Signs and figures: Some remarks about Greimas' theory of the figurative

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Abstract. The paper is a first attempt to analyse Greimas' theory of the figurative from a "philological" perspective and discuss some hitherto unresolved issues. In particular, the paper will focus on four main topics: (1) the relation with Hjelmslev's conception of the figure, showing that while Greimas' conception of the figure is closely related to that of Hjelmslev's – mainly in the fact that the figure is placed below the sign – it does, however, possess quite different and peculiar features; (2) the problem of the significant nature of figures, that emerges in many writings of Greimas' and those of his followers, in which figures are not considered elements of the content that are smaller than a sign, with no autonomous meaning, but as already significant entities; (3) the problematic distinction between the thematic and the figurative; (4) the nature and limits of a semiotics of the sensible, and the (im)possibility of redefining and studying figurativity, not as given in a text, but when first grasped at the moment of perception.

Keywords: figurative; figures; generative trajectory; natural world; thematic; perception

From Hjelmslev to Greimas

One hundred years after his birth, Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992) continues to be among the most important figures of 20th-century semiotics. What continues to fascinate old and new generations of scholars is not only the heuristic validity of his text analysis, but mainly his attempt to build a coherent theoretical system summarized in his famous generative trajectory of sense. What is more, this system was based on a meta-language composed of interdefined terms that has become a reference for scholars, including those who do not adhere strictly to his approach to semiotics.

Even today, Greimas' ideas are considered a watershed in the tradition of structural semiotics that cannot be ignored. Despite the importance of his work, in recent years

many aspects and even some basic assumptions of his theory have been challenged, and unresolved issues and methodological problems have also been highlighted. As Geninasca (1994) observes, the origins of these aporias are to be found mainly in the ways in which his theory developed. One weakness in the Greimassian system is that theoretical acquisitions dating from different periods coexist somewhat patchily, lacking in places the reworkings and revisions of previously acquired concepts necessary to fill the gaps. There is therefore a need for a re-reading of Greimas' work so as to analyse the evolution of several key concepts within the diachronic development of the theory from a "philological" perspective; and at the same time to go back in time to take a close look at the founding texts of his thought, sources of inspiration and semiotic debate of the period.

The concept of figurativity is exemplary in highlighting some of the shortcomings in his theory: on the one hand, the term refers to the current usage of the word (where, for example, a work of art is considered "figurative"); in the metalanguage of generative semiotics, however, it has its own peculiar meaning: an element in a text is considered figurative (i.e., it is a "figure") if it has a counterpart in the natural world. Greimas uses the expression 'natural world' (taken, *mutatis mutandis,* from Merleau-Ponty) to refer to the world of sense experience, fully organized and culturalized, and therefore already significant and endowed with meaning. So the concepts of the figurative and the natural world can therefore be seen, first of all, as attempts to solve two closely related problems: the problem of the referent (the reference to reality) and the problem of realism in literature and the arts. However, figures are not simply "objects" belonging to the world they refer to: they originate from perception, but are elements of a cultural nature that are already organized semiotically. When considering texts, the figurative level is part of the content plane; it is the "concrete" level of the variables, already identified by Vladimir Propp, as opposed to the invariant (and abstract) level of narrative functions.

In his description of the figurative level Greimas brings together some research areas whose relationships had not hitherto been examined. These include: structural semantics, description and reality-effect in literature, the figurative in pictures, folkloric and artistic motifs, figures of speech (in particular metaphors) and research into perceptual categorization. This mix accounts for the variety of "inspirational sources" found in the work of Greimas and his followers such as Merleau-Ponty, Propp, Levi-Strauss, Panofsky, *Gestalt* psychologists, Bachelard, Louis Hjelmslev, etc. While this heterogeneity testifies to the richness of Greimas' formulation, it also raises additional questions related to an increasing number of issues to be resolved, points to be harmonized and possible misunderstandings lurking within the same descriptive metalanguage. The task of sorting out the ideas is made especially complex as Greimas is not exactly a faithful interpreter of his authors of reference, but rather an ingenious *bricoleur*. In fact, his interest is not so much a critical reading as the development of a consistent semiotic theory, to which he has added a variety of different sources of inspiration.

