

The semiotics of A. J. Greimas: A European intellectual heritage seen from the inside and the outside

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Abstract. The essay deals with the formation of the Greimassian thought from its earliest origins in his young years at Kaunas University, i.e. his connections with Wilhelm Sesemann, Lev Karsavin and Russian formalism, to the rise of structuralism in Paris. The Paris School approach stems from *Sémantique structurale* (1967) leading to the ‘third semiotic revolution’, as Greimas called it, by the invention of the modalities. This made his method close to even analytic philosophy and modal logics. In both, a linguistic turn and use of formal logics took place. Yet Greimas’ semiotics grew out of a purely linguistic framework into a broader philosophical approach. Nowadays, considered one of the classics of the semiotic scene, his method still has not lost anything of its analytic acuity and epistemic temptation. Even such new paradigms as existential semiotics grow organically from some Greimas’ ideas which have kept their relevance.

Keywords: structuralism; formal logics; modalities; narratology; Paris School; Vladimir Propp; Wilhelm Sesemann; Lev Karsavin; Claude Lévi-Strauss; existential semiotics

Among all the so-called – and also would-be – classics of semiotics during its history the case of A. J. Greimas is one of the most fascinating, challenging, provocative, and substantial. We know many scholars in the history of ideas, “giants upon whose shoulders we stand”, who never cared about creating a school around them despite their evident charisma. Greimas was one of such giants, yet he also succeeded in gathering around him faithful disciples who continued the doctrine he had created. It is hard to say which generation of semioticians he should be classified as. If the first generation consisted of scholars of the 19th century such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, the second generation probably meant the structuralists of the 1960s, and the third generation referred to the postmodern thinkers picked out from the paradigm, such as Barthes, late Foucault, late Kristeva, Derrida etc., as well as such

unclassifiable figures like Umberto Eco and Juri Lotman. However, to recall the lecture entitled “*Vers la troisième révolution sémiotique*” [“Towards a third semiotic revolution”] that Greimas delivered in Finland at the Summer Congress of the Finnish Semiotic Society in July 1983, the ‘revolutions’ were, according to him: (1) the invention of semantics by Michel Bréal; (2) the invention of structural linguistics by de Saussure; and (3) the invention of modalities at the Paris School around Greimas himself.¹

In this essay I try to look at his contribution both from the inside and the outside. We could distinguish four phases in it, in chronological order: (1) the origins in Kaunas; (2) the beginning – *La sémantique structurale* (1966); (3) the apogee – the generative course and *Dictionnaire* (1979); and (4) post-Greimassian developments. In fact, I found a rather similar periodization of Greimas’ career in an essay written by Paul Perron (Perron 2001: 194). He, however, speaks of three phases: (a) defining subject/object relations by a canonical narrative scheme, i.e. either subject has an object or is conjuncted with it or he does not, i.e. he is disjuncted from it; (b) modal grammars portraying the subject’s competence; and (c) semiotics of passions, i.e. how passions modify action (it could be said that this is the supremacy of modalities). This equals the third phase in my classification.

However, I take the liberty of writing as an insider in the sense that I became Greimas’ pupil in the early 1970s and could follow his legendary seminars in Paris. I was also able to follow his later developments by personal contact and correspondence and in my own research into musical semiotics using his method. Since the 1980s I spent more time in the US, though, received new impulses from Bloomington, and could see his approach also from the outside, through the eyes of different other schools.

In general, when reading the Greimas literature in anthologies, encyclopedias and monographs one can detect two basic types of discourse surrounding him. One is maintained by his faithful disciples trying to preserve the metalanguage intact from any changes and transformations as to terminology. They continue the heritage, but the problem with this may be that other scholars in the global semiotic community do not always understand their vocabulary. On the other hand, the evaluations in encyclopedias and course books on semiotics in English do not really nail his contribution, classifying him in a manner that either covers only its essential aspects or straightforwardly does not comprehend its true nature. So we have to balance between these approaches to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of such extremities.

¹ See the DVD: *Significant Moments in the History of Semiotics – in Finland and elsewhere. Greimas – Lotman – Kristeva – Sebeok – Fontanille – Tarasti*. DVD produced by Merja Bauters et al., 2007. Metropolia: Helsinki.

Early influences: Sesemann

There is something similar in the early phases of scholars usually considered as adversaries, such as, e.g. Thomas A. Sebeok, namely the oblivion of the early stage of their careers. In the US no one any longer spoke about the Finno-Ugrian background of Sebeok as a Hungarian and distinguished scholar of the Tcheremiss and other Siberian Finno-Ugrian tribes. Nor has anything been said about Greimas' years of study in Kaunas, although it is often the early years that are decisive in one's life, offering a store of ideas to which one later returns. Before Rimtautas Kašponis systematically started to collect documents on Greimas' childhood and youth (Kašponis 2014), very little was known about it. In this essay I shall not deal with his biography as such, but it is significant what he studied, and under whom, at Kaunas University in the 1930s before World War II. His study book shows (see Tarasti 2015: 379; a document from Kašponis' sources) that he took a course in logics with the famous Lithuanian philosopher Vasily Sesemann, who came from the Parland family in Finland (the most remarkable figures in the history of Finnish semiotics were Henry and Oscar Parland; see Parland 1991). From the essays on culture written as early as in the 1920s by Henry Parland, a kind of "Roland Barthes before Barthes", we know that semiotic ideas had come to his mind via the St. Petersburg linguist Viktor Zhirmunskij who was so close a friend of Sesemann's that he wrote a preface to his *Aesthetics*.

