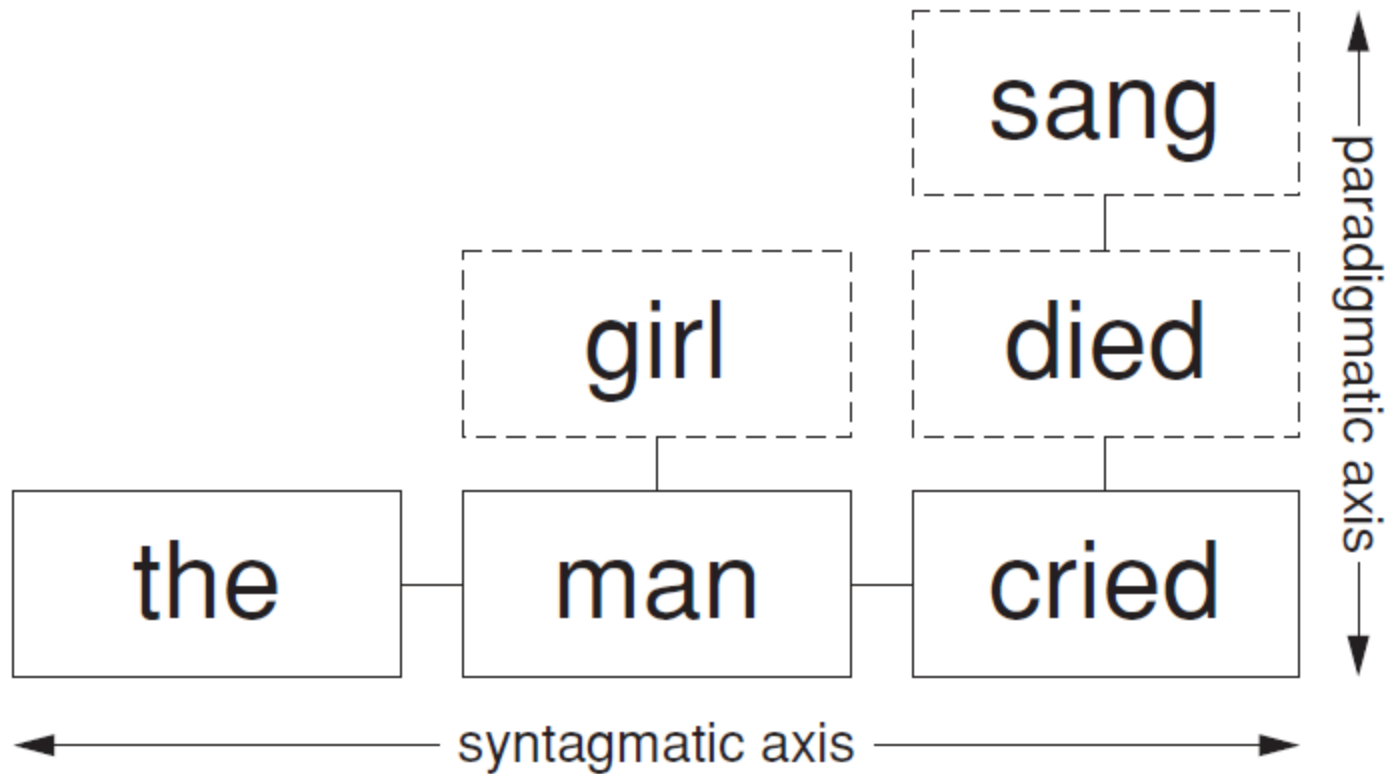
Horizontal And Vertical Axes

FIGURE 3.1 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes
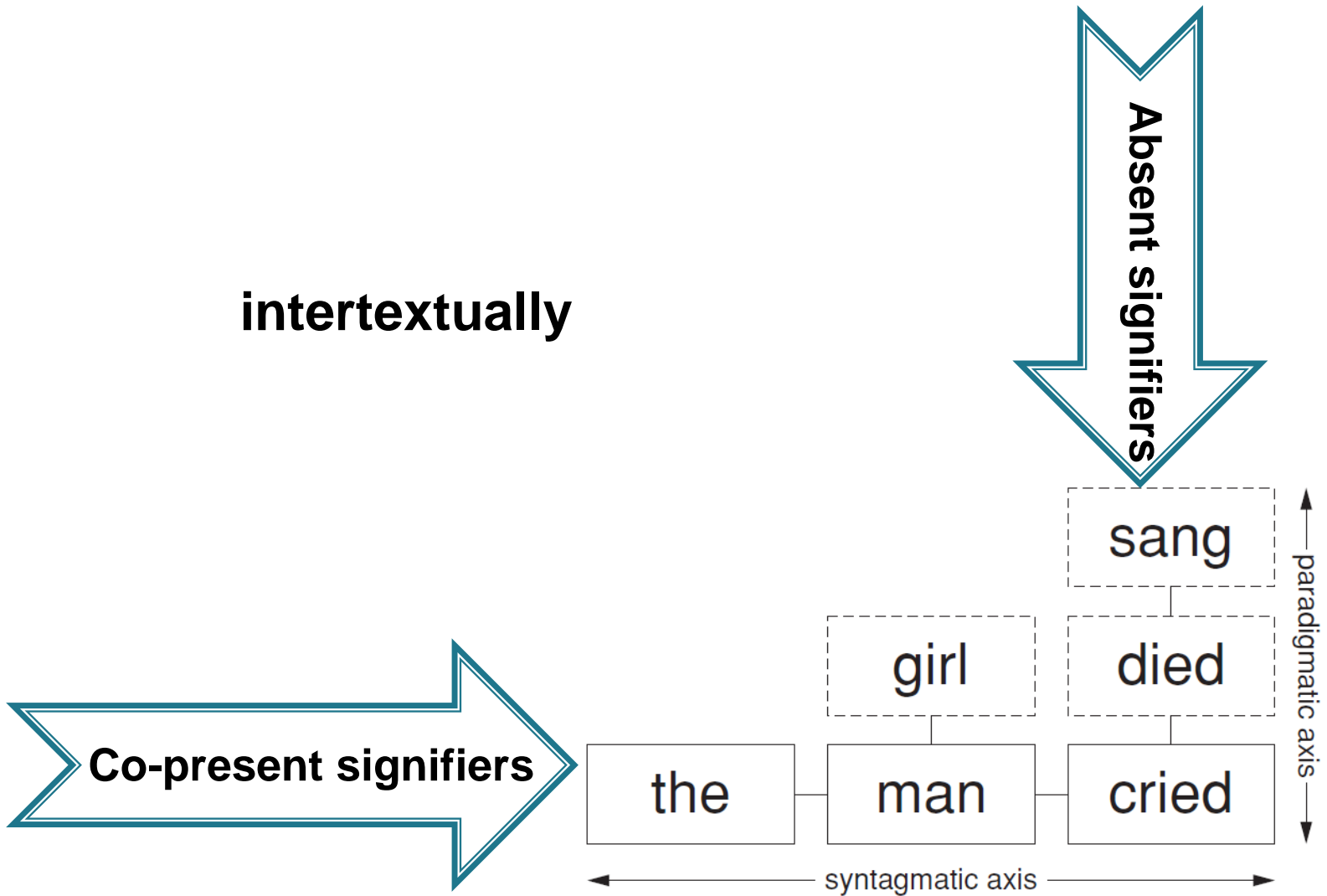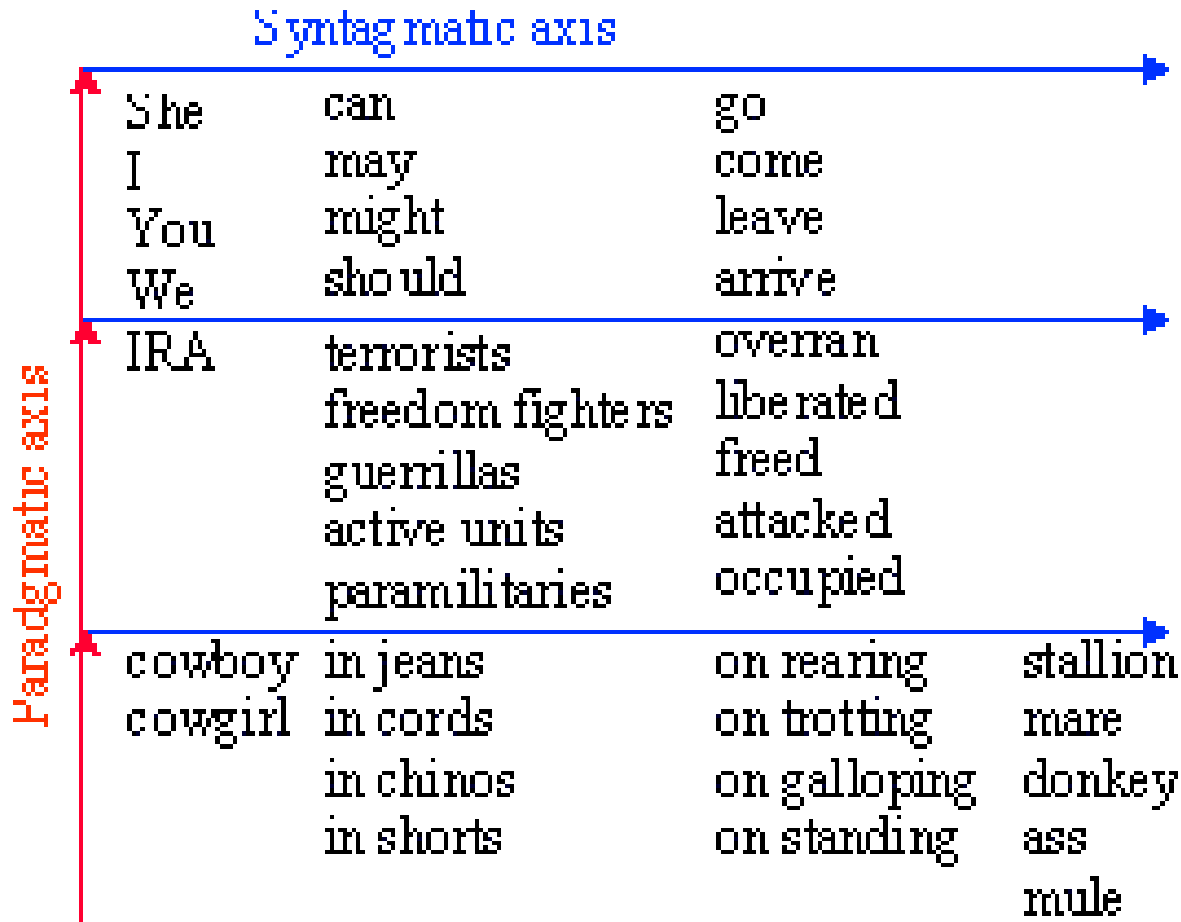
Horizontal And Vertical Axes

