

One of the most common means of classifying is by using binary opposition. Good and evil, white and black, old and young, high and low are oppositions that, according to Lévi-Strauss, reflect the universal human need to convert differences of degree into differences of kind.

Lévi-Strauss applied his assumptions about classification and binary opposition to myths and folk tales. He showed that these narratives have simple building blocks—elementary structures or “mythemes.” Examining the myths of different cultures, Lévi-Strauss shows that one tale can be converted into another through a series of simple operations—for example, by doing the following:

1. Converting the positive element of a myth into its negative.
2. Reversing the order of the elements.
3. Replacing a male hero with a female hero.
4. Preserving or repeating certain key elements.

Through such operations, two apparently dissimilar myths can be shown to be variations on a common structure—that is, to be transformations of each other. One example is Lévi-Strauss’s (1967) analysis of “Cinderella,” a widespread tale whose elements vary between neighboring cultures.

Through reversals, oppositions, and negations, as the tale is told, retold, diffused, and incorporated within the traditions of successive societies, “Cinderella” becomes “Ash Boy,” along with a series of other oppositions (e.g., stepfather versus stepmother) related to the change in gender from female to male.