So Greimas moved in the circles of Sesemann, but also in that of another scholar, Lev Karsavin. Karsavin was a philosopher and cultural historian whom Sesemann had invited to settle at Kaunas University. Karsavin belonged to the Russian intelligentsia of the 1920s (the famous ballet dancer Tamara Karsavina was his sister), but he had learned the Lithuanian language so well that later Greimas wrote that it had been Karsavin who had shown him that Lithuanian could also be a language of science. The life of Sesemann has been studied by the German scholar Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2006); the Lithuanian philosopher Leonidas Donskis has edited an English edition of Sesemann's *Aesthetics* (2007; translated by Mykolar Drunga). As an aside, an English-language version of this major work by Sesemann was a project between me and Greimas for a long time in the 1980s, and we corresponded on this issue which, however, did not become realized then. If we think of Sesemann's possible intellectual impact on Greimas, we can note that he had studied philosophy in St. Petersburg and then at the University of Marburg. In Germany Sesemann discovered the Neo-Kantian School of Marburg and Freiburg; Nicolai Hartmann, who would become a towering figure in modern German philosophy, was Sesemann's classmate in St. Petersburg classical gymnasium. Influenced by Nikolaj Losskij's intuitivist philosophy, the Neo-Kantians' ideas, Hartmann's ontology and philosophical anthropology, as well as phenomenological philosophy, Sesemann

wrote numerous articles in German and Russian on philosophical idealism, classical and modern epistemology, logic and aesthetics (Donskis 2007: xxv).

As we know, there is a direct line via Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms and Neo-Kantianism to structuralism. The three categories of discoursivization: spatiality, temporality and actoriality in later Greimas stem from Kant and his *a priori* categories of space, time and subject. So the origin may lie here.

Moreover, Sesemann was familiar with Russian formalism although he did not quite accept all of its ideas. The most important point I could find there was that meaning was always something *ungegenständlich*, immaterial; thus very difficult to study empirically. In fact, we can find the same argument in Greimas and his notion of isotopy – although isotopies could be said to consist of recurrent *classemes* – as well as in the semiosphere of the Tartu-Moscow School or, to put it like the American semiotician John Deely: sign is never a thing, it is an object (Deely 2001: 419, 564, *et pass.*).

In addition, Botz-Bornstein has discovered that for Sesemann meaning was neither totally subjective, to be studied as a state of human mind, nor completely objective i.e. existing in a text, but living between these, in a form he saw to possess a certain rhythm (note what the late Greimas spoke about tensivity and *valence*). Sesemann was influenced by Russian formalism but his view of form was rather dynamic, almost kinetic. The place where he put it between the subjective and the objective comes close to Greimas' concept of *le monde naturel* which was not natural, but already semiotized by the human mind.

As mentioned above, Zhirmunskij was a close friend of Sesemann's. However, Sesemann also criticizes Russian formalists; his view of structure was that it was inner rhythm which constituted the true aesthetic moment. This was close to Losskij's notion of the organic whole or the Neo-Kantian efforts to dynamize static logical systems. Elsewhere, however, Sesemann emphasized two forms of knowledge, *kennen* and *wissen*, of which the former was more important (in French philosophy, Vladimir Jankélévitch made a similar distinction between *connaissance* and *savoir*).

Vladimir Propp

Now, we still have to consider the way the ideas of Vladimir Propp reached Greimas since my hypothesis is that there might be a "Finnish link" even here.

The name that first comes up is certainly that of Vladimir Propp. The innovation introduced in *Morphology of Folktale* as early as in 1928 was decisive, and in order to understand its fecundity we can only ponder from what kind of network of ideas it emerged. Propp's basic realization when dealing with Russian fairy tales was that the elements of one tale could be transferred onto another without any changes. For instance, Baba Yaga can appear in most diverse fairy tales and plots.

The very notion of plot is defined as follows: one chooses at random one part of a tale, provides it with the word ‘about’, and then the definition is complete; for instance, a tale containing a dragon fight belongs to the type “a fairy tale about a fight with a dragon”. Propp found all earlier classifications unsuccessful. For Veselovskij, plot consisted of several motifs, a motif develops into a section. Plot is a theme which consists of various situations. For him, the motif is primary, the plot is secondary. Propp, however, thought that we first have to segment a tale, and only thereafter can we make comparisons.

To what extent did Propp use the Finnish school of folkloristics for his achievement? Vilmos Voigt answered my question in a letter:

In Russia N. P. Andreev appeared in the Folklore Fellows series, in which his two books have been published. I do not know where is his correspondence with Kaarle Krohn and Antti Aarne. Andreev was a professor at St. Petersburg University, an old fashioned fairy tale type scholar. Probably he was the first who thought that one should make a catalogue of Russian folktale types. The *Russkoe geograficheskoe obshchestvo* (whose director was the famous orientalist Duke S. F. Oldenburg) founded a *skazotshnaya* committee, a research committee for folk tales. It invited Propp to make a catalogue of fairy tale types. Propp got a grant but soon thought that Aarne’s system was outdated and when he had read through Afanasjev’s classical fairy tale collection, he realized that many fairy tales followed the same structure.

This was the birth of Propp’s morphology. He wrote his own book three times. First it was a narrative story, what was really no morphology at all. Committee did not accept that writing.

Lévi-Strauss published his comments on Propp in his essay entitled “*L’analyse morphologique des contes russes*” in 1960. He praises the translators of Propp’s work whose work has done an immense service to the humanities. Lévi-Strauss then comments on Propp and admits that the latter’s criticism of earlier scholars (Miller, Wundt, Aarne, Veselovskij) is justified: the problem is that one can always find tales that simultaneously belong to several categories because classification is based upon types of tale or themes which they enact. The distinction of theme is arbitrary, though. Aarne’s classification provided an inventory of themes which is of big help, but segmentation is purely empirical, although the belonging of a tale to any category is always approximate.

Propp’s work was indeed celebrated by the structuralist movement by and large. It was one of the starting points for Greimas’ school and he launched the discussion in his *Sémantique structurale* in 1966. Like Lévi-Strauss, he noticed that Propp’s list could be made more economic and as to the actant and the actors fulfilling the functions, one could distinguish what he called the *mythical actant model* with six members: subject, object, sender, receiver, helper and opponent.

However, in his book the concept of an actant appears much earlier than his evocation of Propp in the chapter “*A la recherche des modèles de transformation*” (Greimas 1966: 192). Also Greimas tried to reduce the number of functions.

When the structuralist vogue had lost its attractiveness, what remained was narratology, which could still consider Propp as its pioneer: almost all canonical analyses of stories start with segmentation. It works even in musical narratology as I have tried to show in my study of Chopin’s Ballade G Minor with its modal grammar. Yet as Ugo Volli has said about such use of Propp, various authors since Propp have tried to extend the morphology to other narrative genres, such as myth, legend, popular literature, and modern novel, but in order to do so it is necessary for the analysis to be brought upon a higher level of abstraction (Volli 2000: 111). It is hard to imagine any other type of systematic narrative study than one stemming from Proppian ‘functions’.

