



Interview with Thomas F. Broden on Greimas' semiotics

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in memoriam

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Foreword

This work is part of a study conducted with twelve “disciples” of Greimas about possible “black boxes” in his semiotics. The investigation sought to answer the following questions: Did “black boxes” exist? If they did, what were they, and what do Greimas’ followers have to say about them? Initiated in 2014, the project on “Black boxes” and the importance of French semiotics in the analysis of verbal, non-verbal, and syncretic discourse lasted seven years. The research methods included reading articles and books, and interviewing semioticians such as Thomas Broden, José Luiz Fiorin, Louis Hébert, Silvio de Santana Jr., Nícia Ribas D’Ávila, Loredana Límoli, Edward Lopes, Arnaldo Cortina, Edna Fernandes, and Ronald Schleifer, among others.

This interview with Broden is notable in that he represents one of the few researchers who has focused on discussing and developing Greimas’s work in the United States. He was born in South Bend, Indiana, United States, on November 19th, 1951. He describes his birthplace as a “blue-color town” where “everyone worked in factories like Bendix and Studebaker”.

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Broden earned a bachelor's degree in French at the University of Notre Dame, and studied in Angers, France, for his sophomore year, focusing on French language and culture. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. at Indiana University in Bloomington, where Thomas Sebeok taught, and spent two years in Paris teaching English and following seminars at the Collège de France and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. He taught at the University of Notre Dame, Tulane University, the University of Nebraska, and for thirty-two years at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, from which he retired in 2022. He continues his research program, notably the preparation of his intellectual biography of A. J. Greimas.

VALDENILDO DOS SANTOS: Why are you interested in French? Is it because you are a professor of French here, and because you teach introductory courses on semiotics and literature?

THOMAS F. BRODEN: That is right! Why do I study French rather than something else? Actually, it happened by chance. The only two languages offered at the small institution that I attended for my first two years of high school were Latin and French, so French became the living foreign language that I studied. In college, I wanted to spend a year abroad, so I ended up in Angers in the Loire Valley, where the Notre Dame program in France is located. I enjoyed the year there, fell in love with European culture including art and architecture, and yearned to be able to communicate fluently in French. I wanted to continue learning and speaking French, and exploring Francophone cultures and Europe. When deciding on a field for graduate studies, I appreciated that if you pick a foreign language like French, you can concentrate on the language or the culture, on old or new texts, or on any combination thereof, you don't have to give up any options.

VDS: Is that how you started studying Greimas?

TFB: Well, I came to Greimas via structuralism, which showed up late in Indiana, but did arrive. I had studied a little linguistics and structuralist poetics in France and at Indiana, and my major professor and first dissertation director, Robert Champigny, had included *Idéologie et théorie des signes* by François Rastier on the reading list for the Ph.D. in French (1972). The book applies Greimas' structural semantics to a philosophical essay by Destutt de Tracy. So, to understand what the heck Rastier was talking about, I went to the library, checked out Greimas' *Sémantique structurale*, and read about the elementary structure of signification, semes and sememes, isotopy, actants, functions, and more (1983 [1966]). I found the methodology daunting, but sensed that it was powerful and exciting. I had planned to write a thesis on contemporary poetry, but Champigny and I couldn't identify an author or group that hadn't already attracted considerable critical scrutiny, yet offered a substantial corpus. When he suggested that I work on Greimas' method instead, and sketched a clear chapter-by-chapter outline, I accepted the challenge.

From that point on, I read more Greimas, members of his school, and other structuralists and linguists, including in a seminar co-taught by Matei Calinescu and Gilbert Chaitin, my second dissertation director, after Champigny's untimely death. I was able to spend two years in Paris: in 1978-1979 I followed Roland Barthes' seminar at the Collège de France, and in 1980-1981 I attended Greimas' at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, worked with his research group, and participated in its workshops and parallel seminars. Like many members of his group, I returned for briefer periods in subsequent years, and presented on several occasions.

VDS: Did you study with Greimas himself?

TFB: Yes. His seminar met once a week in 1980-1981, and he taught five of the classes himself. His opening lecture presented his group, the seminar, and the year's topic, "La Mise en discours" (Benveniste), on enunciation, while in the final session, he

summed up the year's work. He devoted three other classes to question-and-answer sessions, which were particularly interesting: I was amazed at how he could explain a host of theoretical issues clearly and concisely in spontaneous conversation, and how everything in his approach seemed to fit together, so nothing appeared by chance.

In keeping with the EHESS's emphasis on multiple perspectives and interdisciplinarity, researchers like Michel Arrivé, Umberto Eco, Herman Parret, and Jean-Pierre Vernant presented on the other days, as did members of his group including Jean-Claude Coquet, Jean-Marie Floch, Jacques Fontanille, and Claude Zilberberg. Greimas began most of the sessions by summarizing and discussing the previous week's lecture, which was always insightful. After each class, we all went to the nearby café to discuss the class, talk about semiotics, and trade ideas, reading notes, reports of other seminars, and suggestions for further research. I chatted with Greimas a few times at the café, and also interviewed him twice in his office on the rue Monsieur-le-Prince.

VDS: What were the interviews about?

TFB: Firstly, I asked him a bit about his own biography including during World War II. He liked to talk about those difficult times, and about his life in general. Secondly, I had specific questions about the semiotic square.