Greimas derives what happens with the concept of 'figure' (as he says in Greimas 1983b[1966]) from Louis Hjelmslev, albeit with a considerable amount of freedom. In Hjelmslev (1961[1943]) the term 'figure' (*figura*) is used to indicate components lying lower than the sign in the decomposition of a linguistic chain and is the minimal unit of meaning, i.e., provided with an expression and a content. Conversely, each figure must belong exclusively either to the plane of expression or to the plane of content. For example, syllables and phonemes are 'figures' on the expression plane; in fact they are not expressions of signs, but parts of the expression of a sign and do not have an equivalent on the content plane: in short, none of them is any longer a bearer of meaning. Hjelmslev considers figures (*figurae*) "non-signs [that] enter into a sign system as part of signs" (1961: 46). The Danish linguist explains that '*figurae*' is a term of convenience, introduced for purely operational reasons.

In the same way Hjelmslev postulates the existence of 'figures of the contents'. The description of these is the task of a structural semantics. Still, we can find some examples in Hjelmslev 1958: the Latin desinence '*ibus*' consists of two content elements, 'dative / ablative' and 'plural'; the English sign 'am' comprises five content elements: 'to be' + 'first person' + 'singular' + 'present' + 'indicative'. Here we can see an initial difference between Hjelmslev's concept of the figure and that of Greimas. While Greimas sees figures simply as lexical entities with a strictly semantic value, Hjelmslev consideres them morphological entities. He believes morphological categories also express content. However, there are more substantial differences. When Greimas defines the term 'figure' he, in fact, places strong limits on its use: firstly, he restricts its use to defining the minimal elements of the chains (properly, the taxemes in Hjelmslev); then he further reduces its meaning at the level of discursive semantics, confining its use in the strict sense only to define the figures of content that correspond to the figures of the plane of expression of the natural world. We will see what he means by this expression in the next paragraph. However, we can observe from the above that while Greimas' conception of the figure is closely related to that of Hjelmslev – mainly in the fact that the figure is placed below the sign – it does nevertheless possess quite different and peculiar features.

Still, this problematic compliance with Hjelmslev's theory will play a fundamental role in the generative theory as a whole. For Greimas, in fact, a sign is always a material entity, a sign-object. But descending below signs to study immanence, namely that which exists in a virtual state before its textual manifestation (before the act of language), implies overcoming the contingency of the single sign-object in order to analyse the general mechanisms of semiosis and re-examine the forms and the models that govern linguistic and semiotic creations. In other words, it means studying the transcendental conditions of possibility of textual production and ultimately comes down to pursuing the anthropological vocation which Greimas repeatedly ascribed to semiotics.

Figures, natural world and categorization

As stated above, the notion of figure has become increasingly complex, incorporating a number of issues previously considered (at least partially) separate. However, the origins of the concept are rooted in lexicological analysis: in *Sémantique structurale,* Greimas introduces the notion of 'nuclear semic figure', directly referred to as the so-called 'semiological level' (the 'figurative level' in later works) of the semantic universe. This was the peculiar way Greimas translated what other research paradigms had defined as the extensional (or referential) component of language.

Pending the development of a multilevel textual theory, which was formerly outlined in the generative trajectory model, the semiological level was still basically a semantic rather than textual one; it was defined as

> [...] an ensemble of categories and semic systems situated and apprehensible at the level of perception [...] situated within the process of perception, the semiological categories represent, so to speak, its outer face, the contribution of the exterior world to the birth of meaning. (Greimas 1983b[1966]: 72)

To a certain degree, figures represent the emergence of the notion of the sensible in language. Greimas' interest in the perceptual moment reveals how influential the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1945) was long before *De l'imperfection*, even in *Sémantique Structurale* (Bertetti 2013: 51–53).

In this sense, the development of the concept of the 'natural world' (in Greimas 1968a), which broadened the discussion begun two years earlier, would be crucial for future developments of the theory because it reexamines the old semiotic problem of reference. This time the extra-semiotic referent has been replaced by an entity already organized as semiotic. In this way, the relation of reference is not between words and things. It is instead of an inter-semiotic nature, a sort of translation between two different semiotic systems, that of the natural world and that of the natural languages.