intertextually

Absent signifiers

Co-present signifiers

FIGURE 3.1 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes

Q.2

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

Syntagmatic axis

Paradigmatic axis

She	can	go
I	may	come
You	might	leave
We	should	arrive

IRA	terrorists	overran
	freedom fighters	liberated
	guerrillas	freed
	active units	attacked
	paramilitaries	occupied

cowboy	in jeans	on rearing	stallion
cowgirl	in cords	on trotting	mare
	in chinos	on galloping	donkey
	in shorts	on standing	ass
			mule

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

Colorless	*green*	*ideas*	*sleep*	*furiously*
adj.	adj.	n.	v.	adv.
ugly	thorny	flowers	grow	randomly
rich	Ukrainian	girls	marry	quickly
solar	glittering	planets	shine	unnaturally

Q.3

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

The 'value' of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations.
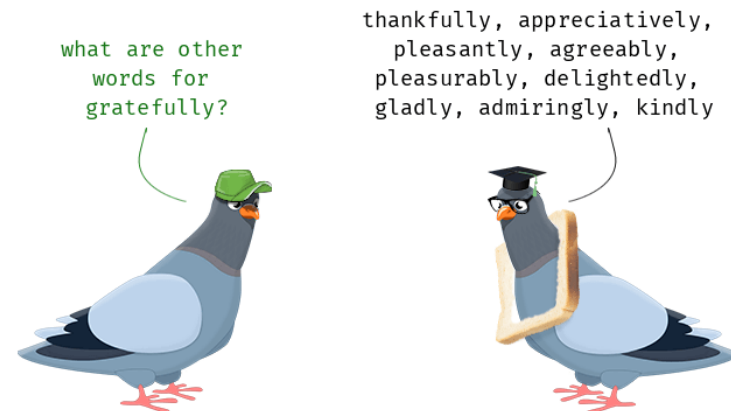
Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which signs make sense; they are the structural forms through which signs are organized into codes.

s	__	*n*
C		C
	V	
	Nasalized	

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

Paradigmatic relationships

    o can operate on the level of the signifier and on the level of the signified

    o are a set of associated signifiers or signifieds which are all members of some defining category

    o are contrastive

    o are not confined to the verbal mode

what are other words for gratefully?

thankfully, appreciatively, pleasantly, agreeably, pleasurably, delightedly, gladly, admiringly, kindly

Thesaurus.plus

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

A syntagm

o is an orderly combination of interacting signifiers which forms a meaningful whole within a text

o sometimes, following Saussure, called a 'chain'

o are made within a framework of syntactic rules and conventions

o can contain other syntagms

Syntagmatic relations highlight the importance of part–whole relationships: Saussure stressed that 'the whole depends on the parts, and the parts depend on the whole'

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

Both syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis treat signs as part of a system – exploring their functions within codes and sub-codes.

'an important part of the semiological undertaking' was to divide texts 'into minimal significant units . . . then to group these units into paradigmatic classes, and finally to classify the syntagmatic relations which link these units' (Barthes 1967a, 48