VDS: How would you compare semiotics in that year with today's semiotics?

TFB: Wow, that's a huge, complicated, and excellent question! I'll take a stab at a few features that strike me. During those days, the semioticians around Greimas mainly analyzed texts, whereas now researchers more often examine visual images, cultural practices, objects, sites ranging from museums to gardens and shops, or music. In the 1970s and 1980s, members of his group investigated elementary structures like the semiotic square, poetical and narrative schemas, modalities, and aspect. Nowadays,

they devote great attention to enunciative processes and structures, and to ways to explore perception and sensible qualities.

In earlier times, research activities and directions flowed mainly from a fairly tight nucleus comprised of Greimas and those who collaborated with him in Paris. Students and colleagues would come to Paris to work on his semiotics, to take or to give workshops, courses, or lectures related to Greimas' seminar, his approach, and related topics. Introductory courses provided systematic initiations into his semiotics, while small workshops allowed us to participate extensively, discuss and debate his theories, and apply the methods. For about ten years, the group produced a pair of periodicals in which its students, adepts, and others could make available "prepublications." It was all very well organized, centralized, and fairly large.

Nowadays, as with semiotics in general, the cohort of students and colleagues has gotten smaller. The research activities are now decentralized, with important seminars and periodicals in Paris, but also in Araraquara, Liège, Lyons, Puebla, São Paulo, Torino, Urbino, Venice, and elsewhere. The methods and concepts have multiplied and diversified, and semioticians have become more open to new ideas from the outside. So it may be more accurate to speak today of a research network rather than a group. Every two years, the Association Française de Sémiotique organizes a conference, which serves as an opportunity for all those interested in structural semiotics and related perspectives to gather. We will meet on 28-30 August 2024 in Bordeaux to explore the topic "Le Vivant comme effet de sens" (Living Beings as Meaning Effects).

VDS: Do you remember Greimas talking about black boxes in semiotics?

TFB: I don't personally remember him employing that term, but he certainly used the concept as a strategy for developing his semiotics.

VDS: Can you think of any paper in which he mentions empty spaces (or gaps) that he left in semiotics?

TFB: I'd have to do some research to dig up exact quotations, but he definitely thought and spoke in those terms. He felt that it was his responsibility to define novel problematics for semiotics, to propose new topics that he and other semioticians could work on. In his 1980-1981 seminar, he indicated at one point that most of the "discursive structures" listed in the diagram of his theory presented in the 1979 dictionary of semiotics remained topics that needed to be investigated, fleshed out, and integrated into the well-established "semiotic and narrative structures" like the semiotic square. The new schemas envisioned include the processes that generate configurations of "actors" (e.g., characters), time, space, and "figures" (representations of entities in the natural and cultural world; Greimas and Courtés, 1982 [1979], p. 134).

Greimas also noted in his seminar that we should add "enunciation" to the diagram, placing it in between the "semiotic and narrative structures" and the "discursive structures." The dictionary defines and discusses enunciation in several important entries, but its absence from the diagram illustrates its relative neglect in Greimas' semiotics, its status as black box as you would say, including how it relates to the structures and methods associated with the traditional linguistic paradigm focused on the utterance, on the analysis of texts and corpora.

And finally, the diagram includes the component called "fundamental semantics" that comprises the elementary differential semantic features used to describe a corpus, text, entire language, or all of the natural world. The description of "spatiality," for example, could include categories like "horizontality vs. verticality" and "laterality vs. perspectivity." The dictionary characterizes any truly ambitious version of such a semantic system as being "among those problems that have been left unanswered and that semantics should resolve," if it is even possible to do so (Greimas and Courtés, 1982 [1979], "Semantics," #6, p. 273).

VDS: Do you think that those empty spaces have been filled now by his “disciples”?

TFB: His collaborators and fellow travelers have certainly made progress, with some help from Greimas himself, although the complexity of the issues guarantees that we can always do more, and explore them from new angles in a contemporary context. As for discursive structures, Jean-Marie Floch's seminar and publications in visual semiotics, and two issues of the group's periodical of prepublications investigate figures (Floch 2000 [1995], 2001 [1990]; *Actes sémiotiques: bulletin*, 1981, 1983). Seminars and two collective volumes explore temporality (Bertrand and Fontanille, 2006; Darrault-Harris and Fontanille, 2008), while Denis Bertrand and others have examined spatiality (Bertrand, 1985).

Innumerable studies have shown the fecundity of enunciation, articulating theoretical avenues and analyzing images, texts, and practices in detail. As of the 1980-1990s, Jean-Claude Coquet, Herman Parret, and others lectured and wrote on the topic (Coquet, 1997, 2007, 2022; Parret, 1983, 1987), while more recently, individuals and research groups have explored important new directions, including non-verbal enunciations (Colas-Blaise, Perrin, and Tore, 2016; Colas-Blaise, 2023; Dondero, 2020; Dondero, Beyaert-Geslin, Moutat, 2017; Paolucci, 2020).

As for “fundamental semantics,” Greimas's *De l'imperfection* on aesthetics and perception offers intriguing perspectives (1987), but to date, linguists and semioticians not directly associated with Greimas's group have provided the most concrete and extensive proposals in the context of structural studies. I'm certainly not an expert on the topic, but Slavic linguists like Van Schooneveld produced excellent comparative analyses (1978), and the thirty “variants” for describing clothing that Barthes formulates in *The Fashion System* provide nuanced, precisely defined semantic categories widely applicable far beyond dress (1983 [1967], p. 111-160).