Still, the above-mentioned Antti Aarne and the Krohn brothers constituted the so-called “Finnish school of folkloristics”. I had never heard about it before a trip to Brazil where I bought a study by the Brazilian anthropologist Renato Almeida entitled *A Inteligencia do folclore* (Almeida 1974) and to my surprise it contained a chapter on *Escola finlandesa*. Still, it might be something of an exaggeration to argue that Propp received the intellectual impetus for his *Morphology of Folktale* from this Finnish school. As Vilmos Voigt has put it, Propp rather criticized Aarne’s methodology. Likewise, Grigori Levinton from St. Petersburg European University has told me that the Finnish connection was an erroneous hypothesis. Nevertheless, taking into account the whole network of ideas around the young Greimas in Kaunas, Sesemann, Karsavin, Zhirmunskij in the background, etc., and then the somewhat later Greimas of the mid-1960s after the publication of the French translation of Propp’s *Morphology of Folktale* by Seuil, it is perhaps not so far-fetched. Why could it be important? Of course because the origin of the whole discipline of narratology stems from these sources.

The beginning of Greimas’ structuralism

We may now skip the post-war phases of Greimas’ journeyman years via Alexandria and Ankara and finally to France. Naturally, we should not forget the friendship between Roland Barthes and Greimas that was established during those years abroad. In his history of structuralism, François Dosse (1991) mentions that 1966 that saw the publication of Greimas’ *Sémantique structurale* in the year of “*les succes structuralistes*” stemmed from the Greimas’ seminar at the Institut Poincaré in 1963–1964. Dosse says: “*L’insistance que met Greimas à défendre une sémiotique générale embrassant tous les systèmes de signification à l’ouverture du travail linguistique sur tout autres champs*” (Dosse 1991: 262). So Barthes’s *Elements de sémiologie* that was published in 1968 was clearly written from the Greimassian perspective of general semiotics. Then, once

Greimas had received his position at the EPHE in 1965 with the help of Lévi-Strauss, structuralism had a steady foothold in French academic life.

What was involved was in fact a kind of ‘linguistic turn’ on the French soil. Yet Dosse’s characterization is correct and more justified than those in later encyclopedias of semiotics which all emphasize the linguistic, text-based aspect of Greimassian semiotics, although ever since the beginning its goal obviously had been more “universal” and transdisciplinary. However, the scientific ideal of structuralism, i.e. extreme formalism and formalization, was apparent in *Sémantique structurale*, so that the final result of any analysis was a quasi-algebraic, achronic structure. Dosse (1991: 266) ironizes thus: someone had ready a Greimassian analysis of marriage, which ended after one thousand pages concluding that marriage is a binary structure. Moreover, Dosse (1991: 274) crystallizes his interpretation of the 1960s, stating that in spite of their differences Lévi-Strauss, Greimas and Lacan constituted the trio of the most scientific structuralism: “*Ce sont les trios fleurons de la pensée formelle à son zenith*”. In a conversation Greimas once told me that his method was so rigorous that he could sign any study of his pupils, the method would automatically guarantee the results. Back then, I did not have the courage to oppose, although I thought that then there would be no change or progress in science. “*Das Wahre war schon längst gefunden, [hat edle Geisterschaft verbunden;] das alte Wahre fass es an*”, as Goethe (1840: 268) put it!

However, when arriving at Greimas’ seminar in Paris as a young passionate Lévi-Straussian structuralist, I soon noticed that I did not understand almost anything happening in the lively discussions among the mostly Italian, Latin American and French pupils of Greimas. The reception was of this kind: Greimas introduced me as “a compatriote of George Henrik von Wright”, the philosopher who was successor of Wittgenstein in Cambridge and had developed the deontic logic that Greimas admired. That happened in the mid-1970s, when I also twice interviewed Roland Barthes, who would have liked to accept me to his seminar; however, when he heard I was already at Greimas’, he lost interest.

Anyway, I quickly realized that first I had to study *Sémantique structurale* and the best way to do this for a foreigner was to translate it into his own language, in my case Finnish. I started the translation in Paris but it appeared in Finland only much later, in 1982, after several revisions (the Finnish language does not have the Greco-Roman-based terminology and so much of the new vocabulary of semiotics just had to be invented).

Still, the year of the original publication of Greimas’ work was the year of the ‘structural’ – Dubois told Greimas, that if he added the term ‘structural’ to semantics, a thousand more copies of the book would be sold (Dosse 1991: 385). It was the time of Lévi-Strauss’s *Structural Anthropology* and Rolan Barthes’ *L’homme structural*. What, then, was the innovative aspect of this important book?

For the first, one could see that it was a time not far from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, or Karl Jaspers – the philosophy is looming in its background. The first definition of meaning is just one of perception: one has to perceive two different terms simultaneously. In the beginning the field of empirical sign studies is mentioned, as the classification of signs by their signifiers (visual, auditive, tactile etc.), but it is quickly abandoned in favour of semantics. The first method Greimas proposes is semeanalysis, and here, of course, we come close to linguistics and binary oppositions. Also a whiff of information theory, cybernetics and computer studies counting on 0 or 1 is present. The analysis of the lexeme ‘head’ is the model example of such an extremely taxonomic analysis. The level of semiology is defined.

From the semiotic square and isotopies to narratology

Nevertheless, Greimas does not actually introduce his famous semiotic square yet, although its elements are already clearly present; as everybody knows, the square as such was an old logicians’ model which Greimas only brought into the semiotic discussion. Its purpose has been to provide a reading model for any empirical field or phenomenon whose structure and organization are unknown, chaotic, disordered. By using the square, a certain order appears. The origin is purely linguistic, but in its general meaning and use the model is a hypothesis of a cognitive deep structure in the brain. One can presume that phenomena follow its law and if we know what S1 and, say, non-S2 are, we may try to infer what the missing parts are. Moreover, in case of temporal semantic universes and texts, the square creates a virtuality for expecting what will happen next in the “becoming” of a text. Let us say, if a composer first gives the listener S2 and non-S1, then when will he give S1 and non-S2? (This was the case with Chopin’s *Polonaise-fantasia* as I have tried to show). This has a narrative arch; the tension is created due to the postulated structure. Some even have a mystic view on the square regarding the signification emanating from it organically. However, if seen more modestly, it is an important working method and research tool, to be used on any level of text.

