

## A. J. Greimas: The perfection of imperfection

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Understanding semiotics has never been an easy endeavour, partly due to the number of semiotic schools of thought and partly due to the missing links and connections between the theories. What also hinders the quest for understanding is that semioticians themselves tend to simplify and reduce the theories to their most distinctive features. This is mainly manifested through branding the leading figures with their most memorable tools or concepts: Juri Lotman with semiosphere, Charles Sanders Peirce with sign typology, Umberto Eco with codes, and Algirdas Julius Greimas with the semiotic square. Lastly, semiotic affinities among the different schools have primarily been expressed through antagonistic relationships, i.e. through denouncing other approaches in favour of a central one. Seen from such a reductionist perspective, the hope of reconciling them, or at least starting semiotic discussions between them seems to be a hopeless pursuit. And we know that connections and links resurface when semiotic thinking is revealed in its full scope, not when it is reduced to a few stereotypical fundamentals.

2017 marks the 100th anniversary of Algirdas Julius Greimas (1917–1992). For the very first time, the journal *Sign Systems Studies* dedicates a special issue entirely to such an outstanding scholar. In the field of semiotics and even beyond it, the name of Greimas has become associated with a number of concepts such as semes and semic analysis, figure and figurative, narrative grammar, isotopy and – evidently – the semiotic square. The anniversary of Greimas provides a perfect excuse for taking a more extensive look at the Greimassian semiotic heritage and the paths of investigation that his work has opened up or inspired. It also presents an opportunity to discuss the main themes that resonate across his varied semiotic work and main features that have consistently been surfacing across his investigations and theoretical constructs. Above all, though, the greatest opportunity that the anniversary presents is not merely about

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revisiting Greimassian semiotic theory, but rather presenting it in a way that fosters understanding and opportunities to connect it to other works.

## The nature of the Greimassian project

The first thing to be defined is the nature of Greimassian semiotics. Greimas himself framed it by calling his work ‘the semiotic project’. On the one hand, such framing meant defining his work on semiotics as a continuous process and positioning it as an existential undertaking that cannot be separated from one’s relationship with the surrounding world and the desire to understand its workings. Greimassian semiotics was never meant to be a contained and isolated project – the ways in which Greimas used and defined essential terms and concepts prove that directly as most of them were borrowed from a variety of scientific contexts and repurposed as a part of the semiotic framework. Understanding the Greimassian project might prove difficult if one relies only on a single work, as an isolated paper or book only provides a snapshot of the full theoretical scope and only by going through a number of Greimas<sup>4</sup> writings can the full scope of his semiotic undertaking be revealed.

## Compatible incompatibility

Different stages of theory development have given rise to various applications and analytical efforts. It is hard to find another body of works allowing derivative analytical approaches that can range from free-form approaches towards objects of analysis to rigid structural work-flows. It is also impossible to dismiss the variety of genres that the Greimassian semiotic theory has manifested itself in: dictionaries, lexicographic studies, analysis of literary, spatial or visual works, gestures, or even mythology, study of passions. Now this serves as an example of the fundamental nature of the theory.

Another unique aspect of Greimas’ semiotic theory is that despite the variety of formats and approaches it managed to change its focus, expand and branch out without invalidating previous theoretical ventures. The first and the second tomes of *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Greimas, Courtés 1979; 1986) are a living proof of that. Despite the variety, all the works managed to communicate the same fundamental approach towards objects of research.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the Lithuanian pronunciation of (the -s at the end of) the name, we use the version Greimas’ rather than Greimas’s in the possessive case.

## From surface to depth

The semiotic theory operates on the unspoken belief that every surface hides a depth, and the full arsenal of semiotic constructs is there to prove it. Throughout the scope of works dedicated to semiotics Greimas stressed his dedication to both analysing the surface, i.e. the immediately experienced level of any semiotic object, and the depth, i.e. the underlying value systems and taxonomies.

Surface and depth are intrinsically related to generative and analytical trajectories: the process of creating a text and the process of understanding or reading it. What is interesting is that analytical work of semioticians is not limited just to analytical trajectories, but could also follow a reverse logic: (a) starting with specific examples and then mapping out narrative transformations and underlying values; or (b) starting with general axiological constructs and then arriving at a specific textual analysis.