VDS: Your paper “Algirdas Julius Greimas: Education, Convictions, Career” published by the *American Journal of Semiotics* affirms that “the first three decades of

his existence largely remain *terra incognita*" (2015, p. 2). Is that related to black boxes Greimas had left in semiotics, or to writings that I don't know about? To what material do you refer?

TFB: It's an interesting question. In truth, my sentence simply meant to observe that until quite recently, we lacked publications on Greimas's life and its immediate sociohistorical context, including the twenty-four years of his youth in Lithuania, how he got by during World War II, and what it was like to teach in Egypt and Turkey for thirteen years. In the last three decades, thanks to several Lithuanian scholars especially Karolis Rimtautas Kašponis, to my research that draws from archival documents and interviews, and to colleagues like you and Vytautas Virkau who graciously took the time to translate documents, one can now read at least basic accounts of his life, career, readings, and cultural and historical context in English, French, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Turkish (Broden, 2011, 2015, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Kašponis, 2014). My intellectual biography of Greimas will offer a much more detailed narrative and analysis of his life and research, and hopefully encourage others to offer their own views.

But you also ask two perhaps more important questions: whether black boxes remain in his semiotics, and whether he produced texts to which we don't have access today. With respect to black boxes in addition to those that I discussed above, Greimas mentioned that in his work on the passions, he had wanted to explore the unstable, changing, quivering nature of passionate states, but that the book co-authored with Fontanille falls short of adequately investigating the problematic (1993 [1991]). So that's another black box. Time will tell how many other diamonds in the rough researchers will uncover in his work and chisel into intellectual gems.

Concerning outlying or unavailable texts, intrepid translators have made his most important research available in many widely known languages—although the quality of those renditions varies, in part due to the challenging content, and to the insufficient remuneration that so often renders the process a labor of love. At the same

time, numerous French articles lie dispersed in multifarious journals of varying accessibility, and thus remain little known. A great many Lithuanian writings have not yet been translated, including his second book on mythology (1990 in 2005, p. 347-492). We do have a fine selection of his Lithuanian journalism in French translation (2017), and a small portion of his copious correspondence in French and in Lithuanian has been published (in French: Broden and Walsh Matthews, 2017, p. 51-90). Kęstutis Nastopka edited and published manuscript drafts of Lithuanian articles on mythology (Greimas, 2005, p. 533-637). Unless I'm mistaken, Greimas kept almost none of his reading notes, nor any outlines, drafts, or manuscripts of his French publications, with the exception of a very early version of the book on the passions. Unlike Saussure and Sartre, I don't believe that he left any manuscripts of important unpublished research.

VDS: In the same paper, you cite a phrase by Greimas, affirming that he very purposefully articulated a scientific project, not a closed, completed theory or method.

TFB: Absolutely! He always emphasized that semiotics must remain a project and not a finished science, for two reasons, I think. Firstly, because he recognized that compared to sociology, anthropology, chemistry, or biology, semiotics is an extremely recent field, and that he didn't have the time to develop its hypotheses. Secondly, because any science is a continuous project. Natural sciences continue to discover, to inquire, and to explore new territories. He always made an effort to incorporate new ideas in his semiotics, albeit with less openness to those from the outside in the last years of his life. He continuously expanded his approach, but without destroying or cutting out any of the established components. Fontanille has published an article that describes Greimas' semiotics as "a long-term scientific project" that continues to develop into the twenty-first century (in Broden and Wash Matthews, 2017, 91-110). The question posed to each researcher who elects to inscribe their work in Greimas' intellectual lineage today is exactly what and how much to retain from his oeuvre, and

to what degree to innovate, to develop the same questions in the contemporary context.

On Greimas and Jean-Marie Floch

VDS: Do you think that Floch helped fill in any black boxes left by Greimas?

TFB: Absolutely! Greimas' semiotics aims to identify general signifying processes common to a host of cultural practices and products, as well as those specific to particular media, social groups, or historical moments. Trained as a linguist, he largely confined his own descriptions to verbal corpora and texts. So he founded a collective, multidisciplinary research group that included students and colleagues like Manar Hammad in architecture, Floch in visual studies, Eero Tarasti in musicology, the filmmaker Eric De Kuyper, and so forth, all of whom investigated commonalities and specificities as viewed from their field. In the context of your project, non-verbal signifying processes thus represented black boxes for the most part for Greimas, who needed collaborators to investigate these domains.

Floch has made significant contributions to developing the figurative dimension of Greimas' semiotics. More generally, to date, no semiotician has made a greater contribution to elaborating its visual semiotics (1986, 2000 [1995], 2001 [1990]). We may forget that when he began working in the area, only a handful of people in Greimas' group were doing so. Those pioneers developed ways of analyzing images that we take for granted now, without realizing that at the time, they puzzled about the most basic questions, like: Where do we start? Barthes had worked on images, but Floch, Felix Thürlemann, Abraham Zemsz, and others in the group's workshop on visual studies wanted to develop a different methodology, and notably to analyze in much greater detail the visuals themselves, the signifier of the visual sign, its plane of expression.