The first really new concept launched there was the one of isotopy – in English it should perhaps be called ‘isotopicity’, i.e. the quality of having isotopes. Yet this deep level of meaning inherent in any text, based empirically on contextual semes and their recurrence, but cognitively, as a mental category, making even the most fragmentary text coherent, is already characteristic of the expansion of the purely linguistic domain to a more philosophical one. How can one for instance prove the existence of isotopy to someone who does not perceive its presence or understand it? There is no way to do that. For instance, in performing arts one may notice that a certain musical, theatrical, filmic, gestural (in dance) interpretation etc. is wrong, but so wrong that it cannot be

corrected by just changing some signifiers (“Play louder here, faster here, more slowly here.”) No, it is wrong because the performer did not catch the isotopy.

It must be admitted that from the moment of launching isotopies, Greimassian semiotics became something more, and broader, than pure ‘lexicography’ as Thomas Sebeok portrayed it or ‘narrative discourse grammatics’. Of course, Greimas essentially remained faithful to his linguistic turn; for instance, he said: “There are no truths, there are only statements about the truth”. Moreover, the fact that isotopies appeared and became manifest when they *changed*, as in cases of bi-isotopies or complex isotopies, added an exciting aura to the notion. For example, Oscar Wilde writes a play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (cf. Ernest = a person, earnest = honest). As Greimas put it, any witty talk is based on playing with complex isotopies. Later, in his study on Maupassant he shows how an isotopy makes an otherwise fragmentary text coherent thanks to the spatial isotopy of Paris.

Isotopy is certainly one of Greimas’ great contributions to semiotic vocabulary; in fact, it is close to Lotman’s ‘semiosphere’ which has also been claimed to lie in the origin of any meaning and define it as a continuum of signs. Here, extremities meet: let us remember late Peirce and his principle of synechism, of a universe where ‘*tout se tient*’ as Greimas would have put it! Isotopy is something to be preserved in any 21st-century semiotics, irrespective of its epistemological ground.

Yet the riches of *Sémantique structurale* do not end here. The Proppian heritage is present in the actant model. The Greimassian version of Proppianism was just in the abridgement of actants into six major actantial roles: sender, receiver, subject, object, helper and opponent. This remained perhaps the most popular of Greimas’ innovations, much applied in different empirical domains. This was prophetically foreseen by Greimas himself, when he made several different “thematic investments”: a philosopher of the classical age, a Marxist, an economist, a psychoanalyst. Subsequently he ponders the transformations of Propp’s functions and moves increasingly closer to extremely formalized reductions.

A little later came the canonical narrative scheme above which Ugo Volli (2000: 120–123) formulated as follows: $S \wedge O$ Subject is conjuncted with Object, or $S \vee O$ Subject is disjuncted from Object². Then actions can be portrayed as: $S1 - (S2 \wedge O)$ i.e. Subject S1 gives a gift of O to subject S2 i.e. makes him conjuncted; or makes so that S2 abandons it, is deprived of it $S1 - (S2 \vee O)$. And this means that a story starts when $S1 - (S2 - (S3 \vee O))$: this is the same as make one do something (*faire faire*) or $S1 - (S2 - (S3 \wedge O))$. These schemes fit all narratives.

Now it might be asked how to situate Greimas in the context of analytic philosophy. According to Nathan Houser, the latter has three requirements: (1) the linguistic turn – present in Greimas; (2) the use of formal logic – present in Greimas (particularly later

² “*Il soggetto è congiunto con l’Oggetto; $S \vee O$ Il soggetto è disgiunto dall’oggett*” (Volli 2000).

in his theories of modalities); (3) the correct philosophical style – this is difficult to say and depends on how you define it.

At this point, one may already enquire what the purpose of this type of semiotic analysis is. Is this method an extreme reductionism whereby concrete phenomena are reduced into abstract schemes? For the first, why should we translate everything from its original language into a very complicated metalanguage? The answer is that in such a reduction new logical possibilities and worlds are revealed in the studied phenomena, dimensions which would otherwise remain hidden. On the other hand, such a metalanguage can serve as an international language of scholars, revealing hitherto concealed new connections between phenomena in the intercultural and transdisciplinary field. Results in one field can benefit others when the shift from one to the other is made possible by a common metalanguage. For instance, results in the narrative study of literature or cinema can be used in musicology, media, education or sociological or cultural studies. This is certainly not far from the idea of unified science entertained by the logical empirists in the 1920s.

At the end of *Sémantique structurale* an example of the method is given in a study of George Bernanos' novel *Journal d'un cure à la campagne* [*Diary of a Country Priest*]. If one has seen Robert Bresson's film based on the novel, one will understand its existentialist nature even better. The idea of the narrative focuses around its main protagonist, the young priest in his first parish with an idealist Jesus Christ project who would convert all his villagers into true Christianity. Yet he fails because he does not understand *which kind of sign he is* for the people around him. Taking into account the existentialist atmosphere of the whole, one is simultaneously fascinated and astonished by the rigorous taxonomic approach of its structural semantics, which approaches its existential message with a cold-blooded method and glance. There is an interesting contradiction involved here.

Apogee: Dictionary and the generative course

Sometime in the mid-1970s Greimas developed the idea of putting all the notions he had hitherto elaborated into what he called a 'generative course'. Generative models had become fashionable due to Noam Chomsky, and tree diagrams were being applied to all sign systems, even to music as by Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1985 or by the conductor Leonard Bernstein in his lecture series *Unanswered Question* from 1973. The grammar behind any sign manifestation or text was supposed to have a deep structure and surface, and the depth was schematized like in Chomsky's example phrase: "John beats his sister". So the originally linear syntactic or syntagmatic chain of signs was shown to be rather a hierarchic construction in which signs in the chain were not of equal value. Of course, the idea of deep structure was launched already by other structuralists, but

it suited Greimas well. Since the beginning there had been the idea of manifest and immanent levels therein. Syntactic and semantic columns were parallel phenomena in the model and it was possible to follow how the text was either produced from the deep level isotopies via discoursivization to the surface, or the surface gradually reduced to dense abridged deep level structures such as for instance the semiotic square. These two courses – the top-down and the bottom-up one – ran parallel to the idea that a text could be produced from some essential principles or else these principles were gradually revealed and inferred when starting from the text's smallest elements, by a kind of *ars combinatoria*. No one questions the process itself and its logical, almost 'organic' coherence. It was not far from the old Goethean idea of an *Urpflanz* from which all later plants would originate, or, to give an analogy from music, the theory by Heinrich Schenker of *Ursatz* to which where any tonal music piece ended. Nor is it far from Heideggerian metaphysics and ontology.