The surface-depth dichotomy developed by Greimas contributed to the specific nature of the semiotic framework – it is not a stretch to imagine the textual structure conceived by Greimas as a spatial organization that features levels of varied complexity. Transformation is the key to understanding how textual structures work and how to transition from one layer to another. Such logic directly ties in with the overall definition of meaning conditions employed by Greimas that revolves around the possibility of moving from one level to another.

## Principles, tools, frameworks

One of the reasons for the impact of Greimas' theory is its multiplicity of the theoretical constructs. This does not only apply to the sheer number of theoretical vehicles devised throughout the semiotician's career, but also to the difference in their nature.

Greimas' work produced both general analytical principles and overall analysis frameworks, as well as individual tools. General principles constitute the bedrock of any theoretical approach with the critical difference being in how well they can be translated into frameworks. In this context, framework denotes the sequential analytical process that outlines the steps and principles and operations assigned to each step. And this is where the significance and the essential strength of the Greimassian semiotic approach lies – in its details and in the consistency with which the process is defined and described. Greimas' theory also gave birth to concepts that at present constitute independent tools. The curious nature of these tools is that even though they are integrated within analytical frameworks, they also function as separate tools that are more often than not used outside the overall theory or the semiotic approach. The semiotic square is a standing example of such a phenomenon.

## Theory and its object

Language and literature were the objects of investigation that Greimas was best known for, but it does not mean that the theory was limited to that. Greimas defined the relationship between the object of study and the theory in an interesting way. The purpose of the theory was to provide a fundamental structure, while the purpose of the object of analysis was to challenge the existing theory and help enrich it through direct application efforts. Such an analytical attitude is reflected throughout other works of the Paris School of semiotics and semioticians who try to expand on the Greimassian legacy. This also shows the interesting trajectories of how different theoretical concepts were conceived, or sometimes appropriated, as a part of specific semiotic investigations, e.g. in visual semiotics, and then became commonly accepted across the semiotic divisions.

## Openness

Greimas did not shy away from referring back to his own work and updating specific parts of its theory – as in admitting the limitations of the narrative transformations of junction and disjunction while studying passions and moving towards a theoretical basis that would allow to define and analyse process over final state.

It has to be admitted that in some ways the incomplete qualities of Greimas' work are exactly what contributes to its attractiveness and longevity. Even though this might sound counter-intuitive, the underexplained and underdeveloped parts of the theory attract most attention. Isotopy is one of such concepts that was initially presented in a limited context and later expanded to cover a number of structures that ensure textual coherence on different textual levels. Another example, *De l'imperfection* (Greimas 1987) is a symbolic work in the sense that it showed the imperfect and incomplete state of the semiotic theory and thus opened it up for numerous development options. It might appear that in his last work the author tried to prove that the semiotic theory can be extended beyond the rigid boundaries that were envisioned in the initial works.

## A brief overview of secondary literature on the subject

The secondary literature on the subject is vast and an exhaustive review of the publications on Greimas' semiotics would fall outside the scope of this introduction. However, we would like to point out some recent (as well as less recent) publications that have dwelled on his scholarship and its implications for semiotics. Amongst the many publications that have been celebrating Greimas' anniversary this year we would like to point out the special issue of the journal *Semiotica*, edited by Thomas F. Broden

and Stéphanie Walsh Matthews (2017), which contains a substantial section not only on theories and applications, but also on Greimas' own life. In addition, the journal *Actes Semiotiques*, under the direction of Eric Landowski (2017), has published a special issue on the Lithuanian-born semiotician, with the title *A. J. Greimas. Sept lectures pour un centenaire*.

Recently, Tiziana Migliore edited an Italian-language volume entitled *Incidenti ed Esplosioni: A. J. Greimas, J. M. Lotman, Per una semiotica della cultura* (2010), which collects the papers presented at the Congress devoted to the legacy of A. J. Greimas and J. Lotman held in Venice in 2008. This collection of essays revolves around the development and parallels between Greimas' semiotics and the Lotmanian approach and it contains an appendix listing the translations of the works of the two authors into Italian. *Greimassian Semiotics*, the special issue of *New Literary History* (1989) published almost three decades ago and edited by Paul Perron, provides a comprehensive review of Greimas' approach to literature as well as a very thorough outlook on his semiotic theory. It has the merit of having introduced some of Greimas' works to the English-speaking world, with Paul Perron playing a crucial role both as a scholar, with his lucid studies on the subject, as well as a "gatekeeper" who has translated Greimas' texts (Perron 1983; Perron and Danesi 1993).<sup>5</sup>

Also Umberto Eco has famously reconsidered Greimas' semiotics in his own theory of "the role of the reader" (Eco 1979), especially with reference to the concept of the "sememe" (Eco, Magli, Otis 1989). And finally, it is worth noting that numerous accounts are designed to bring into a relief Greimassian semiotics in connection with the establishment and development of the School of Paris (Coquet 1982; Landowski 2015).