Floch published numerous works that illustrate fruitful avenues for analyzing the configurations of colors, lines, forms, textures, and compositions in images.

Notably, he showed how to adapt a strategy that Jakobson and Greimas had developed for poetics: many images evince both “figurative” representations of events and entities in the world, and a “semi-symbolic system” in which a network of fundamental “plastic” visual contrasts on the plane of expression (signifier) is strategically mapped to a parallel network of thematic oppositions on the plane of content (signified) to create a coherent overall message or aesthetic effect (2001 [1990], p. 73-107). Like Greimas (2003 [1966]), he followed Lévi-Strauss in studying the figurative dimension as informed by history and culture, and thus declined to adopt any radical interpretation of the principle of immanence that would eviscerate sociosemiotic perspectives. The semi-symbolic system describes how the configurations of the plastic, visual contrasts communicate selective sociohistorical significations of the figurative forms and actions.

VDS: Do you consider that Floch developed a theory because, according to your paper, he established a method based on the close description of particular images?

TFB: That’s exactly right! The theory itself is pretty much Greimas’ semiotics, but I believe that Floch brilliantly adapted it to visual images. His intelligence and his visual acumen enabled him to identify interesting images, design objects, and social practices to study, then analyze them in a comprehensible, theoretically and methodologically sound manner. In his view, attempts to formulate semiotic definitions of “photography” or “photographs” in general, or “painting,” or “sculpture”, remained of little or no use, that only descriptions of particular entities and actions could yield significant insights.

VDS: You wrote in 2002 that “His semiotics incorporates a wide range of signifying processes from basic perceptual dynamics to narrative and communication practices including plastic semiotics in which a structure of differential features generates

characterized aesthetic and semantic effects throughout an image" (2002b, p. 195).

Does he really create that theory?

TFB: I was writing a review article of two books by Floch that had just come out in English translation when the news broke that he had just died, at the age of 53 (2002a). So I also wrote a second, *in memoriam* article, the one from which you quote. When I say "his semiotics," I do indeed mean strategies, models, and concepts that Floch developed for visual studies, but also Greimas' theory. Floch innovated in many ways, but also illustrated how to employ key elements of Greimas' approach in analyzing visual images. And I consider that Floch's highly readable works offer effective vehicles through which to learn signal concepts and models in Greimas' theory.

On Jean-Marie Floch and Nícia Ribas D'Ávila

VDS: Nícia Ribas D'Ávila studied with Greimas, who became her adviser. She mentions Floch, and notes that he established categories that remain very important. Yet she also says that his work is based on the verbal aspect, that he uses the verbal aspect to explain images. In a second criticism, she charges that he studies the figurative aspect rather than figures themselves, which must come first. She argues that he remains in the verbal aspect, that this initial step forms an image, and then so on. Her research has focused instead on the figures, differentiating her approach from Floch's, and perhaps probing a bit deeper than he does, although she continues to use his work. What would you say about her critiques?

TFB: I'm not a specialist of visual semiotics, so defer to the many colleagues vastly better informed on such issues. I unfortunately have not yet read D'Ávila's work, for example, so cannot compare the two approaches, or discuss her distinction between the figure and the figurative aspect.

But certainly, anyone who reads Floch sees clearly that he analyzes what he and the rest of Greimas's school call figures, and that he formulates detailed descriptions of the visual features specific to each image he studies. Throughout his career, he

opposed his era's logocentrism, arguing and demonstrating instead that we derive meaning directly from visual images and design objects without the mediation of language (1995, p. 117). So, I personally would not say that he doesn't analyze figures, or that he remains in the verbal aspect, quite to the contrary.

On the other hand, I suspect that I may understand D'Ávila's critique. Floch's numerous studies collected in *Visual Identities* (2000 [1995]) and *Semiotics, Marketing, Communication* (2001 [1990]) include developed versions of marketing analyses that he carried out for companies as a consultant. And on occasion, it seems to me that the company's ideas of what their logo should communicate to viewers, for example, the qualities or values that it should project to the public, assume undue importance in Floch's published description. Such may be the case, if I remember correctly, in his study of the bank Crédit du Nord's new star logo, perhaps also with Apple's multicolored apple (2001 [1990], p. 40-72, 165-177). For me, such published research should take account of as many likely or attested interpretations as possible of a logo or any other image, or at least indicate clearly that many such meanings exist or remain potential.

That said, speaking for myself, I particularly value analyses that pay as much attention to meaning as to perceivable form. I find that descriptions can be enriched by taking account of information gleaned from documents about how a skyscraper or a city park, an epic or a Parliamentary law, a photograph or a logo has been used and interpreted. For me, Floch's use of the sociohistorical context to analyze Chanel's fashions illustrates a successful use of such material, for example, as do his accounts of the connotations attached to the font IBM chose for its logo, and to stripes such as Apple uses in the logo it introduced in 1977 (2000 [1995], p. 85-115; 2001 [1990], p. 165-177).

VDS: I think that the point is what follows: I heard the following sentence many times regarding the black boxes when I was following classes with D'Ávila and with

Santana. Greimas used to say that he left question marks for people to scrutinize his seminars and to take account of the principle that he championed, according to D'Ávila: "The non-verbal aspect has to have its own language to describe itself. A kind of construct." That is what I call a "black box" in this sense: the lack of such a construct that would specify the steps, as Greimas did with the verbal aspect. The proof that Greimas did it well is the number of dissertations, theses, articles, and books that use his theory to study verbal texts all over the world.

