

**Narrative Externalities:** The term “externality” is used by economists to denote phenomena that arise from economic activity (such as production or trade) that are not accounted for by the pricing mechanisms of the market. A “positive externality” of using electric cars might be a decrease in carbon emissions (assuming they are not taxed); a “negative externality” might arise when toxic metals from their batteries end up leeching into the water supply.

Literary discourse can have a similar economics. Any simile, metaphor or allegory has two basic aspects: the explicit description (i.e., the direct referents of the language, in poetics called the ‘vehicle’), and the implicit description (i.e., what those things are ‘intended’ to refer to, in poetics called the ‘tenor’). When Robert Burns wrote “O, my Luve’s like a red, red rose,” he used the image of the rose (the vehicle) to help people understand the nature of love (the tenor), clearly not the other way around. Implicitly, the rose is considered more basic to human experience than ‘love’ -- the reader’s ability to grasp the simple is deployed as a means to apprehend the complex. And yet, partly because of poems like this, we think of the rose as a romantic flower -- far more than mushrooms, for example. Metaphorical language can thus transform our sensibilities about the very imagery that it presumes we already know.

In Burroughs’ *Tarzan* books, the image of Africa functions as an easy-to-grasp metaphor for the competitive and often cruel world faced by middle class (or labor class) young white men at the turn of the century. Yet this image of Africa acquires a reality of its own, so that readers end up apprehending Africa (and other non-Euro societies) in the terms set down by Burroughs. What begins as a seemingly harmless -- and notably *fun* -- literary device thus ends up confirming and constructing a discourse that had monstrous consequences for the twentieth century. The ‘negative externalities’ of this narrative are easy to spot today; less so the positive ones (an identification and rejection of certain forms of snobbism?; an appreciation of self-education, physical education and physical work?; a rejection of certain abuses of power?).

Yet to “pick and choose” from *Tarzan* the aspects that we find admirable or deplorable can mislead us about the nature of culture. Attitudes towards race, class, gender, age, health, nationhood, geography, the environment, the nature of social cooperation, civilization, authenticity, intellectualism, science, entertainment, and many other aspects of culture were embedded into an interlocking discourse (called a ‘cultural matrix’). No one aspect could be changed without directly or indirectly affecting all of the other aspects.

**Discourse:** Just as any language has ‘words’ and rules that govern how they fit together into larger units of meaning, any culture has a complex system of signification, which includes language but also includes all the practices, artifacts, technologies and institutions that govern ‘meaning’ in that culture. Discourse, in its broadest definition, is the totality of that system. Because discourse is highly interconnected, it resists change. Yet it is also never entirely self-consistent, and the internal inconsistencies always drive change to some extent. It is quite possible to have a society where one group embraces a very different view of the world (and consequently a different discourse) than another.

**Hegemonic discourse:** When a single, prevailing cultural discourse works in the interests of the most powerful people in a society -- and particularly when it works *against* the interests of other groups who nonetheless embrace the discourse under the illusion that it helps them -- it can be called *hegemonic*, in the double sense that it represents the dominant group it also dominates most aspects of cultural production. *Hegemonic ideology* is a closely related term, referring specifically to the ways that discourse can disguise its most irrational and unnatural aspects with thick layers of (false) rationalizations and (false) naturalizations. The term has been most frequently used by dissident economists, who argue that modern capitalist economies tend to propagate the myth that prices of goods and of labor (i.e., wages) are always ‘fair’ because they are set by generally free market principles.

**Paradigm:** Thomas S. Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, U. of Chicago Press) described the history of scientific advancement (with examples from astronomy, physics, chemistry, etc.) in terms of cycles that are initiated by new discoveries or experiments (‘paradigms’) which: (a) solve some major nagging question or inconsistency in the previous scientific discourse, or provide an explanation that is radically more simple or comprehensive; (b) initiate a cascade of new discoveries, experiments, and theorizations (what Kuhn calls ‘normal science’) that otherwise would have been unlikely or unsupported by the scientific establishment; (c) eventually produce a new set of questions or inconsistencies, which in turn are (d) eventually solved by the production of a new paradigm, thus beginning a new cycle.

This formulation is of interest to historians of general cultural discourse (which includes scientific discourse), because it provides a model for understanding the internal interconnectedness of discourse as well as the mechanisms and trajectories of cultural change. Incidentally, Kuhn’s model has striking parallels to the concept of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ in the fields of evolutionary biology or even seismology.