The evocative idea of a macro-semiotic of the natural world, however, raises a number of questions that need addressing. For example, Greimas says that figures belong to the expression plane of the natural world and that linguistic semiotics (and the other semiotics systems) use these figures to form their own content plane. Now the meaning of the content plane of the macro-semiotic has to be specified – something Greimas is rather vague on[1] – as does the issue of how direct recognition of the figures on the expression plane takes place, and how categorization occurs and to what extent it is based on language. Even the typology of semes, which distinguished between exteroceptive (or figurative), interoceptive (or abstract) and proprioceptive (or thymic)

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[1]   On this issue, see Greimas 1987b.

semes, gave rise to some concern despite the vastness and wealth of related literature. According to Eco (1999[1997]) a more thorough definition of interoceptive categories should be undertaken, as they are extremely general categories that should be further articulated in Kantian-type schemata to give an account of their myriad possibilities. On the other hand, Violi (1999) observes that some fundamental oppositions generally traced back to the field of deep figurative categories (such as 'up/down', 'in/out') seem to be rather of the interoceptive type. Violi (1997) believes greater specification is needed here, even at an exteroceptive level. Specification should be far more complex than the simple reference to the sensible qualities of the world.

Floch (1993) notes that the semiotic categorization of the sensible – which is at least in part linguistic – should give rise to formants (in this specific case, to formants on the expression plane), not to figures. But in Greimas' writings (Greimas 1973; Greimas, Courtés 1983[1979]) elements such as 'car', 'priest', 'sacristan' that are units of manifestation are called 'figures'. In short, we are not dealing with elements (figures) that are smaller than a sign, with no autonomous meaning, but with 'sign components' (formants) that are already significant. To be clearer, let us consider the figures of the expression of linguistic semiotics (a natural language): the phonemes. These are entities smaller than a sign, lacking any semantic correlate. The same features should belong to the figures of any semiotics of the natural world. For example, the figures of the expression plane in sign language should correspond to gestural phonemes (as they are called in Greimas 1968), i.e., portions of movement to be identified, whose different combinations would form the gestural signs; and the same should happen in a semiotics of objects. Clearly, Greimas is not thinking about this type of entity when he talks about figures, when he says that the natural world, organized into figures, is already significant.

In fact, in several passages Greimas bestows upon the figures the characteristic of being significant. See, for example, Greimas 1968:

> The same gestural figure, which involves "inclination of the head and movement of the chest forward and down", can mean, on the practical plane, "bend down" and, on the mythical plane, "greet". (Greimas 1968: 69–70)

The same problem returns in Greimas 1983a, Greimas 1976 (see Ferraro 2003) and particularly in Greimas 1989[1984], where figurativity is considered as the effect of an iconizing reading grid, the result of a semiosis, meaning "an operation which, conjoining a signified and a signifier, produces signs" (Greimas 1989[1984]: 633). As observed by Floch (1993: 6), here Greimas "does no longer speak of figures as Hjelmslev does"; a little further, figures seem to be traced back to the formants:

> The reading grid, which is of a semantic nature, solicits the planar signifiers and, bringing under its wing the bundles of visual features which vary in their

respective densities and which it makes into *figurative formants*, endows them with signifieds. It thus transforms visual figures into object-signs[2]. (Greimas 1989[1984]: 633)

From Floch's perspective, this would seem to confirm the theories that would prefer the figurative to be related to the 'level of signs', 'signs-object' or 'formants', and the figures "units related to the manifestation and not to the immanence of the natural world" (Floch 1993: 6).

In doing so Floch seems to suggest a model that differs greatly from the classic generative one. Could figures therefore be assimilated to figurative formants? It is more likely that where the figure is a sign, the formant represents its expression, to which a thematic content would correspond. Unfortunately the *pars destruens* is not followed by a later *pars construens*: as we know, Floch never explored a possible alternative to the classic Greimassian model in later writings.