Yet initially, there was no comparable construct for non-verbal or syncretic aspects. Then, as you say, Floch emerged as a one of the pioneers working on these issues. However, D'Ávila argues that he stays within the existing categories, that he did not develop them in a deeper sense, did not create a new construct to fill the black box.

D'Ávila contends that she provides just such a concept by creating all the steps from the figure aspect toward the figurative. She presents her approach in two monographs, one from 2007 and the other from 2015 with chapters by her and by students that she advised during more than 20 years. Ana Cláudia Mei does an interesting work too on non-verbal semiotics, but it seems that she, like Floch, did not develop a language to apply to the non-verbal aspect.

TFB: I see, very interesting! Once again, regrettably, I'm not a specialist of visual semiotics. I wish that I were familiar with D'Ávila's work, particularly the explicit "steps" she specifies between the two figurative instances, which sound quite useful.

I do know Floch's work, and can vouch for the fact that he proposes concepts, models, and methods specific to visual images, and illustrates them in numerous descriptions of photographs, advertisements, paintings, logos, and other media and supports. He provides clear and concise introductions to his central methods and strategies as well (2000 [1995], p. 1-8, 135-141; 2001 [1990], p. 1-12, 73-94). In French, one can read a particularly detailed visual analysis of Kandinsky's *Composition IV* (1982 in Hénault, 2002, p. 121-151).

But certainly in the last few decades, numerous other innovative directions in visual studies have emerged. I know that in structural semiotics, researchers like Pierluigi Basso Fossali, Anne Beyaert-Geslin, Jean-François Bordron, Maria Giulia Dondero, and Jacques Fontanille have developed approaches to visual enunciations, new theories of iconicity and of media supports, and methods for exploring syncretic expressions, digital media, photographs, scientific images, graffiti, graphic novels, visual poetry, and more (see bibliography).

VDS: It seems to me that Greimas always wanted to be a man of the arts, literature, poetry, and the like. And then, I tried to make a connection with *De l'imperfection*, his last sole-authored book (1987). It's very different from what he wrote before. How do you see this issue? Do you think he was frustrated with the imperfection of science or structuralism and his own semiotics? The concept or ideology for Greimas, for instance, is the constant search for meaning. It seems that it was very important to him. Where did it come from?

TFB: Your questions raise essential issues concerning Greimas, his project, and his work. I'm not sure anyone could pretend to provide definitive answers to them, but all who knew him or who have read him can develop their own responses.

VDS: Was he searching for the meaning of life itself?

TFB: Yes, he says that it was the horrors of World War II that impelled him to a lifelong search for meaning, for fundamental values, to devote his career to trying to better understand what makes human beings tick, what makes them act, and to develop ways in which individuals and societies can move toward strong values that respect others and build community.

As far as how he situated himself with respect to science and poetry, linguistics and literature, I would say that as you suggest, Greimas did indeed love literature, particularly poetry. In his younger years, he read modern and contemporary

Lithuanian, French, and world authors voraciously, especially poets. And he continued to read and review new Lithuanian writers throughout his life. His university studies in Grenoble included literature, and his first four published articles (in Lithuanian) are works of literary criticism written in a lively, accessible style. They use the critical approaches of the day, focused on the relations between author, text, and context, and adopt a literary style to describe the reader's affective and aesthetic experience. The numerous reviews and articles on literature that he wrote in Lithuanian throughout his life use a similar style and approach.

At the same time, his major professor in Grenoble, Antonin Duraffour, already singled him out for his aptitude in linguistics. Works like *Structural Semantics* reveal a truly innovative linguist with a formidable ability to be creative in an abstract, scientific mode (1983 [1966]). He resolutely chose science as the mode of his research, having become frustrated with the imprecise discourse of mainstream literary criticism, its lack of an explicit methodology and terminology, its overreliance on intuition. His book-length analysis of a short story by Guy de Maupassant includes flashes of his literary, poetic sensibility, like the analysis of the setting sun's reflections on the river, and of the naïve joy the "show" instills in the two characters (1988 [1976], p. 36-43). Yet the work mainly uses Maupassant's text simply as a sample of modern French discourse in which the researcher can identify general linguistic and semiotic mechanisms.

As for *De l'imperfection*, I would say that the title points toward a philosophical notion of the gap between the absolute, the ideal, and our humdrum sublunary, quotidian existence (1987). But I think that it's eminently fair to ask whether we ourselves can also interpret the title as an expression of the second thoughts that Greimas expressed on occasion toward the end of his life about having cast his semiotics in a formal, rigorous, scientific mold, rather than in a more "literary," impressionistic mode as did Barthes in much of work. And as you observe, *De l'imperfection* does indeed embrace a style and sensibility that sharply contrast with the

rest of his research, and which seem in harmony with the topic—and which can recall Barthes' literary manner.

On Fontanille, Landowski and others

VDS: How would you compare the work of his “disciples” like Jacques Fontanille, Eric Landowski, and other contemporaries? Do you think they have gone through what Greimas left behind like opening his theory, or are they filling any other black boxes?