Q.4

Horizontal And Vertical Axes

Syntagmatic & paradigmatic relations
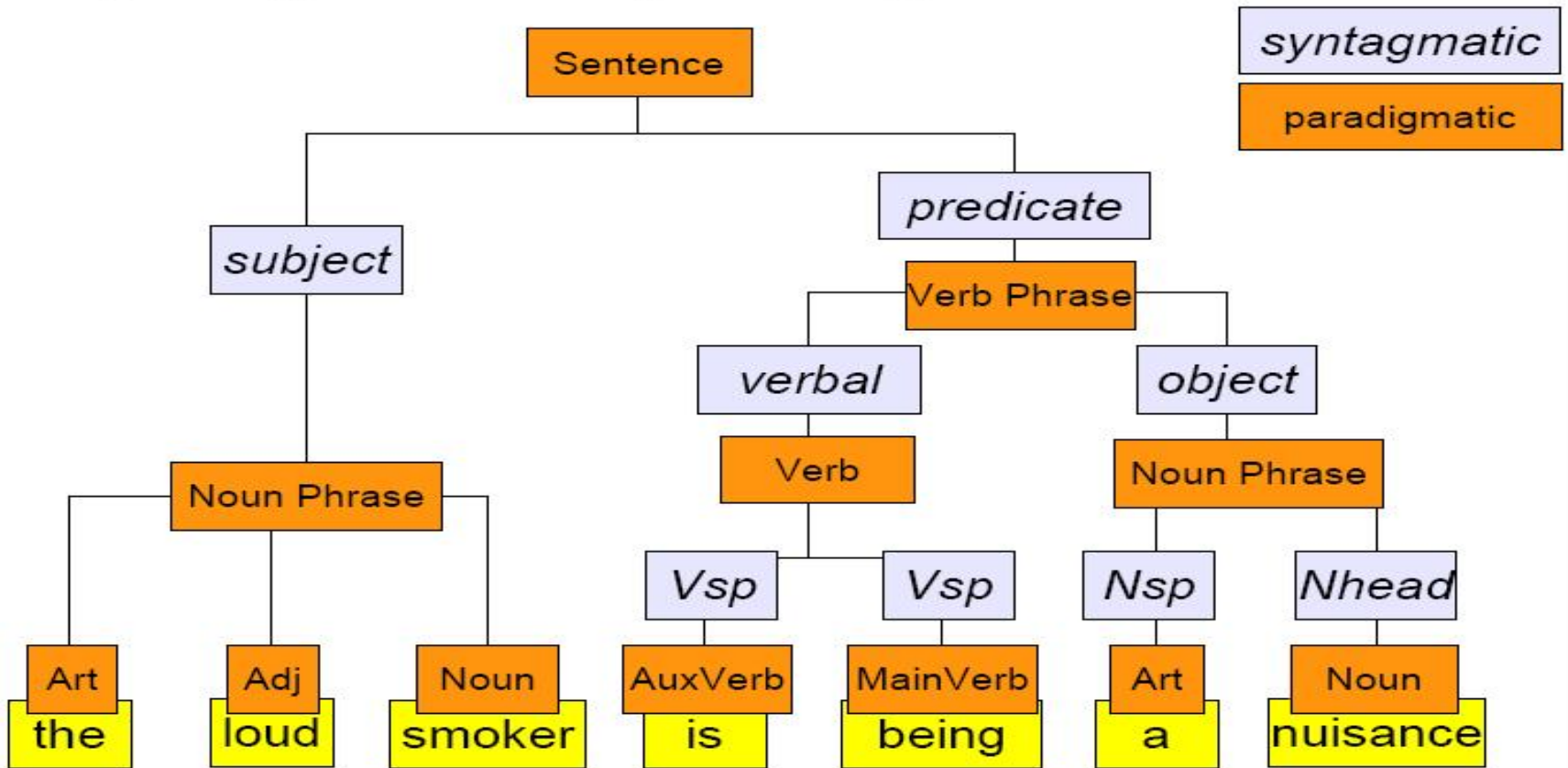
The Paradigmatic Dimension

paradigmatic analysis seeks to identify the various paradigms (or pre-existing sets of signifiers) which underlie the manifest content of texts.

This aspect of structural analysis involves:
- a consideration of the positive or negative connotations of each signifier (revealed through the use of one signifier rather than another),
- the existence of 'underlying' thematic paradigms (e.g. *binary oppositions* such as public–private).

The Paradigmatic Dimension

a characteristic of paradigmatic relations (in contrast to syntagmatic relations) that they are held '*in absentia*' – in the absence from a specific text of alternative signifiers from the same paradigm (Saussure 1983, 122).

signs take their value within the linguistic system from what they are not (Saussure 1983, 115).
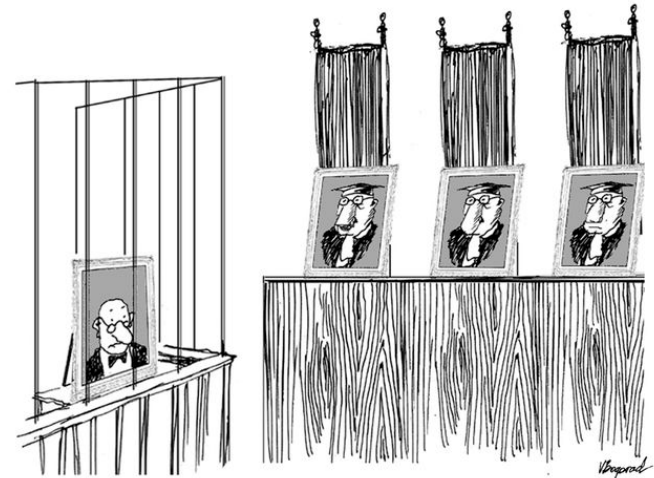
The Paradigmatic Dimension

two kinds of absences :

- 'what goes without saying' (*what is for granted*)
  'people like us already agree what we think about issues like that'
- 'what is conspicuous by its absence' (*making a statement*)
  an item which is present in the text may flout conventional expectations

Paradigmatic analysis involves comparing and contrasting each of the signifiers present in the text with absent signifiers which in similar circumstances might have been chosen, and considering the significance of the choices made.

The Paradigmatic Dimension

Paradigmatic analysis involves comparing and contrasting each of the signifiers present in the text with absent signifiers which in similar circumstances might have been chosen, and considering the significance of the choices made.

Q.5

The Commutation Test

the 'commutation test' can be used in order to identify distinctive signifiers and to define their significance – determining whether a change on the level of the signifier leads to a change on the level of the signified.

E,g. *phonemes substitution* (the case of minimal pairs)

The Commutation Test

The commutation test may involve any of four basic transformations, some of which involve the modification of the syntagm. However, the consideration of an alternative syntagm can itself be seen as a paradigmatic substitution.

Paradigmatic transformations
- substitution;
- transposition;

Syntagmatic transformations
- addition;
- deletion.

The Commutation Test

		/striːt/
Paradigmatic transformations	*substitution*	/striːm/
	transposition	/triːts/
Syntagmatic transformations	*addition*	/striːts/
	deletion	/triːt/

Q.6

The Commutation Test

1. *Many arrows did not hit the target.*

2. *The target was not hit by many arrows.*

The Commutation Test

1. *Many arrows did not hit the target.* *(but many did = true)*

2. *The target was not hit by many arrows.* *(but many did = true?)*

Oppositions

- 'binarism is essential; without it the structure of language would be lost' (Jakobson 1973, 321).

- 'binary opposition is one of the most important principles governing the structure of languages' (Lyons 1977, 271).

- Opposites (or antonyms) clearly have a very practical function compared with synonyms: that of *sorting*

Oppositions

Distinctions can be made between various types of 'oppositions', perhaps the most important being the following:

- **oppositions** (logical 'contradictories'): mutually exclusive terms (e.g. alive–dead, where 'not alive' can only be 'dead');

- **antonyms** (logical 'contraries'): terms which are comparatively graded on the same implicit dimension (e.g. good–bad, where 'not good' is not necessarily 'bad').

Oppositions

In an oppositive duality, if one of the terms is given, then the other, though not present, is evoked in thought. To the idea of white there is opposed only that of black, to the idea of beauty that of ugliness, to the idea of large that of small, to the idea of closed that of open, and so on. Opposites are so intimately interconnected that the appearance of one of them inevitably elicits the other.

(Jakobson 1976, 235; cf. 1973, 321)

Q.7

Oppositions

'binary opposition' in Disney's fairy tales

Markedness

Roman n Jakobson introduced the theory of markedness:
'Every single constituent of any linguistic system is built on an opposition of two logical contradictories: the presence of an attribute ("markedness") in contraposition to its absence ("unmarkedness")' (Jakobson 1972, 42; cf. 1980a).


normal   usual

unusual   perfect

Markedness

The concept of markedness can be:

o applied to the poles of a paradigmatic opposition: paired signs consist of an 'unmarked' and a 'marked' form.

o applied both at the level of the signifier and at the level of the signified.