Yet a semiotician keener on realism would think that the generation of one level from another is perhaps not a phenomenon of logical organic growth, but contains irrational leaps, gaps and conflicts. This, however, remained beyond the structuralist tradition of semiotics to which Greimas remained faithful. Thinking of the situation epistemologically, one may ponder whether the idea to put all Greimas' hitherto invented notions into the straightjacket of *parcours génératif* was a good one or not.

The application of such generation was met with difficulties from the very beginning. One major question was when to start to apply it and when to stop. If the problem being investigated was restricted to a certain level of generation, why should one launch the whole heavy apparatus to reveal its organization? Greimas never spoke about the 'bon usage' of his model; in a word, there had to be a higher-level logic somewhere, prompting when to start and when to stop using the generative model. The case of the Finnish theatre scholar Kari Salosaari (1989) is a good example. He created an extremely complex generative model for actor's work in drama and even used it in his experimental theatre productions of certain classics from Shakespeare to Sophokles. Yet at the defence of his doctoral thesis he could not answer the question of which kind of sign is an actor who is playing someone sleeping and then really falls asleep on stage.

Gianfranco Marrone (2014: 51) has recently pondered and well clarified these problems in his study *The Invention of the Text*. He argues:

The text appears, therefore, as the tip of the iceberg of the generative trajectory of meaning, the place where this trajectory acquires an expression-substance and thus makes an empirical concreteness, becomes communicable, cognizable and reachable. [...] The generative trajectory of meaning is in turn the simulation of the different levels of relevance in which meaning textualizes itself. [...] Any human and social signification can be described by the semiotician at different levels, more or less abstract, more or less simple [...]. It can be performed at the

level of elementary structures [...] (the semiotic square) [...] it can be performed at the level of narrativity [...] at the discursive level where enunciating subject uses the underlying structures by giving them specific actors, spaces and times [...]. In this view, the text results from a different operation: textualisation. Textualisation works by stopping the generative trajectory at some level and revealing it.

This, however, was said much later.

Modalities

Nevertheless, side by side with *parcours génératif* also totally new elements were elaborated by the Paris School, ideas that in the course of time would survive the scientific fashions better. One such innovation was introduced by Greimas in his famous lecture “*Vers la troisième révolution sémiotique*” given at Jyväskylä in 1983 – it was the discovery of modalities. This notion changed the whole paradigm radically: instead of studying the structure of an object or a text, the attention was shifted to the subject and his/her activities and attitudes towards the object. In fact, this almost meant abandoning the old structuralist idea of focusing on a text.

When consulting a French dictionary, we can find the definition of ‘modalities.’ If one is a music scholar, one should be careful not to confuse them with modal scales and church tones. Here, modalities mean only the ways whereby the speaker animates his/her speech according to his/her wishes, hopes, certainties, uncertainties, abilities, etc. So modalities provide an essential source of meanings present in any communication. Thinking of Saussure’s famous diagram of a dialogue, Mr. A saying something to Mr. B, the space between them is not empty or a vacuum: already before any act of communication, before anything has been uttered, it is filled by modalities. Modalization is the process whereby modalities penetrate the discourse. Yet there is the ‘enunciated enunciation,’ i.e. the process has already been put in the discourse and its structure as in “*J’espère qu’il vienne*” [“I hope he will come.”]. Not all languages have this prominent quality, say, the Finno-Ugrian languages have only a few such cases of the subjunctive, as the Finnish ‘*hän tullee, hän mennee*’, which conveys uncertainty. Therefore it can be asked whether modalities are a universal feature of all semiosis. The anthropologist Elli-Kaija Köngäs-Maranda once told me that she wondered whether her indigenous people in Polynesia would have an idea of “*dürfen, wollen, können*” (for some reason she used German words) and what these meant. Once lecturing at a Greimas seminar in Paris I said that I did not know if, for instance, there were modalities in the Chinese language. Afterwards, two Chinese students approached me, feeling upset that I had been underestimating Chinese culture in this respect as if it were lacking something essential for communication. That had by no means been my

intention. To the contrary, I do believe that modalities, the fundamental ones of 'being', 'doing', 'appearing' and maybe 'becoming' are universal, as well as other modalities of 'know', 'must', 'can' and 'will'. I use the modalities in this way in English for the sake of brevity, instead of saying 'to be obliged to' or 'to be able to'. Of course we can also argue that there might be more modalities than those hitherto listed by the Greimas' school.

One problem arising in a concrete text or discourse analysis is of course that modalities appear via what Greimas calls 'aspectualization', i.e. some modality is present sufficiently/insufficiently or excessively/inexcessively. This gave me the idea, so to say, to 'digitalize' modalities which as such are of a continuous nature in my music analyses. So I could give for instance five values according to the extent to which a modality was functioning in the text: 'very much', 'much', 'neutrally', 'insufficiently', 'inexcessively', or '++', '+', '0', '-', '- -'. The next question was: on which competence can a reader make this interpretation, does it have an objective basis or is it totally subjective and arbitrary? Earlier I tended to think that the modal values were based upon the previous articulations of space, time and actors on the discursive level. So the devices of disengagement and engagement were important. Sometimes these terms created more confusion, for instance when one colleague once said after my speech: "I agree that political engagement is important even in semiotics. However, nowadays I am inclined to think that modalities are primal, and then they become more concrete and articulated signs." Ultimately one can write a modal grammar of a whole text using the Greimassian symbolic notation. For instance, quoting the modal grammar on Chopin's Ballade G Minor (see Fig. 6.6 in Tarasti 1979: 179).