## Rationale of the volume

The present volume contains eleven contributions on Greimas from an international range of scholars. The articles cover a range of approaches – including both theoretical and applied studies – that vary from detached and detailed investigations to personal-approach driven studies that trace the intellectual origins of theory and its contexts. The essays are divided into three main sections and cover different aspects of Greimas' semiotic work with the primary intention not only to commemorate his intellectual heritage, but also to question, assess and expand on it. The variety of texts found in this issue reflects the diversity of Greimas' works and outlines the number of fields that show potential for further expansion of the enterprise of semiotic thought.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1993 Jacques Fontanille edited a special issue devoted to Greimas: *Homages à A. J. Greimas (Special Issue)*. *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques* 25.

In “Relationalism: From Greimas to hyperstructuralism” Franciscu Sedda explores the ways in which Greimas’ theory might contribute to the developing debate surrounding the theme of reality. The study does not shy away from one of the most elusive and convoluted parts of Greimas’ theory – the relationship between the natural language and the natural world. The author defines the relationship in four ways in which the two phenomena correlate and reaches the conclusion that allows us to reformulate the relationship as one where a singular form correlates with a multiplicity of forms. Proceeding more philosophically, the author reinstates the relevance of semiotics by describing an intersection point between different scholarly approaches: the reality as a combination of relations and us being a totality of structures of relations that exist between us and the world.

In the article “The semiotics of A. J. Greimas: A European intellectual heritage seen from the inside and the outside” Eero Tarasti takes an insider’s route by describing the development of Greimas’ project from a personal perspective. What makes this article stand out is a number of details and circumstantial aspects that are usually discarded or lost in more canonical accounts of the theory and its stages. The author tracks academic influences and even personal relationships with other authors and thinkers and, by doing so, provides a novel vantage point. The article touches upon the origins of the concept of isotopy and even depicts the moment of the inception of semiotic square. The second part of the article deals with the progression and application of semiotic terms by other semioticians or scholars in the post-Greimassian era.

Dissatisfied with the present state of Greimassian semiotics, Massimo Leone immediately sets out to assess the situation critically in his article “The clash of semiotic civilizations”. By juxtaposing Eco’s and Greimas’ view on the source of the final meaning of the text, the author distils two ideologies, one of which prescribes meaning to the inner workings of the text and another that favours the interpretative community as a party that negotiates the final meaning. Even though the author admits the shortcomings of the Greimassian semiotic theory, he stands in favour of the very belief that formed the basis for Greimas’ theory development – that meaning is born through rules, rationale and communication and not through the use of force or violence. This is the perspective that should not get lost among numerous emergent interpretative ideologies.

“Signs and figures: Some remarks on Greimas’ theory of the figurative” calls for a re-reading of central semiotic concepts. One of such central concepts is ‘figure’ – a theoretical construct that has been appearing through different stages and analytical spaces of Greimas’ theory. ‘Figure’ has also been widely employed through the application of semiotic tools and thinking, so any unclarified methodological questions have wide reach. The author Paolo Bertetti traces the origins of the term and the connections that it has with other inherently problematic notions such as ‘the natural world’. While revisiting concepts such as ‘abstract’ and ‘figurative’, Bertetti identifies

inconsistencies between how different semioticians approach the same concept or even how the perspectives fluctuate inside Greimas' writings. The article is concluded with an effort to define boundaries for the semiotic investigations of meaning and to find the point beyond which semiotic effort starts making less sense.

Thomas F. Broden chooses to investigate the usually overshadowed part of Greimas' methodological legacy in the article "A. J. Greimas' historical lexicology (1945–1958) and the place of the lexeme in his work". The author does not trust Greimas when he himself pronounces discontinuity in his own methodological approach or when he renounces the lexicological method. The author claims that each new methodological approach developed by Greimas did not invalidate the previous ones, but integrated various elements into a different and usually more elaborate framework. By focusing on the early lexicological works by Greimas, Broden points out how the lexicological approach leads to treating lexemes as condensations of meaning that can be unpacked as more elaborate structures, containing even narratives.