In relation to linguistic signifiers, two characteristic features of marked forms are commonly identified: these relate to:

1. formal features
2. generic function.
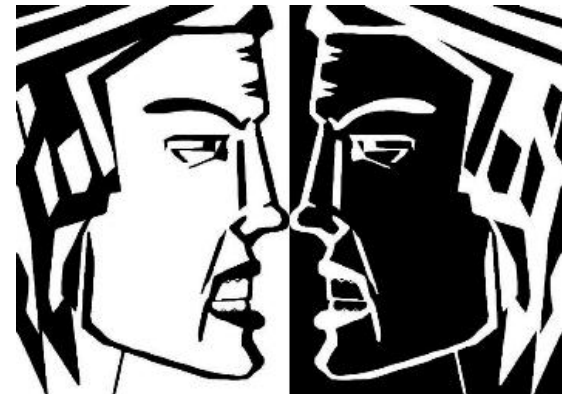
Markedness

The more complex form is marked, which typically involves both of the following features:

• **Formal marking**: *for example*, in morphologically related oppositions, marking is based on the presence or absence of some particular formal feature. The marked signifier is formed by adding a distinctive feature to the unmarked signifier (for instance, the marked form '*unhappy*' is formed by adding the prefix *un-* to the unmarked signifier '*happy*')

• **Distributional marking**: formally marked terms show a tendency to be more restricted in the range of contexts in which they occur.

Markedness

Markedness in linguistics:

o reflects a contrast between two or more members of a category such as *number*, *case*, or *tense*, one of them is called 'marked' if it contains some extra affix, as opposed to the 'unmarked' member which does not.

o refers to the way words are changed or added to give a special meaning. The unmarked choice is just the normal meaning.

For example, the present tense is unmarked for English verbs. If I just say "*walk*" that refers to the present tense. But if we add something to "*walk*" (marking it), such as adding '*ed*' to the end, I can indicate the past: "*walked*".
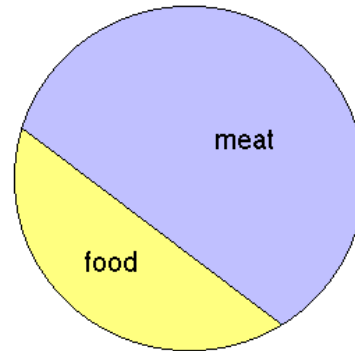
Markedness

Markedness in linguistics:

o Indicated by a morphological marker, e.g. Eng. *Plural -s*, as opposed to the "unmarked" singular
o semantically/functionally more specific (or more complex). Inherently more difficult for humans to process (or learn, or produce).
o Irregular/abnormal as opposed to the "unmarked" regular forms/patterns.
o phonetic/phonological: *vowel* (unmarked) vs. *nasal vowel* (marked)
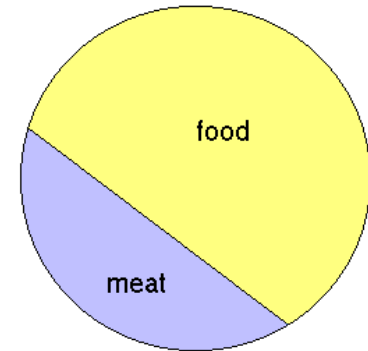
Markedness

Markedness in linguistics:

o Semantic Markedness: that's called semantic marking. In a neutral context the unmarked term in a pair is used. Thus of the pair *old* versus *young*, old is the unmarked term (e.g. *How old is the baby ?*)

Word field in Middle English

meat
food

meat = "food in general"
food = "provisions; item of food"

Word field in Modern English

food
meat

meat = "animal flesh"
food = "all types of nourishment"

Markedness

Markedness in linguistics:

marked and unmarked terms: terms in linguistics which designate a contrasting pair, one possessing a special 'mark', the other neutral.
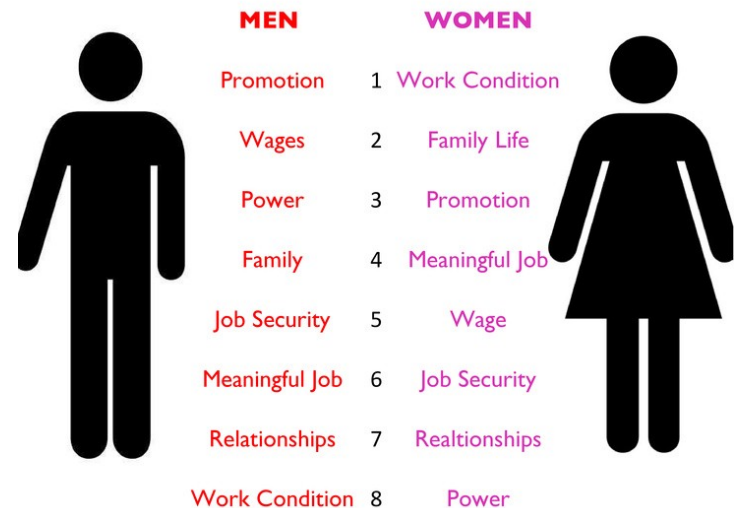
In *play/played*, *play* is unmarked and neutral, and *played* has the mark -ed. Similarly, *host* is unmarked, but *hostess* is morphologically marked for femaleness.

The mark is not necessarily visible or audible: in the pair *horse/mule*, *horse* is the more general, unmarked term, while *mule* is marked for femaleness. In the pair *cow/bull*, *cow* is unmarked, while *bull* is marked for maleness.

Markedness

Where terms are paired, the pairing is rarely symmetrical but rather hierarchical.

For Jakobson, hierarchy was a fundamental structural principle (Jakobson 1980a, 137): 'the entire network of language displays a hierarchical arrangement that within each level of the system follows the same dichotomous principle of marked terms superposed on the corresponding unmarked terms' (Jakobson 1972, 42).

MEN		WOMEN
Promotion	1	Work Condition
Wages	2	Family Life
Power	3	Promotion
Family	4	Meaningful Job
Job Security	5	Wage
Meaningful Job	6	Job Security
Relationships	7	Realtionships
Work Condition	8	Power

Markedness

• With many of the familiarly paired terms, the two signifieds are accorded different values. The unmarked term is *primary*, being given precedence and priority, while the marked term is treated as *secondary* or even suppressed as an '*absent signifier*'.

The unmarked term is defined by what it seeks to suppress.

• the unmarked term is not merely neutral but implicitly positive in contrast to the negative connotations of the marked term.

Markedness

Male things are unmarked, while female things are marked with special endings like "ess" and "ette".

For example: "*actress*", "*poetess*". In man (humanity), the male is known as the "*man*", while the female is known as the "*woman*".

In a discussion about some random persons, "*he*" is often used to refer to one of them. The ending '*ette*" by the way is also used for the diminutive or non-serious, as in "*dinette*".

In general, femaleness in language is associated with small size and non-seriousness.

Markedness

in addition,,,,

markedness refers to the relationship between the two poles of an opposition;

- then, the terms marked and unmarked refer to the evaluation of the poles;
- the simpler more general pole is the unmarked term of the opposition while the more complex and focused pole is the marked term.

Markedness

- The unmarked form is typically *dominant* (e.g. statistically within a text or corpus) and therefore seems to be neutral, normal and natural.

- It is thus transparent – drawing no attention to its invisibly privileged status, while the deviance of the marked form is salient.

- It is notable that empirical studies have demonstrated that cognitive processing is more difficult with marked terms than with unmarked terms (Clark and Clark 1977).

- Marked forms take longer to recognize and process and more errors are made with these forms.

Markedness

Unmarked &	Marked
Greater frequency of use within language.	Lesser frequency of use.
Less complex phonologically or morphologically.	More complex
It is not overtly marked.	Will be overtly marked
Early child acquisition	Late acquisition
Occurs in many languages.	Occurs in fewer languages.