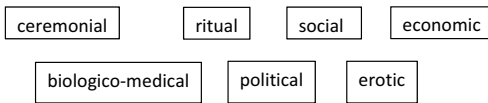
Such an enterprise is very Greimassian and structuralist in its endeavour to crystallize the result of the analysis into simple logical schemes. Yet, the pragmatic difficulty here lies in the fact that in the empirical field of music those who are supposed to read such studies and benefit from them in their interpretations most often are *not* trained in formal logics and hence are unable to understand what is involved. So in this case the results should be expressed via a notation like the standard musical score, i.e. notes which the majority understands. This has happened in the so-called Schenker method of music analysis.

As another illustration the work of the Finnish theatre scholar Kari Salosaari could be quoted. In 1989 Salosaari published a systematic study about the actor's work which was completely based on Greimas' generative course. His empirical object was a 10-minutes-long video section from the stage performance of Carlo Goldoni's play *Il baruffo in Chioggia*, filmed at the drama studio of an avant-garde Finnish theatre in Tampere. Among other things, he showed what a complex network of modalizations takes place in a simple dialogue between the two actors playing Isidoro and Checca on stage. A diagram, quoted in Tarasti 2015: 217, reveals his idea of the modal nature of such a communication, the theatre being always "communication of communication" as the Czech scholar Ivo Osolsobě used to say.

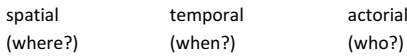
It appears that in the scheme Salosaari left the abridged symbols of modalities to follow French and not Finnish, which probably made his study less accessible. Unfortunately, Salosaari's book has not yet been translated into English or French although it is certainly one of the most Greimassian works ever completed.

Another empirical application of Greimas' idea of generation appears in an essay on gastronomy (Tarasti 2015). Just like in my studies on musical narrativity, here only certain elements are chosen from the original generative trajectory, namely those which seemed to be relevant for the object. So facts are not forced into theoretical schemes but their selection depends on the phenomenon itself, and its isotopies: the application of Greimas tries to be flexible, 'idoneist' as the Swiss mathematician Gonseth has said (Fig. 1).

ISOTOPIES

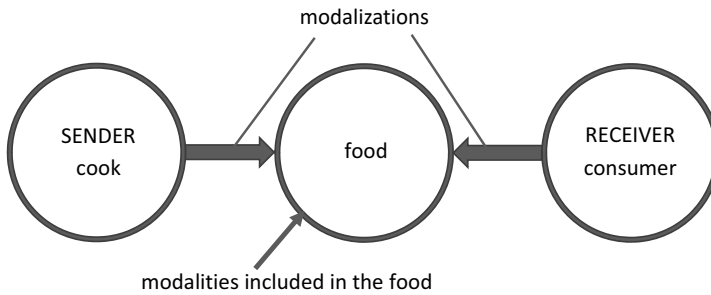


CATEGORIES



MODALITIES

For which human needs, or modality of being or doing, the food is prepared; on which modality the food is assumed to have its impact



modalities of food

- to know:* to fulfill curiosity, the food must be innovative
- to want:* "will to food", energy
- can:* the technical skills of food preparation, virtuosity
- must:* the norms regulating communication by food
- to believe:* the persuasiveness of the food, "truth"

PHEMES/SEMES

Food as such; the smallest significant units of the food (gastrophemes and gastrosemes)

Figure 1. Generation of food (modified from Tarasti 2015: 258).

Epistemological reflections

The generative trajectory was also visited by Paul Ricoeur in his famous speech at the Colloque de Cerisy in 1983. His talk was published in the booklet series *Bulletin* of the Paris School and thereafter appeared in *Temps et récit II. La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (Ricoeur 1984: 49–51). His major point was that in his opinion Greimas had tried to build achronic principles of narrativity which existed before the story was told, i.e. before anything was manifested. Therefore, regarding the Proppian approach, he chose a way to enrich its paradigmatic aspect, i.e. the actants instead of functions whose list had been much longer (31) than that of the actants (6) to start with. What disturbed Ricoeur was just stepping outside the temporal aspect of any narration, yet the major epistemological problem for him was whether the surface grammar was richer than the fundamental grammar. If the process is supposed to be generative, everything should be included in the axioms and no additional elements smuggled in during the trajectory. This gradual enriching of the model proceeds perhaps from our competence and from our empirical familiarity with all kinds of stories. Ricoeur crystallized his point as follows: Greimas' analysis is teleologically guided by the anticipation of the final stage, that means, narration as a process of creating values. We might add here that Greimas is revealed to be rather Hegelian claiming that 'the absolute' only appeared at the end of the world process and development of the spirit.

What then are those "inserted" or smuggled elements in Greimas' system? Ricoeur mentions three: (1) the aspectual structure, i.e. inchoativity, durativity and terminativity which are not well defined in relation to fundamental structures; (2) the strongly axiological nature of contents to be invested in the semiotique square (he certainly means the articulation of life/death and nature/culture). Ricoeur rather considers them to contain a euphoric or dysphoric character; (3) the role of destinator; to put it: communication which is the dynamic aspect of signification and which Greimas elegantly calls "operational syntagmatisation". Ricoeur's analysis remains one of the sharpest philosophical comments on Greimas. From an "existential" point of view that the generative trajectory looks a little like the Hegelian palace criticized by Kierkegaard; it is fine but the only default element is that the subject does not live there but in a dog hut by its side. Of course those who see Greimas as an incurable nominalist whose slogan was "No salvation outside the discourse" defend the generative construction as a machine of textualization. Rather analogous was the case of Juri Lotman, who considered culture as consisting of texts, but supposed there loomed somewhere inside any culture a procedure or a device or a mechanism which was producing the texts, textualizing the world; or, as Jorge Borges has said, world was a book into which all events we were written.

The problem with all these text-based semiotic systems lies, as Ricoeur has already put it, in the text's temporal nature, it having a beginning and an end. So what to think of such texts as architecture, painting, sculpture etc. without time? By talking about

text or discourse as well, we secretly introduce strong hypotheses about the nature of these semiotic objects. This was in fact already noticed by Thomas Winner and Irene Portis Winner.