Gintautė Žemaitytė's paper titled "Plastic semiotics: From visibility to all the senses" provides an overview of the transition from linguistic to non-linguistic dimensions that the Greimassian semiotics has undertaken. The author highlights one of the crucial moments in theory development that occurred when the question 'what is represented?' was replaced by 'how is it represented?'. The article defines plastic semiotics as a branch that aims at investigating the effects produced by the sensorial dimension and tracks the developments of the plastic semiotic concepts and their proliferation into other domains. Žemaitytė notes an interesting analogy in trajectories of theoretical development: if the general semiotics stemmed from linguistics and then moved to other fields, plastic semiotics originated from investigating visual phenomena and later became adapted to other fields. In both cases, the principles derived from specific fields quickly became universalized and contributed to the enriching of the overall inventory of semiotic tools and concepts.

Dalia Satkauskytė in her article "The impossibility of immanence: A contemporary perspective on Algirdas Julius Greimas' *Maupassant*" observes one of the highest points in the application of semiotic theory. Yet the purpose of this article is not merely to celebrate the versatility and practicality of the semiotic method, but also to investigate how Greimas dealt with the contextual contamination of the text – the possible isotopies that lead beyond the text and somehow have to be integrated into the interpretative reading process. What starts as an investigation into analytical practice turns into a problematization of the immanence principle in the Greimassian semiotics. The author suggests that context should be a controlled, but not a prohibited, aspect of the analytical processes – the reading of the text should be opened, but only where the reading requires it.

Jacques Fontanille goes for a conceptual retracing in his article “Praxis and enunciation: Greimas, heir of Saussure”. The author tries to disperse the stereotypical understanding that temporal and social dimensions are somehow absent from the definition of the sign. By highlighting arbitrariness, tensions and no-coincidence between different parts of the sign, Fontanille redefines the Saussurian sign as a dynamic entity that is changing and transforming in time. By pointing out the often overlooked aspects of enunciation that were already present in Saussure’s account of signs, Fontanille presents the enunciation theory as a more consistent and coherent semiotic development and one that was inscribed within the theory’s methodological origins. Moving to the Greimassian context, Fontanille defines the conditions of the enunciation process and explains the phenomenon of the enunciative praxis as a totality of acts by which discourses are appropriated for a specific enunciation.

Herman Tamminen’s article “Four ways of triadic ‘sign-ness’ on two semiotic squares” is an exploration of methodological syncretism. The author combines triadic sign logic with the frame of semiotic theory and replaces the sign concept with sign-ness. This combination is undertaken in order to demonstrate that the four categories can be defined as four dimensions of signs that contain their own set of internal relations. The paper also serves as an example of how semiotic constructs can be repurposed for broader theoretical discussions that extend beyond their initial frameworks.

In her article “Interpreting “The Snow Queen”: A comparison of two semantic universes” Tatjana Pilipoveca resorts to an application of semiotic tools. The author picks an intriguing case of cultural adaption in which Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Snow Queen” is reworked in Evgenij Schwartz’s play that would be more suitable to Soviet audiences. Semiotic tools are employed as a mechanism of comparison that makes it possible to juxtapose the interpretations of the two texts. The paper showcases how the changes that appear on the discursive level transform the deep meaning structure of the text. Such an exercise in textual permutation in which the reshuffling, deletion and insertion of elements can be observed allows taking a glimpse at the causal and transformatory relationships between the surface and deep levels of discourses.

Dmitrij Gluscevskij employs the semiotic framework to tackle the task of defining the phenomenon of humour. The essential question that the author raises concerns the overall ability of semiotics to tackle such an abstract object of analysis. Firstly, the semiotic approach towards meaning-making is discussed to determine the implications of the analytical task. This is followed by an overview of Greimas’ own attempt at analysing instances of humour through the concept of isotopy. The fundamental aspect of the nature of humour is revealed once the object is approached from a process perspective that takes the temporal aspect into account. Even though semiotics might seem as a discipline that forgets its reader most of the time, the analysis performed by

Gluscevskij reaches its conclusion by essentially defining humour through the text-reader relationship.

Together, the papers demonstrate how one methodological approach can expand into a variety of analytical paths and applications, and hopefully will open more doors than it closes.

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