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# New Outline to the Creation of Myths from a Semiotics Point of View

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## Abstract

This article introduces a new assumption in the formation of myths. Based on the existing literature, the hypothesis of this article is that all myths are created based on the selection of components from a limited collection and the combination of those components with each other. For better understanding and discussing this hypothesis, it is required to give a definition of myth and its kinds, followed by short discussions about the narrative and continue with discussions of the two processes called selection and combination. The author shows that each myth is created based on the narrative and this creation is limited to the selection and combination of components which are exemplified from the real world. Each myth is created in a possible world which is based on the narrative of the myth. Selection and combination of components to create a myth is obeying the rules of the real world and the perception of myth is based on the human perception of the real world.

*Keywords:* myth, semiotics, narrative, selection and combination, possible world.

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## Introduction

Historical evidences show that humans evolved in their modern anatomical form approximately one hundred and thirty thousand years ago (Wilford, 2002). The study of human evolution is an interdisciplinary study consisting of many scientific fields such as physical anthropology, primatology, archaeology, paleontology, neurobiology, ethology, linguistics, evolutionary psychology, embryology and genetics (Heng, 2009). In all these fields, scientists agree that the senses are physiological capabilities of organisms, which deliver data for perception (Macpherson, 2010). According to Malinowski (1922) based on the researches and existing literature of anthropologists, human perception didn't change and we still perceive the world based on our senses. Undoubtedly by the use of technology humans have gathered more knowledge about the world however the perception of humans is still limited to the senses and these senses didn't evolve for one hundred thirty years within the anatomy. Since the dawn of the human species, we always tried to explain the unknown world around us, and these descriptions are based on the information we had accumulated at that time. Based on this description it is possible to understand the era of each of them. For instance, the era of the creation of gods which makes spring tides and neap tides based on their anger is much older than Newton's law of universal gravitation and the anger of a god who creates thunder is much older than the discovery of the concept of electric charges.

All these descriptions of humans about the unknown surrounding world create narratives that were passing from generation to generation. Most of these narrative collections depend on the time, place and the conditions of those people to be formed as a narrative. As an example, a society which was living in a coastal area could have lots of narratives about the gods of sea, gods of sailors, and gods of spring tides and neap tides, which would be unknown for the people who were living in other areas such as the desert. Furthermore, the narratives were divided into two, good and evil which were based on their helpfulness or detrimental traits. For instance, a god who made rain in dry areas and fertilizes the land was a good god and a god who was the cause of overflow because of rain in the other area was an evil god.

Due to these narratives, there is a massive collection of gods, heroes and mysterious creatures who had a role to play in these narratives. They were explaining the unknown phenomenon based on their actions. In this circumstance, a part of each narrative could be used in another narrative and that's how there are so many narratives who are the base and back up of the other ones (Levi-Strauss, 1978). Based on this introduction, it is possible to give a definition of mythology and discuss the goal of this article from the semiotic point of view.

## Mythology

Danesi (2004) defines mythology as a “Story of early cultures that aims to explain the origin of life or of the universe in terms of some metaphysical or deistic entity or entities” (340). This is a very general definition of mythology and that’s why it’s acceptable by all mythologists. Any other specific definition may not be acceptable by all mythologists due to the difference of their paradigms. Scientific study of myth called mythology and the scientific study of narratives are called narratology and it seems Algirdas J. Greimas developed narratology as a branch of semiotics.

By studying the mythologies of different societies, it is possible to differentiate three general types of mythology, which are common among all societies. The most important mythology in different societies is the cosmogonic myths that explain how the world came into being. On the other hand, eschatological myths explain the end of the world. The third group of myths is explanatory myths which explain the natural events. These mythologies are different in each society and also they are presented in various forms in different religions as well. Each of these mythologies has their own gods, heroes and mysterious creatures who are involved in the narrative of each myth. In addition, each of these entities has their own form based on these narratives. In each of these narratives, humans are using the actual world around them, otherwise it would not be perceivable. Even hell and heaven from different religions are told based on the human perception and both are perceivable based on the exemplification of the real world.