But is the text everything in Greimas? Even Marrone who wants to underline the role of text, finally admits:

It is therefore necessary to suppose the existence of some kind of element – cultural, historical, scientific, social – that is a constructing *subject*, either individual or collective, taking charge of placing the relationship, of making it relevant and valid within the socio-cultural universe. (Marrone 2014: 56–57)

The radical innovation occurred in the 1970s – let me once again emphasize the discovery of modalities, because it changed the entire research strategy which was no longer the study of a fixed object, i.e. a text, nor the study of the mind of a subject as it is in cognitive studies, but lied in the relations of the subject to the object, i.e. the modalization.

In fact, one may say that this had been Greimas' original plan since the beginning. In a recent essay Eric Landowski has spoken about the existential dimension in Greimas, manifested as early as in *Sémantique structurale*. Landowski correctly states:

The Greimassian thought was first and foremost motivated to explore meaning in general. Greimas was not only interested in the signification of texts but in the 'signification of human activities' in the signification of history or simply as he often put it in 'the signification of the living experience.' [...] His starting point is the situation of man [...]. But at the same time he showed greatest possible vigilance against the risk of slinking into impressionistic or psychologizing discourse, or of contenting oneself with a speculative kind of inquiry. (Landowski 2013: 11–12)

Yet, the problem of experienced meaning soon turned into the problematics of manifested meaning. For Landowski, Greimas thought that the only relevant issue was to understand “in which conditions and by which process our existence in the world makes sense” (Landowski 2013: 12). So the existential turn was reduced back to the linguistic turn in the sense that the meaning was supposed to appear best in an uttered text. Yet taking into account the existential or experiential dimension did not exclude or ignore earlier results of the studies of textuality carried out during the last decades. The semantic world was only seen as identical with the living world, inside which we are definitely closed. Thus Landowski (2013: 15) has to repeat the slogan *Hors du texte point de salut*. This meant that the *regime* outside the text – ‘regime’ being Landowski's favourite term in his social semiotics – was a prohibited zone. Subsequently Landowski develops his own new research line where he distinguishes the subject's existential styles, such as programming and manipulating.

Post-Greimassian era

However, now we have already glided into the post-Greimassian era. So what happened to his school and system after Greimas? Some pupils of Greimas had already in his lifetime been developing in different directions, fertilizing the authentic doctrine with all kinds of innovations. Among them is of course Jacques Fontanille, one of the most open-minded scholars of the school who made remarkable findings in the study of space, light, and corporeal semiotics, the latter in his monograph *Séma et soma* (2004) where he launched the philosophical distinction of *Moi* and *Soi* into semiotics. Some others have continued strictly on what they thought was the primal and original Greimas, like Anne Henault, Claude Zilberberg etc.; some discovered new fields of application like Ivan Darrault-Harris in psychiatry. The strong Italian School continued educating semioticians in a strict Greimassian doctrine, but would pay much attention to the contemporary economic world, media, etc.: scholars like Paolo Fabbri, Guido Ferrari, Ugo Volli, Gianfranco Marrone, Omar Calabrese, Isabella Pezzini have made serious work along these lines. Huge quantities of studies have appeared, yet, essentially, Greimas has been considered a scholar who had found the truth and put it in his writings in an epigrammatic form, like the inscriptions on the ancient stones of Antiquity.

Already early on, the *Dictionary* contained trends to elaborate his schemes further with a more dynamic outlook. The semiotic square was temporalized, words like 'becoming' (*devenir*) appeared among the fundamental modalities. The theory itself was already in motion. Yet, as we know no one can enter the Greimassian universe by reading the *Dictionary* first. In order to understand it, one should have read all previous literature and, if possible, have attended those endless discussions in Paris seminars and cafeterias. Outside the European context the theory has flourished alike in South America as well as in Iran which has recently shown its strength in semiotics by analysing the old and contemporary Persian culture with Greimassian notions. This has mostly happened around Reza Hamid Shairi in Tarbiat Modares University in Teheran. However, we are still waiting for the encounter of the Iranian philosophical tradition and a "modern" or "postmodern" semiotic approach.

The existential turn

Nevertheless, in his last phase, the semiotics of passions, Greimas himself had already hinted at the ontological questions as the basis of his thought. He launched new notions of 'phorique' tensivity, and valence, the former of which was the same as Husserl's pretention of a subject; so he referred to the phenomenological aspect of his theories, not mentioned since the quoting Merleau-Ponty in his early writings. In the end what was involved was the argument:

The being of the world and subject do not depend on semiotics but on the ontology, it is to use the jargon the manifesting of the manifested what we are searching for. (Greimas, Fontanille 1991: 15, 25–27)

At this point, it is certainly appropriate to say a word about existential semiotics. This term probably first appeared in the monograph *Existential Semiotics* (Tarasti 2000), which was one of the last semiotic treatises produced in the series once established by Thomas Sebeok at Indiana University Press. It must be said as a comment that in spite of his well-known hostility towards the French School, Sebeok published many English translations of Greimas' works (like the *Dictionary*) at Indiana University Press. The new theory of existential semiotics was in fact a combination of continental philosophy in the line of Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Wahl, Marcel, etc. and classic semiotics, including Greimas. In this sense it was a synthesizing effort inside the European intellectual tradition, yet on the other hand, it was a rather radical effort of renewal, of creating a new theory or what I would later call 'neosemiotics' of the 21st century.

The starting points were temporality, subjectivity, logic of change, flux, qualitative research, experience, existentiality, values, and transcendence. Its first models were indeed far afield from the Cartesian squares and layered structures to be found in Greimas. It adopted a new outlook by using circular models, arrows portraying the 'journeys' of the subject beyond his/her living world now called by the untranslated (or untranslatable) German word *Dasein*. Thus it seemed to be something opposed to the Paris School, but it was not so in the end.