Markedness

high				
90%+*				
indoor/outdoor				
up/down				
yes/no				
East/West				
open/closed				
wet/dry				
question/answer				
true/false				
major/minor	**80%+***			
hot/cold	on/off			
reader/writer	public/private			
before/after	male/female			
love/hate	high/low			
top/bottom	parent/child	**70%+***		
good/bad	internal/external	black/white		
cause/effect	gain/loss	mind/body	**60%+***	
front/back	human/animal	left/right	adult/child	
primary/secondary	past/present	positive/negative	urban/rural	
birth/death	gay/straight	art/science	product/process	
presence/absence	more/less	active/passive	horizontal/vertical	
problem/solution	above/below	light/dark	physical/mental	
win/lose	inner/outer	product/system	hard/soft	
acceptance/rejection	thought/feeling	sex/gender	fast/slow	
inclusion/exclusion	life/death	static/dynamic	quantity/quality	
success/failure	subject/object	liberal/conservative	foreground/background	
human/machine	producer/consumer	higher/lower	similarity/difference	
right/wrong	work/play	teacher/learner	temporary/permanent	
nature/nurture	good/evil	war/peace	nature/culture	
theory/practice	masculine/feminine	body/soul	poetry/prose	
near/far	health/illness	fact/fiction	part/whole	**50%+***
self/other	comedy/tragedy	form/content	married/single	new/old
figure/ground	insider/outsider	form/function	strong/weak	large/small
rich/poor	happy/sad	simple/complex	subjective/objective	local/global
fact/opinion	superior/inferior	original/copy	dead/alive	them/us
system/use	present/absent	means/ends	shallow/deep	system/process
hero/villain	clean/dirty	appearance/reality	competition/cooperation	young/old
fact/value	natural/artificial	competence/performance	live/recorded	majority/minority
text/context	speaker/listener	one/many	head/heart	foreign/domestic
raw/cooked	classical/romantic	speech/writing	formal/casual	structure/process
substance/style	type/token	straight/curved	structure/agency	order/chaos
base/superstructure	nature/technology	signifier/signified	message/medium	concrete/abstract
knowledge/ignorance	rights/obligations	central/peripheral	form/meaning	words/actions
fact/fantasy	reason/emotion	wild/domestic	words/deeds	beautiful/ugly
knower/known	sacred/profane	stability/change	fact/theory	individual/society
literal/metaphorical	maker/user	realism/idealism	words/things	strange/familiar

INCIDENCE (vertical axis, high to low)

| more marked | MARKEDNESS | less marked |

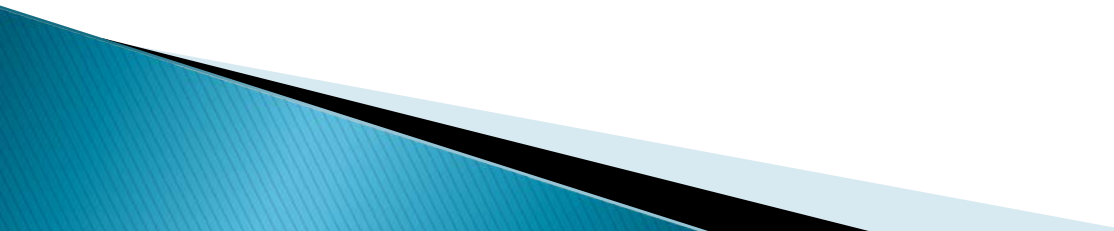*Dominant order as percentage of total occurrences of both forms

FIGURE 3.3 Markedness of some explicit oppositions in online texts

Markedness

• The concept of markedness can be applied more broadly than simply to paradigmatic pairings of words or concepts.

• Whether in textual or social practices, the choice of a marked form 'makes a statement'.

• Where a text deviates from conventional expectations it is 'marked'.

• Conventional, or 'over-coded' text (which follows a fairly predictable formula) is unmarked whereas unconventional or 'undercoded' text is marked.
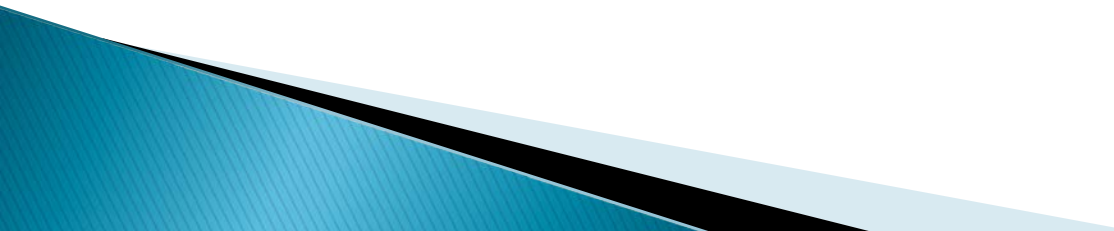
Unmarked forms reflect the naturalization of dominant cultural values.

Alignment

• Paired signifiers are seen by structuralist theorists as part of the 'deep [or 'hidden'] structure' of texts, shaping the preferred reading.

• Such oppositions may appear to be resolved in favour of dominant ideologies.

• It is not in isolation that the rhetorical power of binary oppositions resides, but in their articulation in relation to other oppositions.

Alignment

Applying the concept of marked forms to mass media genres:

- Boy vs. girls

- Brown goods vs. white goods

- 'It's Good to Talk'

- 'dirt is good'.

Alignment

- 'dirt is good' commercials.

The Semiotic Square
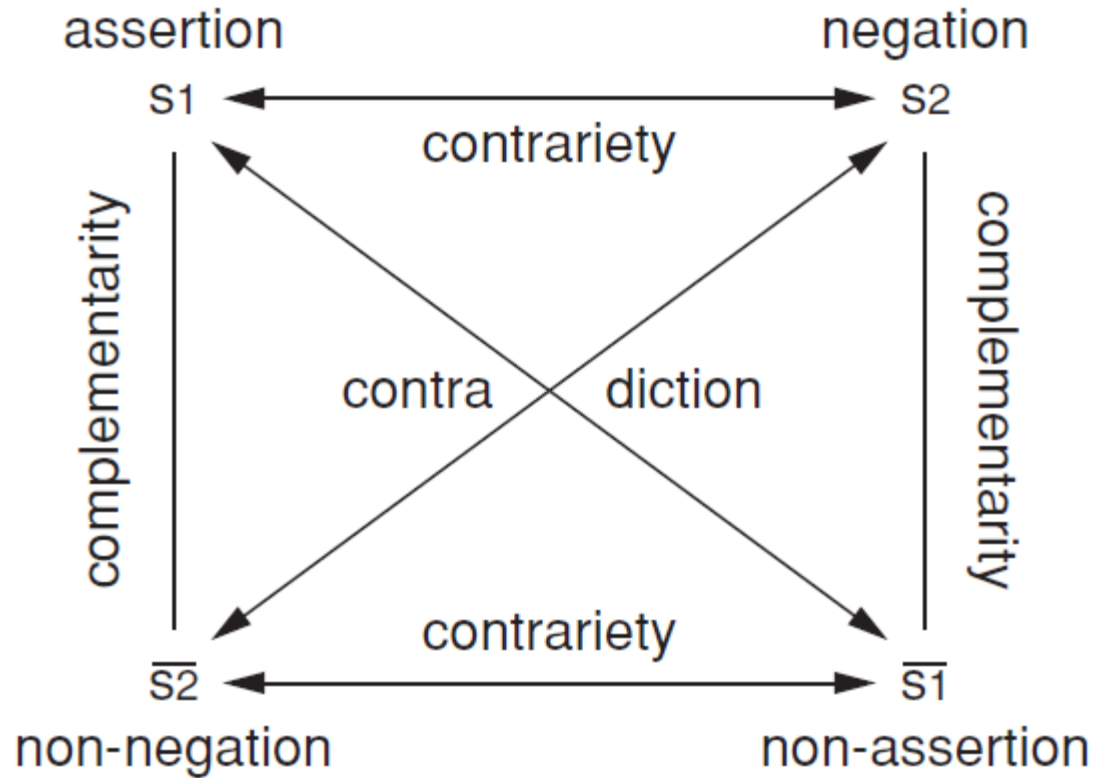
a means of analyzing paired concepts more fully by mapping the logical conjunctions and disjunctions relating key semantic features in a text