## Narrative

Up till now, the researcher explained each myth created based on a narrative. The very common definition of narrative considers narrative and story together and it’s a report of connected events (Abbott, 2009). According to Danesi (2004) “A narrative is a text that has been constructed in such a way as to represent a sequence of events or actions that are felt to be logically connected to each other or intertwined in some way” (142). We don’t discuss what we mean by “logically connected” or “intertwined in some way” because there are disagreements in each point of view about narratology and they define and explain this term based on their perspective. This article focuses mainly on the narrative sequence which can be purely fact-based and belong to the reality of the world and/or be fictional and belong to the possible world other than the real world. Each created myth in its core is based on the real world and there is a pattern for the creation of myth in the real world. The next section is based on discussion of the importance of this matter in further detail.

## Possible world

Thru the eras, Philosophy has been concerned in various subjects connected to humans. But for the first time, Leibniz (1710) discussed the world's variability and its roots as "the best of all possible worlds." Till the mid-20th century, modal logic was becoming very popular in Europe and the United States, particularly in the field of semantics by American philosopher Saul Kripke (1963). This system made logic flexible to frame new notions in regard to the realities of our world which was difficult before. Therefore, "the introduction of modal operators represented by the symbol established a system of assigning truths to statements in relation to a specific possible world" (Maza, 2017: 3). "Without referring to Leibniz, Kripke invoked in the interpretation of his model structure the basic concept of the seventeenth-century German philosopher, the concept of the possible world" (Dolezel, 1992: 201). That's how it set up the conditional status of things that are only real in the reality from the area of the possible. According to Maza (2017: 4), Kripke's approach introduced some interesting concepts. On one hand, possible worlds establish certain links between each other, called accessibility relations, which allow transitivity between them. On the other hand, possible worlds consist of two fundamental attributes: the complete nature of its structuring – that is, the states of things contained in the world that have been or can be produced according to the rules of the system – and the consistent or coherent nature – that is, that no contradiction exists. The concept of possible worlds is not available in just philosophy and logic. It develops itself into other fields of study. It is related to worlds which are shaped by imaginary texts or possible universes. Consider the examples: (1) In this movie, the humans can fly; (2) In this photo, they remove my face wrinkles; (3) If I were rich, I would buy this Mercedes.

In example (1), the possible world is considered that humans can fly like birds. Example (2) shows a photo in a possible world in which the speaker doesn't have wrinkles on their face. Example (3), the speaker considers a possible world for him/herself in which he/she is rich and in that world he/she can buy a car which exists in the real world. In all these examples we are considering a possible world that is different from the real world however they are based on the human perception of the real world so that they become understandable.

For a better understanding of the importance of this, imagine a producer of a movie asking to create an organism which came from another planet and which is supposed to fight with humans. We can create an organism who has three heads, twelve eyes, with the size of a skyscraper, can throw fire from its mouth and etc. However, the producer is asking that we cannot use any entities from this world to create that phenomenon because it belongs to another planet and there is nothing similar from that planet and earth. This is not possible for us to create in the way what the producer wants since we don't have the perception of it. In all of the human creations, we always use entities from the real world and we do this based

on the selection & combination process, which is further explained in the next section of this article.

## **Selection & Combination**

Ferdinand de Saussure in *the course of general linguistics* (de Saussure, 1916/1985: 80) talked about two imaginary axes called paradigmatic axis and syntagmatic axis. According to him what today is called paradigmatic is “structural relation between signs that keep them distinct and therefore evaluable”. He also considered syntagmatic as the “structural relation that combines signs in code specific way”. Based on this explanations the paradigmatic axis is an axis that structural paradigmatic relation are located on it and the syntagmatic axis is an axis that signs are combine on it. For example, for making a word ‘man’ in English, three sound signs ‘m’, ‘a’, and ‘n’ were selected from the paradigmatic axis and then they are combined on the syntagmatic axis. Selecting ‘p’ instead of ‘n’ will make ‘map’ which is different from ‘man’ and has a different value in the system of the English language.

