

The Mythological Robot

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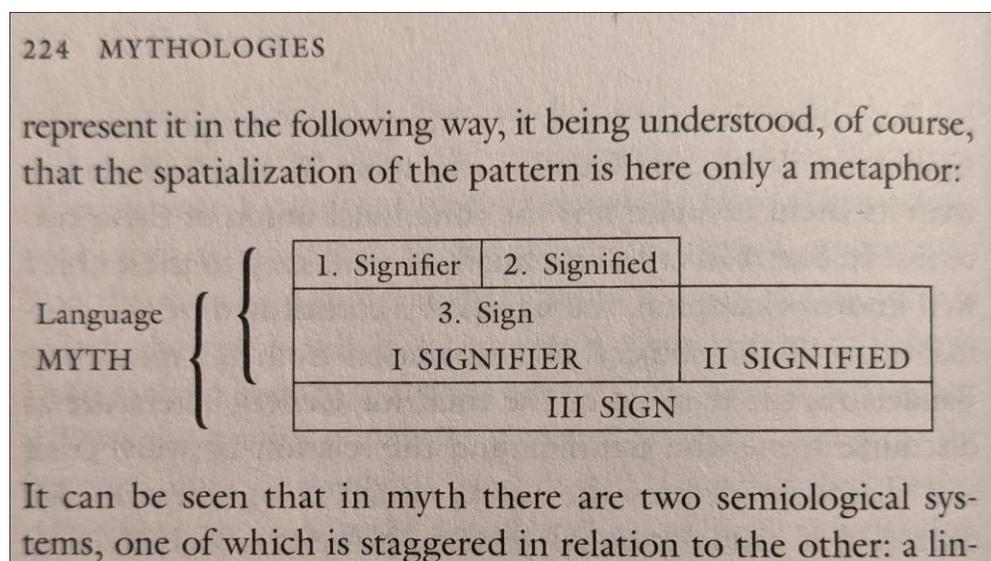
Myths are more than stories told to children, they are an important part of daily life, influencing politics and shaping history. The French literary theorist Roland Barthes wrote that myth is a way of "dressing up reality" in order to make it acceptable or "natural." I am developing a conversational robot and it turns out my robot must "dress up reality" as humans do, to communicate.

In his book "Mythologies", Barthes provided many examples of myth in French society, and perhaps myths are best explained by example. Here are two I have taken from modern North American mythology:

The Gun. The gun is pure power, the power of life and death, power you can not only touch but hold in your hand, and when you hold a gun its power flows into you making you pure, righteous, and safe. With a gun in your hand, you become a legend. A gun is freedom. You will never let them take your freedom from you.

Athletes are Heroes. Sports are more than entertainment. Sports are a shining mountaintop, a pinnacle where excellence, sacrifice and pride play out with unsullied glory, a mountaintop we can never reach. Of course, we all want to climb there, to touch it. Together we follow the careers of our heroes. We build our own mountains, massive stadiums where we share their glory, their defeats, we touch it through our teams, our bets, our fantasy football leagues, our dreams of a kid in the NHL.

Barthes wrote that myth is a component of human communication on a par with language itself. He called it a "type of speech" that is "one fragment of the vast system of signs postulated by Saussure". He created a small diagram illustrating his theory:



1. and 2. in the diagram represent the Signified and Signifier postulated by Saussure and 3. represents the Sign created by those two elements. The Sign, in turn is a signifier in the Myth layer, which when matched with another Signified forms the mythic Sign. We see here that Barthes considered myth to be a semiological system, or a part of the system of signs we humans use to communicate.

And we can see how this plays out in society today. Laws are based on myth, politicians use myths shamelessly to garner votes and plot nations' futures, fortunes are made retelling these myths, they show up in casual conversation, parents raise their children with these myths in mind.

So, in a quest to develop a conversational robot one may crack semantics and syntax, build a transformer with a trillion parameters, even design a computer chip with artificial neurons instead of bits, but if a robot cannot access mythology, people will end their conversation with it disappointed, and unimpressed. We must think in terms of content rather than just process when developing a conversational robot.

Suggested Reading:

Roland Barthes, Mythologies, <https://soundenvironments.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/roland-barthes-mythologies.pdf>

Joseph Campbell, The Hero With A Thousand Faces,

<http://www.rosenfels.org/Joseph%20Campbell%20-%20The%20Hero%20With%20A%20Thousand%20Faces,%20Commemorative%20Edition%20%282004%29.pdf>