The Semiotic Square

o The terms at the top (S1, S2) represent 'presences', while their companion terms (Not S1 and Not S2) represent 'absences'. The vertical relationships of 'implication'

o offer us an alternative conceptual synthesis of S1 with Not S2 and of S2 with Not S1 (e.g. of white with not-black or of black with not-white)
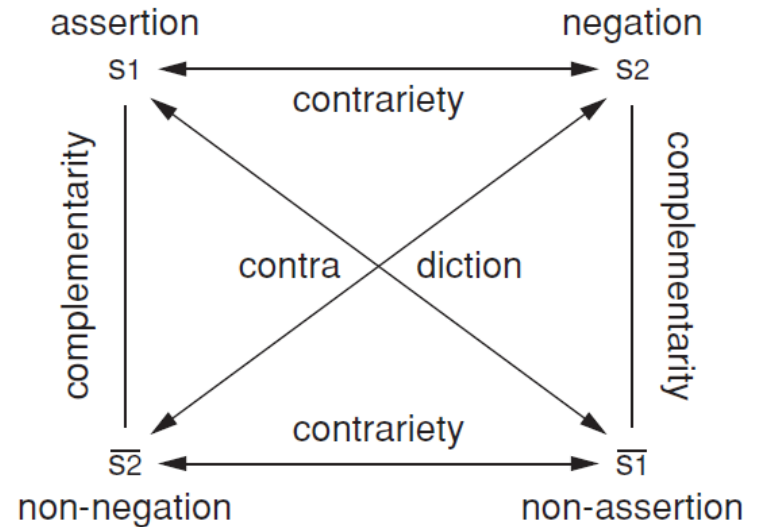
The semiotic square can be used to highlight 'hidden' underlying themes in a text or practice.

The Semiotic Square

o Jameson suggests that Not S2, the negation of the negation, 'is always the most critical position and the one that remains open or empty for the longest time, for its identification completes the process and in that sense constitutes the most creative act of the construction'.
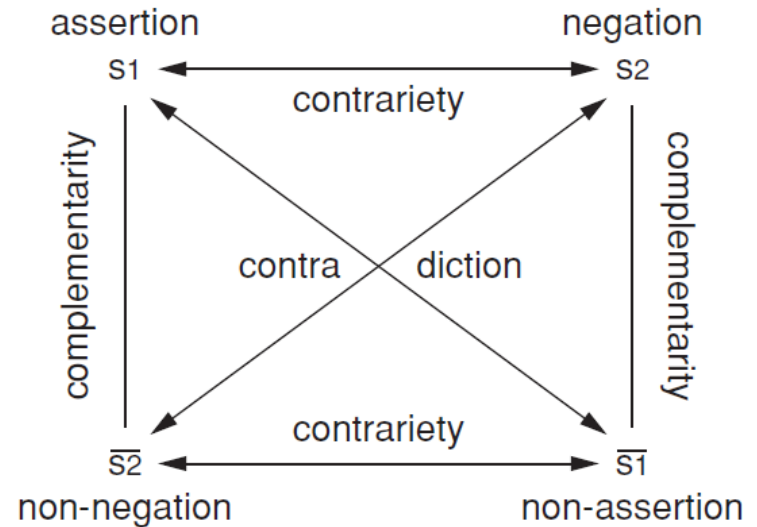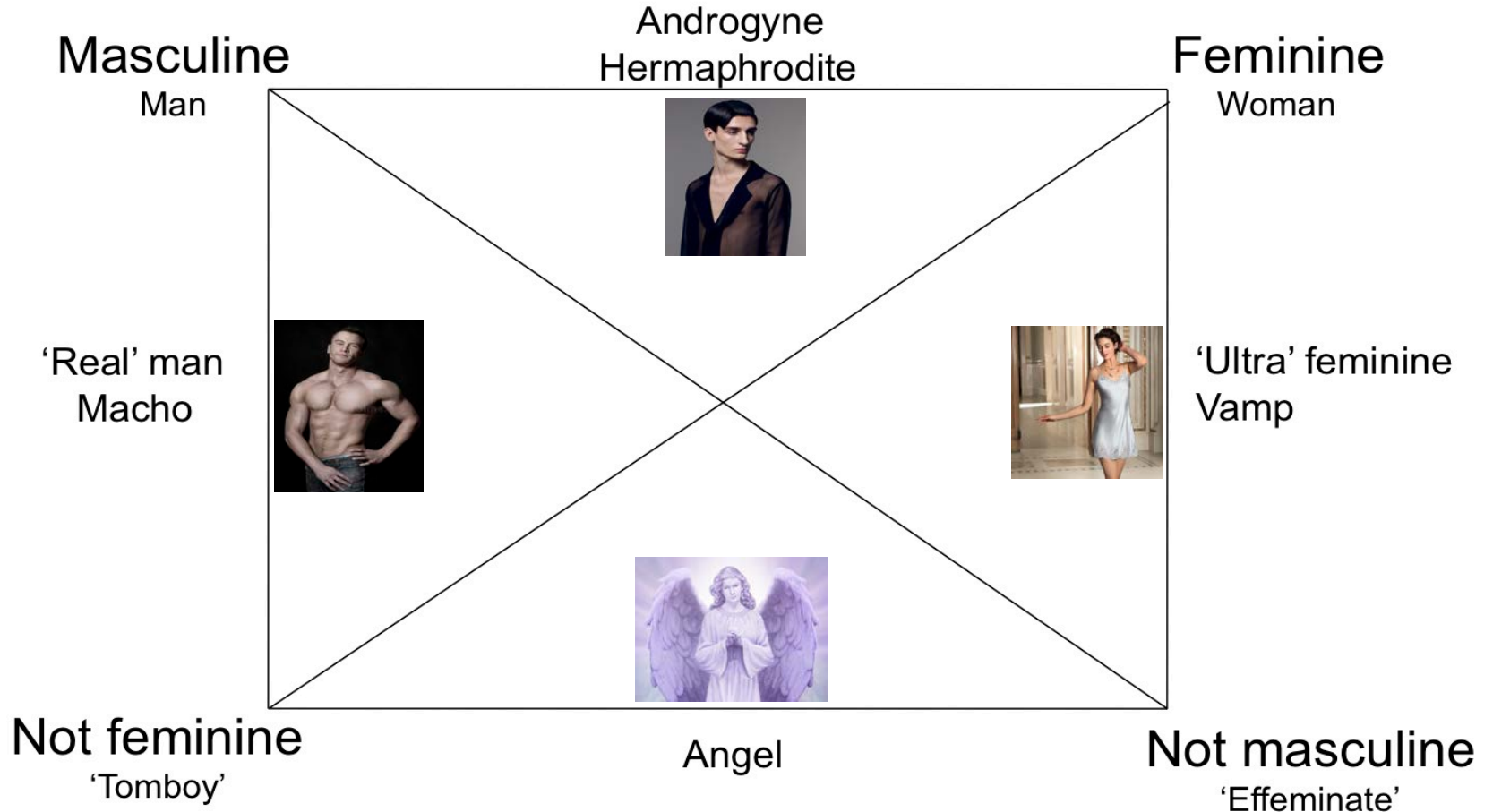
# The Semiotic Square

