Linguistics is often represented as the social science where scientific laws have been found to be most applicable. Does this represent a complete picture of it as a discipline?

Claude Lévi-Strauss accorded linguistics a special place among the pantheon of social sciences, writing "It is probably the only one which can truly claim to be a science and which has achieved both the formulation of an empirical method and an understanding of the nature of the data submitted to its analysis"[1]. The post-enlightenment halo-effect surrounding the designation "scientific" bestows upon its discourses a truth status which overlooks paradigm shifts or questions about what empirical methodologies exclude. Yet the father of structuralism saw in this methodology an enviable tool, asking "Can the anthropologist, using a method analogous *in form* (if not in content) to the method used in structural linguistics, achieve the same kind of progress in his own science as that which has taken place in linguistics?"[2]

The exemplary progress of modern linguistics to which Lévi-Strauss referred was begun in 1786 when Sir William Jones suggested the common descent of Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. The "genetic" correspondences remarked betrayed Indo-European family resemblances and prompted Rasmus Rask, Jakob Grimm and August Schleicher

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Basic Books Inc., 1963), p.31
[2] ibidem, p.34

amongst others, to delineate as a group diverse languages from the Germanic, Romanic, and Slavic branches, including even purely vernacular languages such Lithuanian on the family tree[3]. Proto-Indo-European was posited and then reconstructed through inferences based on the comparison of phonological correspondences; and so comparative linguistics had an overarching disciplinary project as well as a methodology which produced tangible results. Developments continued apace. Morris Swadesh (1909-1967) developed glottochronology by which if one compensates for a quasi-red-shift base rate of change in a core group of 100 or 200 basic vocabulary items over time in any language, it becomes possible to infer at what stage two languages may have diverged from a common ancestral language. Such lexicostatistical dating could be combined with archaeological and historical data to identify and date patterns of migration. Furthermore, lexical reconstruction offered the prospect of using "cultural"[4] vocabulary sets as a basis for inferences about environment, habitat, lifestyle, subsistence pursuits, military, political and religious practices and the social and kinship systems of historical population groups[5].

For Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, the way that linguistic methods would inform anthropology would by analogy. Just as Ferdinand de Saussure observed that the

[3] Nancy Parrott Hickerson, *Linguistic Anthropology* (London: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), pp.121-123
[4] ibid., p.127
[5] ibid., pp.126-131

correspondence between a signifier and a signified in any given sign was socially determined and yet objectively arbitrary, so Lévi-Strauss would claim the same for totemism, kinship and myth. For Lévi-Strauss totemism, kinship and myth function in the same manner as language – as symbolic codes, systems of signification[6], and categories of thought[7]. Like language these systems contain a conscious element (grammar, semantics) and an inherent structural logic[8]. Where Emile Durkheim had argued that totemism involved taking the categories of exogamous clans and projecting a classificatory system onto nature, Lévi-Strauss used the language metaphor to argue that existing terms of classification determined by local plant and animal life were adopted into a conceptualisation of the social structure and the relationships of groups within it. Just as Marcel Mauss' analysis of the gift distinguished between the conscious normative consensus about gift giving and the underlying structural principles of reciprocity and communication; so Lévi-Strauss' analysis of kinship started by asking why exchange was happening[9].

Within Durkheim's model, collective representations such as language were social facts, yet there was no theoretical mechanism by which one could explain their origins. Lévi-Strauss' solution was to posit in the avoidance of incest a pre-social social

[6] C.R. Badcock, *Lévi-Strauss: Structuralism and Sociological Theory* (London: Hutchinson & Co Ltd., 1975), p.65
[7] ibid. p.51
[8] ib., p.49
[9] ib., p.48

fact, thereby allowing structuralism to assert that sister exchange was the foundation of kinship systems and therefore the origin of exchange and society. Like language then, kinship was a form of communication – the communication of women – governed by arbitrary conventions of exchange and collectively defined terminology[10]. Lévi-Strauss put it as follows:

> 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.[11]

In the field of myth, Lévi-Strauss drew from Roman Jakobson's linguistics the principle of binary opposition. Not only at the level of phonemes but also at the level of words and sentences, Jakobson saw binary oppositions (at the phonetic level oppositions between compact/diffuse, consonantal/non-consonantal, nasal/oral, strident/mellow, etc.) as the basis of organisation within language, due both to physiological constraints as well as mental principles for clear transmission and encoding. Using a methodology reminiscent of Jakobson's, yet applied to narrative elements, Lévi-Strauss found the same binary principles and logical structure in myth. As he analytically disassembled myths into mythemes Lévi-Strauss argued that myths elaborated and then negotiated fundamental structural contradictions within society. Edmund Leech encapsulates how

[10] ib., p 65
[11] Lévi-Strauss (1963), p.50

Lévi-Strauss elaborated cultural equivalents of linguistic phonological oppositions between for example: left/right hand, raw/cooked, sister/wife and the spatial opposites such as land/sea and this side of the river/the other side[12]. One broader consequence of Lévi-Strauss' use of linguistic methodologies and the language metaphor of cultural practice is that social facts and the categories of thought which underlie them are conceived as being rational and independently derived by a mass of broadly similar individual psyches[13].

Dumézilians also use the methods and findings of comparative linguistics to assess myth. Georges Dumézil, examining a cross-section of Indo-European folklore and myth advanced the thesis that distributed across the Indo-European linguistic territory and embedded in most, but not all, Indo-European mythical and epical literature were three ideological elements. Significantly, it is claimed that this tripartite ideology is uniquely Indo-European and has no parallels (prior to 2000 BCE migrations) among the ancient civilisations of the Near East, the Nile Valley, China or any other region of the Old World[14]. Stemming from the three tier segmentary social structure shared by many early Indo-European societies, the elements consist of: sovereignty (or in N.J. Allen's

[12] Edmund Leach, 'Structuralism in Social Anthropology', *Structuralism: an Introduction*, ed. by David Robey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.48
[13] Badcock (1975), p.51
[14] C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An anthropological assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil* (London: University of California Press, 1973), p.6

formulation, "sacred power"[15] from the priestly class); physical prowess (warriors); and sustenance, well-being, fecundity or abundance (cultivators / herders). After Alwyn and Brinley Rees, Allen proposes "other, beyond or outside" as a fourth focal idea for this archetypal template. The breadth of the unifying elements does perhaps detract from the boldness of the proposition, but the claim that "from the *Vedas* of ancient India to the *Eddas* of pre-Christian Iceland, from the *Mahābhārata* to the *Heimskringla*" there are three common themes, would suggest that we could talk in terms of a parent proto-Indo-European culture.

The question of whether one kind of social science is better than another on the basis that it is "more scientific" lurks behind this discussion. Lévi-Strauss would perhaps answer in the affirmative. However, the very framing of the question is problematic. Some methodologies are more suited to particular subjects of study than others and anthropology holds that participant observation is integral to the study of peoples. A greater empirical bias of methodology may suit other subjects; and in linguistics a bricolage of observation, classification, extrapolation and inference has generated persuasive universalising statements which have enriched linguistic anthropology and provided structuralism with its dominant metaphor.

[15] N.J. Allen, 'The Ideology of the Indo-Europeans: Dumézil's theory and the idea of a fourth function', *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies*, Vol. 2, no.1, (1987), p.24

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