Still, in this existential theory much is based upon dialectics between the present and the absent, say, the interaction between the empirical reality and transcendence. The easiest definition of transcendence was certainly "anything which is absent but present in our minds". However, the notion of transcendence launched into semiotics was neither of a theological nor of a psychological (psychedelic 'trip') or an anthropological (a shamanistic practice) origin, but conceptual and philosophical. In this sense it was rather stemming from Immanuel Kant. Yet, as could be expected, it was always an object of misunderstanding. So in the end, in the present state of the theory, I distinguish three kinds of transcendences: (1) the empirical one, transcendence *a posteriori*, according to our daily experience; (2) the existential one: I can stop in my action, living, experiencing and step into the transcendence; at any moment, I can say like Faust: "*Verweile doch, du bist so schön*"; (3) the radical one: it is the theological one present in many thinkers through ages such as Dante, Thomas Aquinas, Ibn Arabi, Avicenna up to the American transcendentalists, Emerson, etc. In any case, it is opposed to the idea that the semantic universe, the living world where we are – or into which we have been "cast" – is closed. As semiotic "animals" we can even amidst our corporeality step outside this process at any time. Anyway, the notion of transcendence with all its varieties can lead to what

I called a transcultural theory of transcendence, whereby we can compare different cultures and their views of transcendence. This is to continue the debate started by the American linguist Walburga von Raffler-Engel about crosscultural misunderstandings, an extremely topical issue in the contemporary world of huge immigration movements and cultural conflicts, involving diverse uses of the transcendental idea. We have to remember that it is the most abstract theories that will prove to be the most influential ones in the end with their pragmatic applications.

Further, other elements were included in the theory of *Dasein* stemming from the Hegelian logics. The categories of *an-sich-sein* and *für-sich-sein*, being-in-oneself and being-for-oneself, were very important. The case was further enriched by inserting Fontanille's categories of *Moi* and *Soi* so that we ended up with a 'semiotic square': Being-in-myself = *Moi1* = body as such; Being-for-myself = *Moi2* = person, habit; Being-for-oneself = *Soi2* = social practices; and Being-in-oneself = *Soi1* = values and norms. So we reached the familiar semiotic square after all! (Strictly speaking it was not quite the semiotic square with its logical implications, but still something along those lines.) Yet very soon the theory went further and the square was replaced by what is called the 'Zemic' model, the letter Z symbolizing the movement within the structure either from body – by gradual sublimation – into values, or from abstract values – by stepwise embodiment – into our primal corporeal behaviour.

The part '-emic' evoked Kenneth Pike's theory of the emic and etic aspects or categories, 'emic' being the internal and 'etic' the external. The model was intended to portray nothing less than the human mind, after all. Then the truly semiotic problem of course was how it manifested in signs and texts, so how it was textualized. Nevertheless, the semiotic moment was not seen as something added only later, when we need to manifest or "utter" this state of affairs, but it was included in the movement of "semiotic" signifying forces within the model itself.

However, I do not see any contradiction between being an existential semiotician and still continuing to conduct Greimassian analyses of any kind of sign complexes or signifying phenomena: my recent treatise *Sein und Schein* (Tarasti 2015) contains strictly Greimassian analyses side by side with existential reflections (e.g. an analysis of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, Act 2, Scene 4).

We know that many contemporary theories in human sciences use semiotics, but, alas, without mentioning the origins. One does not necessarily need to start *ab ovo*, but without a certain kind of erudition in the field of the history of ideas, the new semiotics remains rather superficial and its results not lasting ones. For instance, Deleuze's thought is full of semiotics but people just quote Deleuze and do not take him as a semiotician. The same goes for all those Parisian geniuses who once became fashionable in the American academic world, starting from Foucault and Derrida up to Barthes. Fortunately, Greimas never had to endure this fate. Even in France his

thought was not “*bien médiatisé*”, so it could develop more peacefully according to its inner logic and on a deeply reflective level.

In British cultural theory which has become predominant in social studies and the humanities, Greimas is seldom mentioned. In fact, it could be studied how well and to which extent diverse parts of the Greimassian heritage have been received. If many can understand its popular models of actants or even isotopies, there are rather few of those who have seriously continued writing modal grammars. Yet we cannot stop the time and even scientific theories have their aspectualities i.e. *initium*, *motus* and *terminus* or inchoativity, durativity and terminativity; but as we know from music, the *terminus* can always be also the *initium* of the next phase.

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Семиотика А. Греймаса: европейское интеллектуальное наследие изнутри и снаружи

В статье исследуется формирование научных взглядов Греймаса: юность в Каунасском университете, знакомство с Василием Сеземаном, Львом Карсавиным и идеями русского формализма, рождение структурализма в Париже. Основой парижской школы семиотики стала книга Греймаса *Sémantique structurale* (1967), которая, по его словам, привела к «третьей семиотической революции» благодаря изобретению модальностей. Это сблизило метод Греймаса с аналитической философией и модальной логикой. В обеих науках произошел лингвистический поворот и стали пользоваться формальной логикой. Семиотика Греймаса преодолела рамки чистой лингвистики, став более широким философским подходом. Сейчас его метод считается классикой семиотики. Однако метод Греймаса не потерял своей аналитической остроты и эпистемологической привлекательности. Даже такие новые парадигмы, как экзистенциальная семиотика, органически вырастают из идей Греймаса, сохранивших свою актуальность.

A. J. Greimase semiootika: Euroopa vaimne pärand seest- ja väljastpoolt nähtuna

Artikkel käsitleb Greimase mõttemaailma väljakujunemist alates selle varaseimatest allikatest, mis pärinesid noorusaastatest Kaunase Ülikoolis, s.t tema sidemetest Wilhelm Sesemanni, Lev Karsavini ja vene vormikoolkonnaga, kuni strukturalismi tekkimiseni Pariisis. Pariisi koolkonna lähenemise aluseks on *Sémantique structurale* (1967), mis toob kaasa “kolmanda semiootilise revolutsiooni”, nagu Greimas seda nimetas, leiutades modaalsused. See muutis tema meetodi sarnaseks ingliskeelse analüütilise filosoofia ja modaalloogikaga, kus mõlemas toimus lingvistiline pööre ning hakati kasutama formaalloogikat. Ent Greimase semiootika kasvas puhtlingvistilisest raamistikust välja avaramaks filosoofiliseks lähenemiseks. Tänapäeval, mil tema meetodit peetakse semiootikavaldkonna klassikasse kuuluvaks, ei ole see kaotanud midagi oma analüütilisest teravusest ja episteemilisest kõitvusest. Isegi sellised uued paradigmad nagu eksistentsiaalne semiootika kasvavad orgaaniliselt välja mõnedest Greimase ideedest, mis on säilitanud oma relevantsuse.