Semiotic square

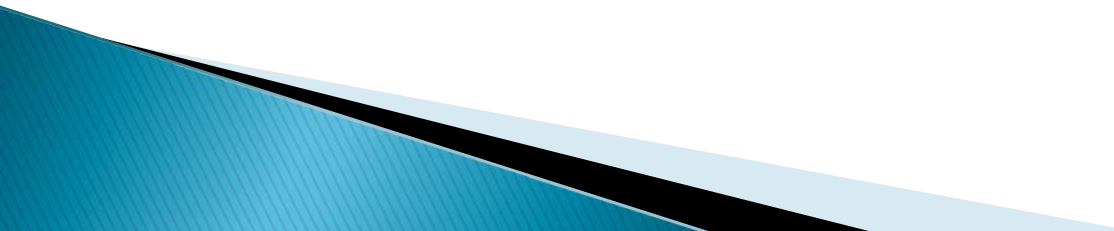of masculine / feminine

Androgyne
Hermaphrodite

Masculine
Man

Feminine
Woman

'Real' man
Macho

'Ultra' feminine
Vamp

Not feminine
'Tomboy'

Angel

Not masculine
'Effeminate'

Semiotic square

of masculine / feminine

Androgyne
Hermaphrodite

Masculine
Man

Feminine
Woman

'Real' man
Macho

'Ultra' feminine
Vamp

Not feminine
'Tomboy'

Angel
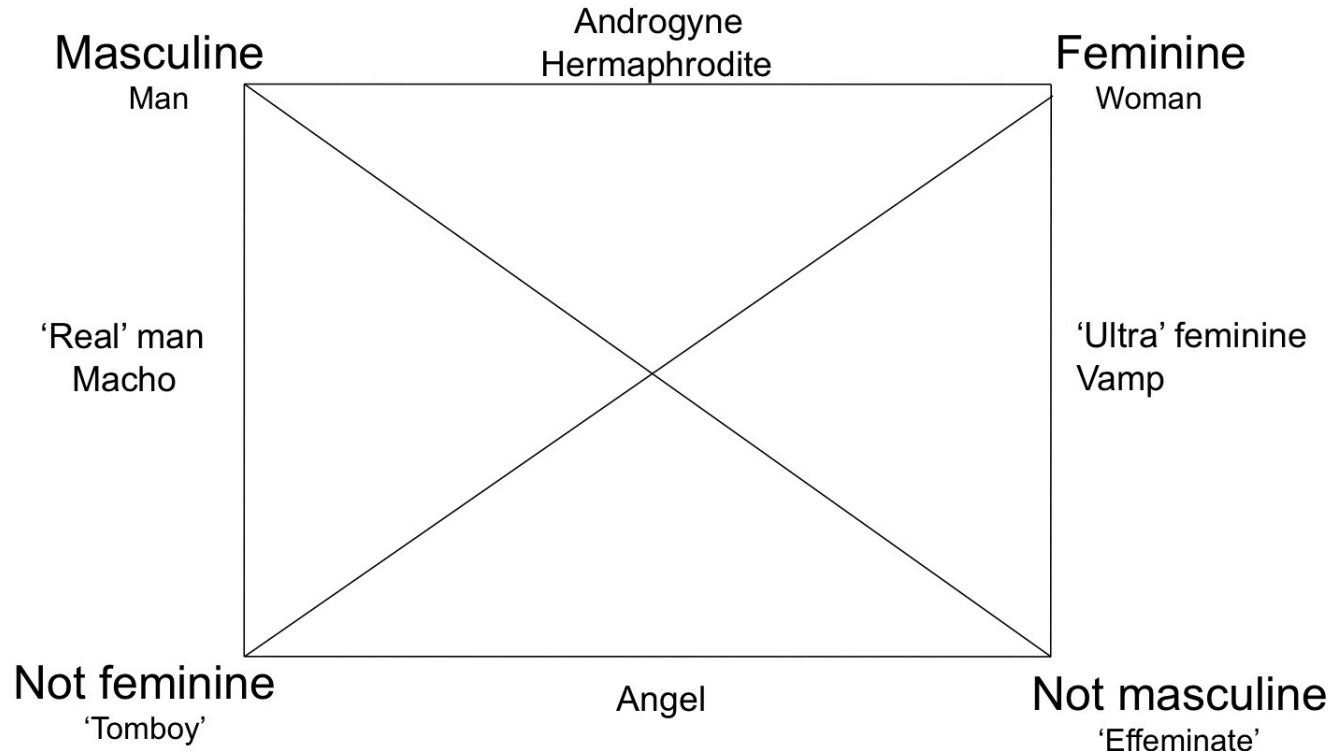
Not masculine
'Effeminate'

The Semiotic Square

Criticism
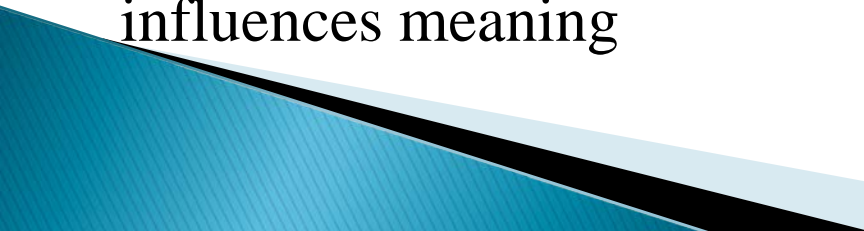
o The interpretive usefulness of simple dichotomies is often challenged on the basis that life and (perhaps by a misleading realist analogy) texts are 'seamless webs' and thus better described in terms of continua.
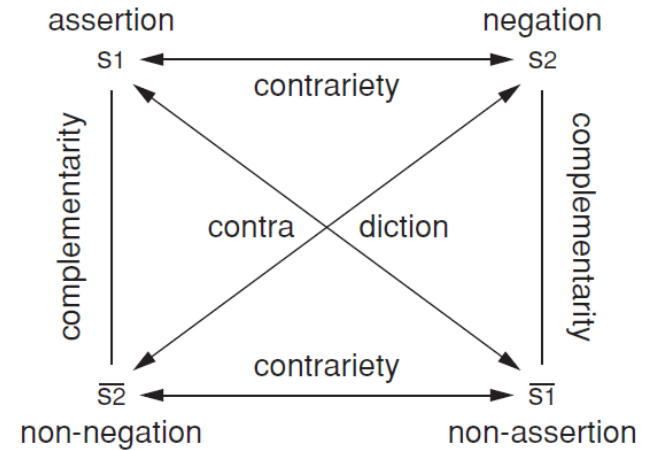
The Syntagmatic Dimension

o 'normally we do not express ourselves by using single linguistic signs, but groups of signs, organized in complexes which themselves are signs' (Saussure 1983, 127).

o Thinking and communication depend on discourse rather than isolated signs.

o The linking together of signs was conceived solely in terms of the grammatical possibilities which the system offered.

The Syntagmatic Dimension

o The syntagmatic analysis of a text (whether it is verbal or non-verbal) involves studying its structure and the relationships between its parts.

o Structuralist semioticians seek to identify elementary constituent segments within the text – its syntagms.

o 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

Spatial Relations

o syntagms are often defined only as 'sequential' (and thus temporal – as in speech and music).

o Saussure emphasized 'auditory signifiers' which 'are presented one after another' and 'form a chain'. But even in auditory signs sequential relations are not the only dimension: in music, while sequence may seem the most obvious feature, chords, polyphony and orchestration are manifestations of simultaneity.

o temporal relations tend to be dominant in auditory signs, but in visual signs it is spatial relations that are dominant.