Floch is not alone in probing this question. Ferraro (2006) suggests reintroducing a correlation between content and expression to figurativity. According to Ferraro semantic configurations and elements of a cultural system tend to associate on the basis of analogy criteria and would be expressed in the texts through a network of sign correlations. Ferraro rejects the immanence of the discursive level: in his view figures are not at the level of textual content, but first and foremost they are significants inside a sign relation – in line with Saussure's model – where the sign is an immaterial entity of a cultural kind, that can be manifested in different ways and substances within texts.

Even Jacques Geninasca appears to be thinking along the same lines. According to him there is no "depth" in a text, rather a manifested surface upon which several textual spaces can be found. He is critical of the idea of the generative trajectory, considering it an attempt to bring together under the same roof a bundle of concepts and models developed indepently in different contexts and with different purposes. He proposes a topological and horizontal model built around enunciation (Geninasca 1994). In his view figures are similar to formants that can be continuously invested with different meanings.

But does the fact of recognizing this significtivity actually imply the refusal of such a model? And why do Greimas and his followers seem to have accepted it without realizing the possible contradiction?

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2   This assimilation is confirmed in the following paragraph: "The formation of formants, at the time of semiosis, is no more than an articulation of the planar signifier, its segmentation into legible discrete units [...]. These discrete units, constituted out of bundles of features, are already well known to us. They are the 'forms' of Gestalt theory, 'figures of the world' in the Bachelardian sense, 'figures of the level of expression' according to Hjelmslev" (Greimas 1989[1984]: 633–634).

Marsciani notes the significant nature of figures, explaining it in terms of a dialectic between the local and the global:

> It is true that, compared to the semantics of manifestation, the figure is a non-sign that intervenes in the construction of a sign and is not significant in itself but a partaker of signification. However it is not less true that structural semiotics points the way to conceive a continuous reformulation of the opposition, in the sense that the relation between a sign and non-signs that constitute it is established locally each time and that the non-signs are not insignificant. In this way figurativity refers to a previuos thematic meaning, in a continuous referral from superficial instances of content organization to deeper and presupposed ones. In short *the figures are signs that perform the local function of non-signs for other signs*, for manifested signs, and the figure based interpretation of manifestation rests on the reconstruction, done by the language in its metalinguistic function, of the signification of the object-language; it is language talking about language and its units are always signs that interpret other signs. (Marsciani 2012: 117–118)

In other words, the figures are signs that in the analysis of the text are taken by the descriptive metalanguage as constituents of the content plane. For Marsciani, "the logic itself of generative trajectory [...] implies an intrinsic semantics for each passage and for each element" (Marsciani 2012: 117–118)[3]. Each level of the trajectory "would mean" the immanents levels, as each underlying level would be nothing but a metalinguistic reconstruction taking into account the conditions of manifestation of the higher levels; so it is not part in itself of the content of the text analysed[4], except in the sense that it is a metalinguistic reconstruction. A sign, therefore, is the result of an interpretative practice. Marsciani, in conclusion, invites us not to reify the generative path, but to consider it the result of a metadiscursive description.

How Marsciani (2012) recognizes this reading implies, among other things, that the generative trajectory works only if it is covered moving from the concrete to the abstract, which makes its alleged *foreseeability* and *predictability* somewhat problematic. In any case the problem of understanding the nature of these signs-figures outside textualization remains: they are at once transtextual cultural motifs of a paradigmatic nature, belonging to a system and not to a process and figures of the world, meaningful in the way indicated by Floch (1993).

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[3]   This, Marsciani continues, because "the Trajectory is a trajectory internal to content, the reconstructed model of the conditions by which the content is manifested in articulated signification, but it is also a model internal to the content, the product itself of, from and in the content" (Marsciani 2012: 118).

[4]   The generative trajectory "is not at all a representation of everything that is before the manifestation" (Marsciani 1997: 3).

Considering figures of the natural world as signs (instead of non-signs) carries with it a number of consequences, the extent of which is to be verified. For example, we must recognize their inhomogeneity with either the phoneme or the sememe (which is one of the cornerstones of the concept of figurativity in Greimas). However, since figures are nevertheless componentially decomposable, we must also admit that they are of the order of the mytheme in Lévi-Strauss – as Ferraro (2001) seems to acknowledge.