Jakobson (1960) introduced these two relations based on the two processes called selection and combination. He believed the speaker of a language select units from the selection axis and combines them on the combination axis. Jakobson (1973) believed that these two processes are a sort of biological programming for humans and mentioned that humans in their creations are procuring these from the selection and combination process. This approach is the same with the approach of the authors of this article which used this approach to discuss the myth and the units used in the creation of mythological narrative. The authors believe that all units of any mythological narrative are created based on the selection and combinations process. In other words, humans select some units from the real world and combine these units in a possible world.

## **Creation of myth**

In the previous sections of this article, the authors determined that each mythological narrative is quoted as myth and are based on the two processes selection and combination from the real world of humans, which is perceivable in a possible world. Each myth contains entities that create the characters of the myth and can be considered as a mythical character. Characters such as Satyr, Pegasus, Unicorn, Dragon and etc. in the combination of Olympus gods, Thor, Achilles, Hercules and etc. create characters that have a role in the different narratives. Each of these characters created based on the selection and combination process from the real world. For instance, Pegasus created from the selection of ‘horse’ and ‘wing’ and then combined. Or a Dragon is the selection of ‘snake’, ‘wing’

and 'fire' and then created because on the combination of all these in a way that 'snake' become much bigger, with two 'wing' for it and the 'fire' that comes out from his mouth. This selection and combination process can be summarized in a collection function (4) stated below.

$$\begin{aligned}(4). \quad A &= \{a, b, c \dots h\} \\ B &= \{i, j, k \dots o\} \\ C &= \{p, q, r \dots v\} \\ \Sigma &= \{a, i, p\} \leftarrow\end{aligned}$$

It is possible to explain collections (4) as  $\Sigma$  is a mythical character and it's a combination of the selected units 'a', 'i' and 'p'. So 'a' is a unit of the collection A which is exemplified of the real world. 'i' is a unit of a collection B which is also another exemplified of the real world, and 'p' is also a unite of the collection C in the real world.  $\Sigma$  is created based on the selection of these units and combination of those in a possible world. This can be applied to all historical mythological characters and also can be applied to the characters such as Superman, Spiderman, or even Donald Duck or Pink Pinter and etc. However the question is how these selections do and combinations work? Or in other words, why in order to create Pegasus instead of combining the wings to the ears of the horse, it's on the side of it and exactly in the place that birds have their wings?

We can see that all these myth are created under a certain structure in which all the creation is formed. This certain structures are telling that all human creations are perceivable based on the limited structure of the real world. If in an era a horse was supposed to fly, it should have the structure of a bird, at least in the era of the creation of Pegasus, and the wings had to be placed exactly on the side of its body like a bird. For the creation of Superman, the human has the knowledge for the rocket launcher and that's how Superman can fly without wings. Due to this, at least in current time, a human has more alternative ways to create humans who can fly; the human withwing can fly like a bird; humans who can fly like a rocket or even humans who can fill themselves with air like a balloon and fly. This alternative creation can be explained based on the technological development which occurred at that certain time which laid to the creation of these possible worlds.

## Conclusion

Based on the discussion of this article, it is possible to conclude that each myth created is based on narrative or narratives. These narratives are created based on selection and combination of entities from the real world and they belong to a possible world. Selection and combination of units from each myth and character are based on the rules of this world and the dominant principle of the real world. The perception of each mythological character is based on the human perception of the real world.

This helps us form a different perspective on how we perceive myth and narratives of mythology using a semiotic approach. Based on this article human perception of myth and the creation of myth are limited in to a certain structure which is related to the understanding and perception of the humans in a given time frame.

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