SEQUENTIAL   SPATIAL
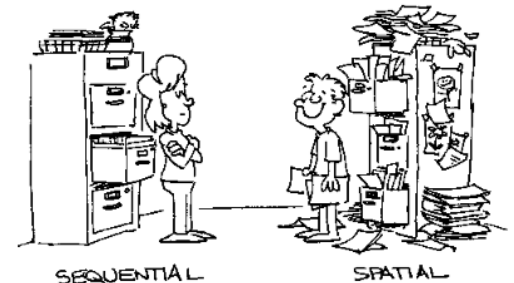
Spatial Relations

o the visual medium of written language for Saussure was secondary. 'Linearity', a consequence of Saussure's phonocentric stance, was the second of his two 'general principles' of the sign (Saussure 1983, 67).

Spatial Relations

o 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).
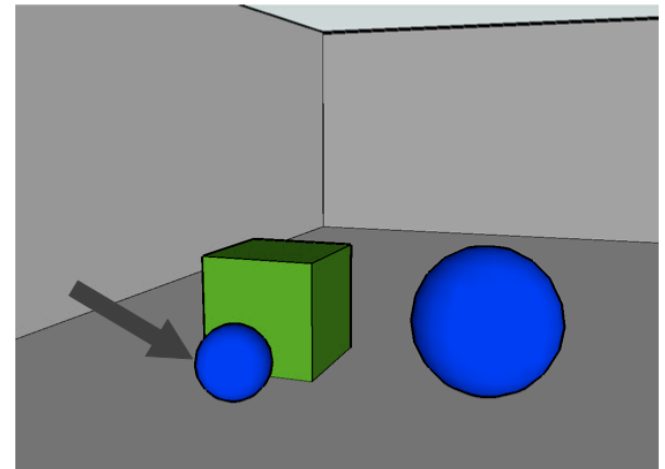
Spatial Relations

o '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

"The past is a foreign country;
they do things differently there."

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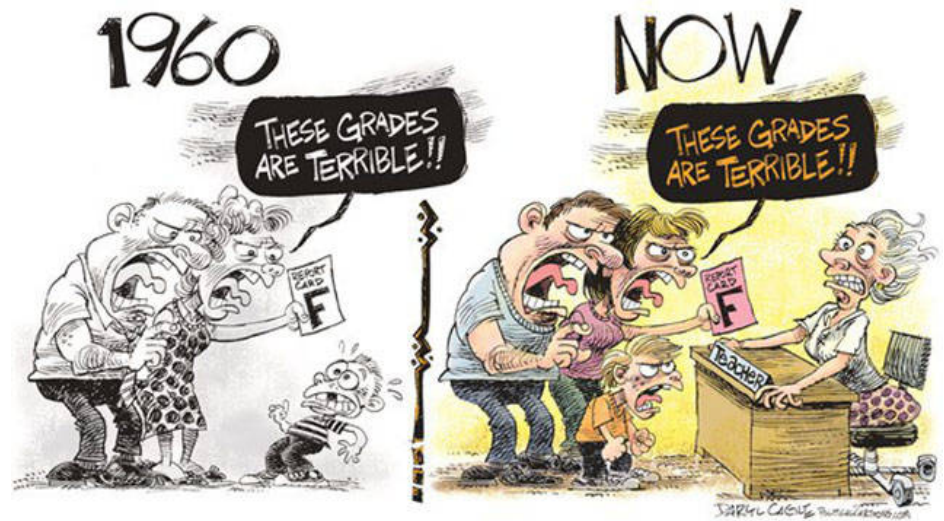
Spatial Relations
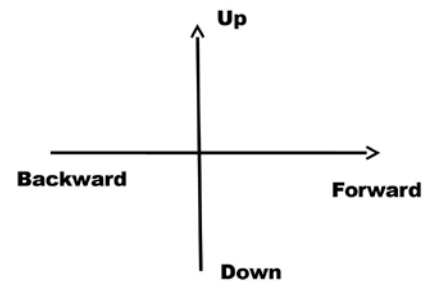
o The vertical compositional axis also carries connotations. Arguing for the fundamental significance of orientational metaphors in framing experience, Lakoff and Johnson observe that (in English usage) up has come to be associated with more and down with less. They outline further associations:

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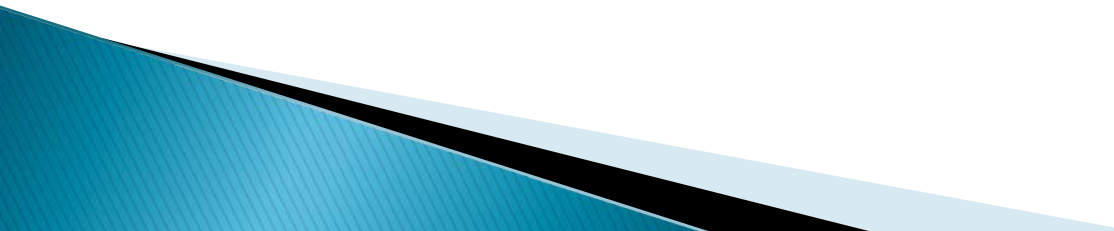
(Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Chapter 4)

Spatial Relations

o 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.

God
Angel
Heaven
Human
Beast
Plant
Flame
Stone
The ladder of intellect
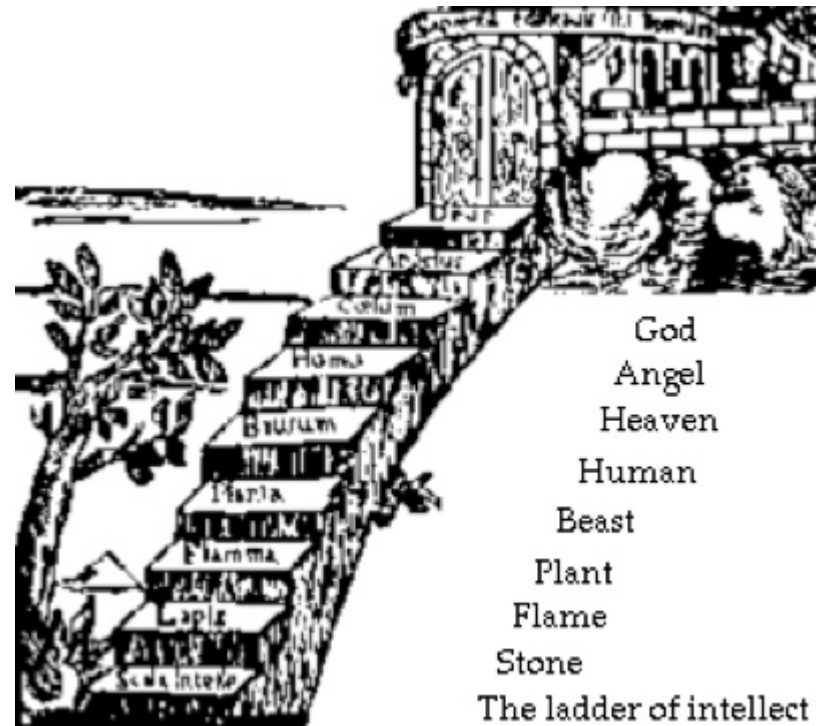
Sequential Relations

o 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.

o Semiotic narratology is concerned with narrative in any mode – literary or non-literary, fictional or nonfictional, verbal or visual – but tends to focus on minimal narrative units and the 'grammar of the plot' (some theorists refer to 'story grammars').

Sequential Relations

o 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').

o 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.

End of Chapter 3