In terms of textualization, the existence of sign relations at different levels must be recognized inside a text. This is ultimately anything but strange: a text is not simply a sort of macro-sign, but a meaningful totality; it is not a monolithic block but a set and an articulation of varying significant elements. Words are signs, figures are signs, each with its own signifier and its own signified, each one caught in a network of relationships which together structure the text, whose signified and whose signifier are something more than the sum of individual signs.

It is besides a somewhat classic conception of the text in semiotics. However, as Greimas (1983b[1966]) notes, a text is never "given" once and for all, it is never "objectified", but it is always the result of a construction performed by the analyst, who identifies its closing and the coherences that establish it. This analysis enables us to isolate and consider fragments of other "texts" that have been empirically established (such as a sequence in a film) as texts (i.e., analysable portions of signification). Similarly, we can call signifying sets 'texts'. (as is the case of the routes of the travellers in the Paris underground – see Floch 1990).

If a text is, therefore, a "conglomerate" of significant elements of a different nature, the extent of which will always depend on a semiotic relevance (that always depends on the choices made in the analysis), it is natural that you will be able to identify signical relations at all levels once inside. In this sense we might agree with Fontanille (2006[1998]: 11–13), according to whom the boundary between the expression plane and the content plane is always relative; however, if, according to Fontanille, the boundary is set by the subject of perception and, at the discursive level, by the instance of enunciation, for us it is rather the result of the pertinentization made in the analysis.

Seen from this perspective a text leads to two consequences. Firstly, a sign should not be considered a material element, as Greimas argues, but rather as an immaterial entity, as Saussure suggests, where it is virtually present only in the memory of the culture and actualized from time to time in texts (that are material); secondly, the underlying model of textual description is not so much vertical (generative) as horizontal. In this kind of model the interaction of the different "local" signified gives rise to a "global" signified of the whole text, and the instance of enunciation plays a central role, as operator of the overall textual strategy and principle of coherence of the textual discourse.

Developments and problems of the notion of the figurative

The nature of the figures of the world is twofold: on the one hand, figures represent the emergence of the sensible in the language (and the text); on the other hand, they are cultural elements more or less encoded and stereotyped. This dichotomy is actually merely apparent, since according to the semiotic approach (not only the Greimassian approach) the sensible and perception are inextricably intertwined with culturalism. Until the 1980s, aspects connected with perception played a decidedly subordinate role with regard to aspects related to cultural models in the development of generative semiotics. In those years the question of perception persisted as a kind of theoretical horizon, and culturalized forms and coded representation had greater importance. This is evident in the concept of the motif, developed in folklore and art history studies, which is attributed the value of a figure (Greimas 1983a; Courtés 1979–80, 1986).

Extensions to the concept of the figure in the late 1960s and the 1970s marked the transition, already begun in Greimas 1983[1979], from a mainly lexicological analysis to discourse analysis.[5] The new relevance given to the discursive level raised the question of the syntagmatic organization of figures and that of their relations with the underlying thematic (abstract) level and the deep semio-narrative level (Greimas 1973; Courtés 1986). Hence the interest in an isotopic organization of discourse, a reinterpretation of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, a typical connector of isotopies (Greimas, Courtés 1983[1979]), and also the centrality of the concept of 'actor' (notably in Greimas 1973), the real pivot between semantics and syntax and between narrative and discursive structures. A central concept also became that of 'configuration', considered not so much as a simple grouping of figures but rather as a figurative micro-narrative, with a potential narrative organization.

All this would be arranged in the well-known generative trajectory of meaning. Its completion (in Greimas, Courtés 1983[1979]) was certainly a turning point in the history of generative semiotics. Greimas intended the trajectory as the general framework of his semiotic theory (that would later be called the 'standard theory'), a tidy description of the formal and transcendental conditions of determining meaning. Obviously, this general arrangement ended up generating another set of problems. In particular, in the following years many scholars began emphasizing relationships of relative autonomy within the generative path between the figurative level and the underlying thematic-narrative level.[6] More generally, at the end of the 1980s Paul Ricoeur asserted that the discourse level could not be reduced to a simple conversion

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[5]   See Bertetti 2013: 61–63.