TFB: Fontanille said that when Greimas was his thesis advisor, he told him that he could either write using his own idiosyncratic intellectual and terminological idiom, producing anomalous works, or develop his ideas within a collective project, employing a methodology shared by others. Fontanille said that he made the decision to embrace the latter, collective mode, to elaborate new paths and theoretical instruments, but to integrate them into the Greimassian framework. And clearly, he has followed through on this decision—and has also done much to strengthen the research group and its institutional structures. He serves as a good example of how to maintain the semiotics developed by Greimas and his research group in the 1970-1980s, while embracing Greimas' notion that science must ever remain dynamic and take on new issues.

VDS: What about Eric Landowski?

TFB: He applied Greimas' methods and theory, and strove to illustrate and develop the new directions for exploring perception traced in *De l'imperfection* (1987). He elaborated a semiotics of “experience” in which the elementary utterance predicate “adjustment” (modification, modulation, etc.) replaces logical “conjunction.” The approach aims to bridge Greimas's classical semiotics and the new paradigm sketched in *De l'imperfection*.

It seems to me that it would be valuable for us to use or develop new methods for analyzing social practices and structures. I think that Floch illustrated a promising avenue when he explored how the physical layout of personnel and equipment in a company's office space manifests and fosters its hierarchy, organization chart, and departmentalization, and how that topological configuration governs the firm's communication channels, and how it "thinks." The study can recall Foucault's pre-semiotic descriptions of the panopticon, and of the architectural and power structures shared by French prisons, hospitals, and schools. The concrete, perceptible plane of expression drives the intelligible plane of content and functioning of the institutions, illustrating an eminently semiotic dynamic.

Taking inspiration from anthropology and sociology, it would be helpful to undertake comparative studies as well, if there be semioticians capable of such research. Essential features of classical structural semiotics derive from classical philosophy focused on the individual, its universal mind, and its engagement with the world and with others. A comparative study could investigate a problematic like the passions in different cultures: rather than analyzing only avarice and jealousy in France, compare how France, Turkey, and China articulate those affective spaces, for example, searching commonalities as well as cultural specificities.

VDS: What about the thematic modes? Does Landowski take care of them or not?

TFB: When Greimas and Fontanille analyze passions, they discuss the significant role that each society plays in defining them, and include two culturally specific moments in their generative trajectory (1993 [1991], p. 52-55, 95-109). However, I'm not aware of any systematic comparative studies that search constants and variables among cultures, sexes and genders, age groups, economic strata, and so forth. That's a classic way to investigate cultural diversity and potential universals. Such projects require the ability to undertake serious research in several cultures, which unfortunately I don't really possess. We always have ideas we want other people to develop.

VDS: What you mean is that when Greimas and Fontanille talk about passions, they are specific? They don't propose comparisons?

TFB: That's right.

VDS: They start from the etymological origin of the word "passion." They built a dictionary and then start from there, right?

TFB: Yes, and in his work, Greimas explicitly states that when he studies nostalgia or anger, he is investigating those passions in France, using a French dictionary.

VDS: Do you think that it makes a lot of difference if someone uses a Brazilian dictionary, a Portuguese dictionary, or an Italian dictionary?

TFB: Well, I don't know, but suspect that one would observe parallels and contrasts. I do think that it would be interesting to find out!

VDS: That is your new research topic, am I right?

TFB: No, I'm focused on my intellectual biography of Greimas.

On Jean-Claude Coquet

VDS: Was Greimas more interested in the object than in the subject? Because I've often heard people say that semioticians call Greimas' approach "Objective" semiotics, the semiotics of the object, and cite Jean-Claude Coquet for the semiotics of the subject. I heard that Greimas didn't want to explore subjectivity because he didn't want to go into psychology. Do you agree with that?

TFB: Well, I agree somewhat, but think that it would be wrong to transform their differences into two dichotomous semiotic projects, especially in today's context. Coquet participated regularly in Benveniste's seminar well before the publication of *Problems in General Linguistics* (1971 [1966]), and found his concept of enunciation and

his definition of subjectivity through the linguistic I-thou relation groundbreaking. He evinced openness to projects parallel to Greimas's, including Kristeva's semanalysis informed by psychoanalysis. As of the early 1970s, Coquet greatly developed the investigation of the modalities that Greimas had initiated in *Structural Semantics*, proposing a typology of semiotic subjects defined by their respective modal strings. A "wanting" (*vouloir*) initial sequence defines the "questing subject," a "knowing" (*savoir*) initial string defines the "contractual subject," while "meta-wanting" (*méta-vouloir*) in final position defines the subject who becomes a self-sender, for example. The non-modalized subject constitutes a "non-subject" (*non-sujet*) limited to a bedrock sensual interaction with the world (1989 [1984-1985]). In the 1980s, he also began working intensively on Benveniste's concept of enunciation.