[6]   See in particular the works of Joseph Courtés (1979–1980, 1986) and the positions of the CADIR, summarized in Bertetti 2013.

of the semio-narrative deep levels.[7] This level emerged as a result of the central role of the instance of enunciation, that became not only the conversion point between the semio-narrative deeper level and the surface level of the discursive structures, but rather the breaking point, or better an intersection where the two components overlapped. A few years later, these considerations led Greimas and Fontanille (1993[1991]) to redefine the procedure for switching from one level to another not in terms of 'conversion', but rather of 'convocation' in the discourse of the deep semio-narrative level by the instance of enunciation.

In the years following the publication of the *Dictionnaire*, several publications as well as an entire seminar at the EHESS (see Bertrand 1983) were dedicated to the notion of figurativity. The question of the figurative was addressed in various fields, ranging from biblical texts (in particular with the work of the CADIR group of researchers in Lyon: CADIR 1993; Delorme *et al.* 1995; Delorme 1987; Groupe d'Entrevernes 1977 among others) to folklore (Courtés 1979–80, 1986) and literature (Bertrand 1985; Geninasca 1997). Despite the variety of texts analysed, a common set of theoretical problems runs through these studies: the question of figurative autonomy, its structurations on different levels (with the possibility of "deep figurative" structures that are independent of semio-narrative structures) and its syntagmatic-narrative organization.

Another issue is the distinction between the thematic and the figurative. Joseph Courtés defines the thematic as "the abstract semantic investment of a given syntactic form, achieved not by reducing the figurative semic density (as in certain cases of generalization, for example when we take into account the occurrence of a figurative classeme like /animated/ or /human/), but using a purely conceptual formulation, deprived of all exteroceptive semes", such as, for example, 'goodness' or 'equity' (Courtés 1986: 53). The definition shows that the thematic instance is closely linked on the one hand to the figurative and on the other to syntax which it gives a meaning to through a given semantic assignement.

From this perspective the classic example of thematic role given by Greimas (1973), the /fisherman/, is quite misleading: according to Courtés /fisherman/ is a figurative role which may be called upon to play different thematic roles. For example, in the case of a story that tells of a fisherman saving a child from drowning, the role of the fisherman is that of the saviour (Courtés 1986: 45). A definition of the thematic is somewhat mobile, at times it resides in the abstract level of the deep values and at others in the concrete one of figuration. Courtés strictly identifies the thematic with the abstract and the conceptual, while Greimas shows a certain degree of uncertainty, identifing the thematic roles with social, psychological, family roles, etc.

According to Rastier 1987, there is a real difficulty in distinguishing between abstract thematic content and concrete figurative content, to the point that he even – in our view,

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7   See the writings gathered, together as a discussion with Greimas, in Ricoeur, Greimas 2000.

erroneously – denies this distinction that he considers *a priori*, since the two types of discourse within the text operate in a similar way (Rastier 1981). Not to mention that, generally speaking, terms like 'abstract' and 'figurative' seem better suited to indicate the polarity of a continuum rather than an oppositional category.

Perhaps the most significant development in the first half of the 1980s in the context of visual semiotics was the identification of a plastic semiotics next to that of figurative semiotics.[8] The distinction arose from the need to account for the materiality of expression with respect to the "nameable" content represented in visual texts. The *plastic level*, in fact, pertains specifically to visual texts and their sensible qualities; it covers aspects such as shapes, colours and the disposition of elements that cannot automatically be transposed into verbal language. Along with the related notion of semi-symbolism, the distinction has shown itself to be particularly productive in heuristic terms over the years; even if it has given rise to criticism, due mainly to the alleged dependence of the plastic level on the figurative, which resulted, albeit involuntarily, in a revival inside the visual field of linguistic and semantic models[9].

Nature and limits of a semiotics of the sensible

Among other things, the development of a visual semiotics contributed to focusing semiotic research on the sensible and perceptive components of figurativity. In this regard, the work of Greimas 1987 is now considered as representing a turning point, since it redirected semiotic investigations, in particular the study the figurative, to the phenomenological roots of perception. It places the spotlight on the phenomena of aesthesia, intended here as immediate prehension of the world.

We must set this renewed interest in the sensible in the context of a general reorganization of the generative paradigm that took place between the end of the 1980s and the 1990s. In those years, a discrete and categorical perspective of semiotics based on the continuous, the gradual and the modular was partially abandoned. This led to a gradual shift of focus away from the *systems* of signification towards the *processes* of meaning, from *doing* to *being*, from a semiotics of *object* to a semiotics of *subject*. Within this framework a study of passions was also developed.

The position of the figurative inscribed in texts gradually lost its centrality within semiotic research, in favour of its emerging at the moment of perception: Fontanille (2003, 2004) in particular thoroughly redefines figurativity, which is no longer given, being grasped instead as syntax at the moment of its constitution. In the same years

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[8]   See, among others, Greimas 1984 and Floch 1985.
[9]   These are the criticisms adressed to Greimas and Floch by the *Ecòle du Quebec* (see Hébert 1998 and Sonesson 1987).

several studies (Fontanille, Violi) focused on the question of embodiment – sometimes getting tangled up in a problematic dialogue with the cognitive sciences – where the body is understood as a phenomenological body (Merleau-Ponty) that constitutes the junction between the natural and the linguistic worlds, the meeting point between the subject and the world.

In reconsidering ontology and the reference in some respects, these developments of generative semiotics seem to match Eco's interpretative semiotics, where Being becomes the founding moment where meaning is generated. Relations between the "lines of resistance" in the continuum, described by Eco (1999[1997]: 40), and the *source* of perception postulated by Fontanille (2006: 61) are not random.

As we know, neither semiotics nor semiology in the 1960s promoted anti-radical ontology, but at most an anti-methodological ontology; in other words, they were anti-referentialist, but not anti-ontological. As noted in Bertetti 2006, none of the founding fathers of semiotics (Barthes, Eco or Greimas) questioned the fact that the different semiotic systems serve for acts of reference, but affirmed simply that such acts were outside the field of relevance of semiotics, understood as the study of cultures (Eco 1999[1997]). Or rather, as Greimas points out in his concept of 'natural world', the referent can be the subject of semiotic study because it is itself semiotized, categorized and pre-understood by cultural patterns. Following Greimas, this semiotization is the horizon itself of what is human: "The human world as it appears to us is defined essentially as the world of signification. The world can only be called 'human' to the extent that it means something" (Greimas 1983b[1966]: 3).

Fontanille (2003) notes that in doing so the result in some ways shifts the problem. There is always a gap between the Being and the natural world, which is due to perception. This, precisely, is the problem: it is true that perception cannot be contained only within a linguistic categorization as the act of perceiving involves physiological factors; and outside each of us there is a Being who offers itself to perception and who is, as Eco (1999) says, an instance *a quo* of perception itself. Nevertheless, we wonder whether it is possible (and if so, how) for semiotics, as a science of systems and processes of communication, to investigate the sensible pre-conditions of meaning.

While recognizing the importance of the sensible, Bertrand (2000) rather prudently directs his investigations to representation actually enunciated in discourses, specifically, literary discourse, of which it constitutes a fundamental aspect. This representation is still mediated by cultural conventions: in this sense a typology of aesthetic *saisies* based on literary (or pictorial, filmic etc.) texts is nothing more than the analysis of a particular discursive genre.

We believe instead that semiotics can and should really go further and deal with the study of perception. If we admit that perception is semiotized, why should semiotics not deal with it? Perhaps we should rather consider critically the hows, whys and degrees of

such interest. Bertrand (2000) rightly warns that semiotics not trespass into the fields of other disciplines such as psychology, the anthropology of the sensible or – here we might add – the phenomenological speculation about perception.