As for Greimas, it's certainly true that he didn't want his methods to rely extensively on psychology, to draw significantly from psychological concepts and methods. Yet thanks to his definitions of the narrative Subject, Sender, and Opponent as of the mid-1960s, Greimas's actantial schema models interaction and motivation as well as action, creating spaces for cognitive, affective, and intersubjective dynamics in his approach (1983 [1966], p. 196-256, 272-287). He explicitly defines the Subject-Object relation as one of "desire," or more precisely as the category "obsession vs. phobia," for example (1983 [1966]: 203-209). His Proppian narrative model foregrounds the Subject-hero's quest, which when successful entails the acquisition of competence, public validation, and the accomplishment of a project infusing life with meaning (Greimas and Courtés 1982 [1979], "Narrative Schema," #2, p. 204). His textual descriptions foreground the analysis of characters' rivalries, collaborations, and deceit. He develops these dynamics in 1970s studies of manipulation (persuasion, seduction, provocation, intimidation; 1988 [1976], p. 143-197) and the passions (*Actes Sémiotiques: bulletin*, 1979; Greimas and Fontanille 1993 [1991]). So while Greimas doesn't focus his theory on the subject as does Coquet, he doesn't at all construct a semiotics of the object that neglects the subject—and Coquet integrates the object into his framework as well.

In the mid-1980s, Greimas demonstrated increasing opposition to Coquet's project, presumably as he became more and more concerned that rival perspectives could muddle the semiotics that he wanted to leave for posterity and for continued development. I assume that Greimas' sharp critiques of Coquet's approach at his dissertation defense, his resistance to Coquet publishing a programmatic article in *Actes Sémiotiques: documents*, and similar actions drove Coquet to emphasize the differences between the two projects, and to promote his own at the expense of Greimas'. If the rift was experienced as painful and unhelpful to the research group at the time, perhaps it didn't come without a silver lining, if by chance it gave Coquet further impetus to develop his approach more vigorously, as he did.

If one compares the modest place that the concept of enunciation occupies in the semiotic dictionary (Greimas and Courtés 1982 [1979]) to the central role that it has played in Romance linguistics and semiotics in the last five decades, one would have to conclude that history has validated Coquet's focus. In this century, structural semioticians fluidly combine Greimas' concepts with that of enunciation, and few see the two men's research as mutually exclusive or starkly different.

VDS: Okay. To finish, how do you contemplate semiotics nowadays? I know that you are working on Greimas' biography. Can you talk about that?

TFB: Yes. Anyone writing in English about Greimas today faces a dilemma. On the one hand, his structural semantics and semiotics represent his chief contributions to science and the *raison d'être* of his international reputation. On the other hand, it's extremely challenging to communicate these approaches to a contemporary Anglophone audience. In our "post-theory" context, their complexity and abstraction pose immense barriers, as do their unfamiliar concepts, references, and terminologies. Even at the height of interest in structuralism and post-structuralism, few English-language researchers understood or used more than a couple of his models, mainly his semiotic square and actantial model. Yet the power and quality of his methodologies

make it essential to find a way to somehow communicate their nature and amplitude, their key theoretical positions and choices, and their main concepts and models.

It occurred to me that an intellectual biography could serve as an effective vehicle: his amazing life and compelling person can draw readers into his research, while the chronological order provides a firm, clear structure. Whereas we have numerous biographies of such figures as Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss, including authoritative, detailed works published in the last two decades, we have none of Greimas in any language. Nor do we have a book-length survey of his entire oeuvre, from historical lexicology through *De l'imperfection* and *Sémiotique des passions*. That trajectory is all the more significant in that it maps the development of linguistics and the human sciences during the second half of the last century.

My biography in progress aims to situate his projects in their scientific, cultural, and historical context, and to highlight institutional factors that impinged on his research productivity and the development of a large international research group. Historical events and chance encounters altered the course of his career and his research projects, as did his relations and collaborations with other intellectuals like Barthes, De Certeau, Jakobson, Kristeva, Lévi-Strauss, Lotman, and Ricoeur. The book targets a broad intellectual audience, strives for a clear and lively style, and uses terms and comparisons more familiar to Anglophone readers to present the methodologies and situate Greimas with respect to other figures.

The study thus highlights the affinities between Greimas' lexicological research on fashion and contemporary cultural studies, and compares his structural semantics and semiotics to American structuralism and to Chomsky's generative grammar. It delineates parallels and contrasts between Greimas' and Barthes' work of the 1970s, and shows how Greimassian narratology complements that of Genette. I situate Greimas' positions vis-à-vis the central debates of the "structuralist controversy," notably the question of history and the debate on "death of the subject."

Greimas' life story offers a window onto the global history of the last century, from the development of new nation states to the struggle against totalitarianisms, from North-South relations to exchanges and tensions between East and West. He grew up in newly independent Lithuania, earned a doctorate at the Sorbonne in postwar Paris, and taught for thirteen years in the Third World, Muslim-majority countries of Egypt and Turkey. Back in Paris as of the early 1960s, he became a leading figure in one of the most significant intellectual movements of the last century, (post)structuralism. Greimas played an active role in major dramas of his era: he became an officer in the Lithuanian infantry during World War II, held leadership roles in anti-Nazi and anti-Stalinist resistance movements, and participated in the May 1968 events in Paris. He worked with fellow liberal democratic Lithuanians to foster critical thinking and Western values that helped prepare his original homeland for the independence that it regained just before his death.

In addition to published scholarship, the book draws from site visits to Greimas' numerous domiciles, research in thirty-five archives, and correspondence and interviews with Greimas and some two hundred other individuals. Generous Lithuanian colleagues, especially the late Vytautas Virkau, translated his copious correspondence in his maternal language, along with some 250 journalistic essays that reveal his thoughts on fundamental intellectual, cultural, and social issues.