In our opinion semiotics should remain a social science focused on the study of cultural and social mechanisms that establish signification. In this context sensible semiotics must deal with socio-cultural conditioning, and linguistic and semiotic categories that govern perceptual activity. This is no small task, considering the fact that any act of perception is inextricably intertwined with sensible and cultural elements.

Basso (2002) warns that semiotics should avoid the temptation to try to account for the ontogenesis of meaning, but rather concentrate its efforts on explaining semiosis at work, namely how it fits into the cultural and social context where the subject acts. Basso also argues against the assimilation of aesthesia to a nostalgic return to an originary moment of fusion between subject and object which has become an emblem of the fullness of meaning of the aesthetic experience (see Greimas, Fontanille 1993). This would have given rise in the latest post-semiotics Greimas to a "poetic fusion" which would tend to hypostasize aesthetic experience, pushing the role of cultural and social intermediation in the construction of aesthetic categories and more generally of the experience back into the shadows.

From our point of view, semiotics cannot, after all, go back to auroral and pre-categorial moments of meaning. Research into possible and original "fusional" conditions has nothing to do with semiotics, meaning the science of signification. This is because in such a situation there is not yet (and cannot be) signification. How is it possible to establish a sign relation in a condition of real fusional unity where no split between the knowing subject and known object has occurred? And between what? The direct and unmediated apprehension of the sensible is beyond the semiotic horizon.

Aesthesia, intended as a pre- (or, rather, extra-) categorial perceptual experience, certainly has semiotic relevance as a moment where cultural categories undergo resemantization and are renewed; semiotics (as a discipline with a scientific vocation) does not deal with it in relation to the experience as such and the ways of its epiphanic manifestation, but only in relation to the categories (why not also related to the sensible) that account for it, organize it culturally and make it socially communicable. What emerges is therefore a "threshold" of semiotics, as described by Eco (1976). Crossing it would imply stepping on a terrain that the discipline has neither the theorical foundations nor the means to explore.

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Знаки и фигуры: некоторые замечания о теории фигуративности Греймаса

Данная статья является первой попыткой проанализировать теорию фигуративности Греймаса с «филологической» точки зрения и обсудить некоторые нерешенные до настоящего времени проблемы. Работа сосредоточивается на четырех главных темах: (1) связь с концепцией фигуры у Ельмслева, где автор демонстрирует, что хотя концепт фигуры у Греймаса тесно связан с ельмслевским (главным образом тем, что фигура размещается ниже знака), концепция Греймаса, тем не менее, обладает своими специфическими особенностями; (2) проблема значимой природы фигуры, которая появляется во многих работах Греймаса и его последователей, где фигуры считаются значимыми сущностями (а не элементами плана содержания, не обладающими автономным значением); (3) проблематичное различение тематического и фигуративного; (4) природа и пределы семиотики чувственного, а также возможность пересмотра и изучения фигуративности не так, как она была представлена в тексте, но как она была впервые осознана в момент восприятия.

Märgid ja kujundid: mõned märkused Greimase figuratiivsusteooria kohta

Käesolevas artiklis tehakse esimene katse analüüsida Greimase figuratiivsusteooriat "filoloogilisest" perspektiivist ja arutleda mõnede varem lahenduseta jäänud küsimuste üle. Eelkõige keskendub artikkel neljale põhipunktile: (1) suhtele Hjelmslev' figuuri mõistega, näidates, et kuigi Greimase arusaam figuurist on tihedasti seotud Hjelmslev' omaga – peamiselt tõiga tõttu, et figuur on märgist madalama staatusega – on neil samas mitmeid olulisi erinevusi; (2) probleem figuuride tähendusliku loomusega, mis tuleb ilmsiks mitmetes Greimase ning tema järgijate kirjutistes, kus figuure ei peeta mitte märgi autonoomse tähenduseta sisuelementideks, vaid tähenduslikeks entiteetideks; (3) temaatilise ja figuratiivse problemaatiline eristamine; (4) meelte semiootika olemus ja piirid ning figuratiivsuse ümbedefineerimise ja uurimise võimalikkus mitte nii, nagu seda esitletakse tekstis, vaid nii, nagu seda algselt mõistetakse tajumismomendil.