VDS: Does the book draw from interviews with Brazilian semioticians?

TFB: Absolutely! I integrate insights gleaned from interviews with José Luiz Fiorin, Diana Barros, and Waldir Beividas, among others.

VDS: How would you compare Greimas to Peirce?

(both laugh)

TFB: That is a complicated issue! One that I've attempted to address in two articles (2000, 2014). In a word, I see parallels as well as contrasts, and believe that for the

development of semiotics and its global reputation, we would do well to showcase the many significant commonalities, and to emphasize ways in which major differences can prove complementary rather than conflictual or mutually exclusive. Peirce and Greimas both highlight the central role that signifying processes and the resultant signs play in perception, cognition, and communication. Their common attention to the perceptible dimension of semiosis manifests their rejection of idealism. Both semioticians ground their approach in a form of phenomenology, explicitly so in Peirce's case. Both thinkers analyze signs as meaningful terms and not as mere empty symbols that serve as variables within syntactic or logical formal calculi, as do mainstream currents in linguistics and philosophy.

Among differences, Peirce was a philosopher and logician interested in the hard sciences and technology, Greimas a linguist drawn to anthropology, textual analysis, and the philosophy of language. Greimas accorded equal importance to theory and practice in the form of descriptions, while Peirce focused more exclusively on theoretical issues. Peirce developed an explicit phenomenological basis to his semiotics, while Greimas endeavored to emphasize ontological agnosticism, emphasizing a constructivist stance meant to leave space for each semiotician to hold their own philosophical views.

VDS: How do you project semiotics in 10 or 20 years from now? What will this theory look like?

TFB: I have no idea! Hopefully, we will continue to see youthful researchers engaged in semiotics. Today, there are talented young semioticians and dynamic semiotic communities in many regions of the globe. These are promising signs for the future of the field!

VDS: Do you think there is room for visual studies?

TFB: Visual studies has played a central role in semiotics for many decades now, quite justifiably, and will continue to do so, I would guess, in part thanks to the ever growing importance of images in our daily lives. The production, distribution, and perception of visual images lend themselves to interesting explorations of enunciation, for example. Semiotics enjoys an established reputation for research in emerging technology and media, and currently possesses tools particularly effective for such investigations. For just two examples, Maria Giulia Dondero is leading a major project that proposes to employ today's massive computational capacity to analyze the history of key forms and gestures in visual images from the Renaissance to contemporary fashion photography. The initiative builds on her research on using Big Data to study images (2017, 2019, forthcoming in 2024). Massimo Leone has directed major collective projects on the human face, including the uses and abuses of facial recognition technology, and the "hybrid" biological and digital face as it functions in such arenas as AI systems, digital portraiture, alien depictions, and video games (Gramigna and Leone 2021; Voto, Finol, and Leone 2021; Leone 2023).

VDS: What about the enunciation itself? Is it solved?

TFB: It remains an ongoing problematic, which is a good thing...It remains a wide-open field that researchers continue to explore, including recently in a major funded project that semiotic groups in Brazil and Belgium put together.

VDS: Is there any question that I did not pose that you would like to address?

TFB: No, you've been pretty thorough, I would say!

VDS: Thanks, Tom. Thank you very much.

TFB: Thank you, Val.

Final remarks

Thomas Broden is one of the few researchers who has worked to disseminate Algirdas Julien Greimas's approach in the United States, where semiotics has been more closely associated with the general science of signs elaborated by the American Charles Sanders Peirce. In 1980-1981, Broden attended Greimas' seminar in general semantics at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, and participated in the group's workshops. He has devoted more than forty years to the methods of the project initiated by the "master" of Lithuanian origins.

Broden's interview deserves special attention since he is preparing an intellectual biography that presents the stages of Greimas' methodological evolution and his role in the development of linguistics, semiotics, and the humanities during the second half of the last century. The book highlights Greimas' collaborations, dialogues, and debates with other major thinkers of his time. It situates his proposals in relation to the work of these figures and to broader intellectual traditions and social trends. Broden is a prominent researcher who has played a significant role in making Greimas' semiotics known in the English-speaking world.

Throughout this interview we can hear Broden's interest in Greimas' narrative and discursive models and in textual analyses. He has been attracted by the breadth of the Greimassian method and its development in the United States and around the world. He also shares a curiosity for black boxes, those empty conceptual place holders that Greimas created in his theory for subsequent development.

We see Broden's view that Greimas has contributed to the development of semiotics and the language sciences throughout the world thanks to researchers who worked with him in France and elsewhere, including in Brazil (Broden, 2021a, 2021b). This interview outlines Broden's view of semiotics from the 1960s to today, and sketches his ideas about its future, especially regarding the development of "black boxes" in Greimas' theory. The conversation highlights Jean-Marie Floch's innovations in visual semiotics and research that explores paths traced in Greimas' *De l'imperfection*

(1987). It also foregrounds Jacques Fontanille's development of the Greimassian approach, and his formulation of his own concepts and methods within the framework of Greimas's theory.

Esta entrevista e sua publicação são dedicados pela família do pesquisador e pós-Doutor Valdenildo Dos Santos (25/02/1961 – 21/11/2023) — Eternamente um grande provedor, protetor e amante de sua família, Deus e suas áreas de pesquisa.

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