

From standard semiotics to today's commitments. Lecture for a celebration

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The Programme for Semiotics of the University of Vilnius is celebrating today its twentieth anniversary. Greimas would no doubt rejoice. Such a commemoration shows that in spite of a nearly lifelong exile his endeavour to implant structural semiotics in his country of origin did succeed. Kęstutis Nastopka, Saulius Žukas and Arūnas Sverdiolas, the three pioneers with whom he kept close relationships until his death in 1992, not only ensured the presence of semiotic thinking on the Lithuanian intellectual scene through their writings and translations, the creation of a publishing company and a semiotic journal but, perhaps above all, managed to mould the pedagogical team now in charge of this Programme. And instead of proposing semiotics as an optional course in some department of linguistics, literature, cultural studies or communication as is most often the case in university curricula, they introduced it, from the beginning, as a fully-fledged discipline and an (almost) self-sufficient theory. As a result, a new generation

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of Lithuanian researchers is at present integrating the international semiotic community. From this point of view, the *Greimo centras* is qualitatively comparable to such great centres as those of Bologna, founded by Umberto Eco, Palermo, Rome-La Sapienza, Turin or Sao Paulo (whose Centre for sociosemiotics celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2024). All those share the same ambition: to enhance the theory and form semioticians. Mission accomplished!

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To form semioticians for what, however? For what purpose in today's highly problematic sociopolitical context? I would like to show that semiotics, as conceived here, is more than just an academic discipline. It has to do with real life.

Contrary to what is often said, it is no longer just a sophisticated method for analysing texts, as it used to be during a first period. Nowadays, beyond texts, our investigations address social practices and attempt to account for lived experience. In so doing, like all social scientists, we are involved in the matter we analyse. As a consequence, although we obviously try to be as rigorous as possible in the construction of a coherent apparatus of theoretical, methodological and descriptive concepts, we do not claim to deliver a purely neutral view of society. The ultimate objective of the models we elaborate is not only to help better understand the world we live in, it is also to enable us to act more adequately in personal life and in regard to the societal and natural environment. In other words, our work is motivated by both moral and concrete concerns and, in the end, it is politically orientated. As sociosemioticians, we ought to assume such commitments. I even think that this is what makes our discipline worth exercising.

To endorse and implement such a standpoint requires, first of all, a clear idea as to our object of study, meaning. More exactly, meaning as an effect produced, and grasped, in interaction. This point must be emphasised because one of the main features of Greimasian and post-Greimasian models – their dynamicity (a quality

that differentiates our approach from the typological perspective of Peircian semiotics) – stems from the connection we have always established between these two notions – meaning, interaction – even though the way we delimit what they respectively embrace has evolved as time passed and new questions arose.

I shall evoke the starting point of this evolution and its present, provisional, point of arrival (and finally add some general considerations): why and how did we pass from the standard narrative grammar which dates back to the 1970s to today's sociosemiotic model of a plurality of interactional regimes of sense?¹

1. Everything originates from Greimas's decision to put narrativity at the heart of his theory as an overall principle of intelligibility. This fundamental choice still guides most of our research and, as such, need not be reexamined. But a second choice, meant to concretise this general principle, soon posed a problem, namely the introduction of a 'canonical schema' serving as an 'ideological reference model' which is supposed to articulate any concrete narrative.²

Presented as a 'formal framework in which the meaning of life is inscribed', it consists of a syntax that regulates the circulation of 'objects' among 'subjects', themselves guided by their 'intentionality'. A subject, according to its classic semiotic definition as a syntactic actant, is an anthropomorphic agent who intends to get hold of (to enter in 'conjunction' with) whatever element is liable to play the syntactic role of an actant-object worth acquiring, due to its intrinsic value (its utility or its attractiveness) in the eyes of the said agent. Thus, if consumable goods and hoardable riches (starting with money) as well as 'modal' prerequisites for efficient

¹ See respectively A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés. 1983 [1979]. *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*. Bloomington, Indiana U. P.; E. Landowski. 2015. *Prasmė anapus teksto. Sociosemiotinės esė*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos; E. Landowski. 2025. *Au risque du sens. Essais de socio-sémiotique IV*. São Paulo, Estação das Letras e Cores. www.estacaolettras.com.br; E. Landowski and J.-P. Petitimberty. 2023. Risky Heuristics. In P. Copley (ed.). *Semiotics and its Masters*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

² Cf. *Semiotics and Language. Op. cit.* Entry "Narrative", § 8.

action (such as knowledge or power) must pass from hand to hand, it is because, according to this standard view, only their pursuit, their exchange, their circulation and finally their possession are supposed to prompt and orientate action, thereby giving a meaning to life.

The ideological bearing of this 'formal framework' is twofold. One aspect relates to political philosophy, the other to political economy. The vision it proposes of life in society is primarily a democratic one. If everyone is motivated by a clear, free and well-informed volition, the relations between subjects may all be settled by means of negotiation procedures resulting in specific agreements as to the conditions for the exchange of the desired objects of value. This defines the interactional regime known as 'manipulation', a badly chosen metaterm since it arouses suspicion even though it designates what this grammar presents precisely as most positive in sociopolitical terms since it privileges in all domains (even in the allocation and the exercise of power) free discussion (seen as a dialectic of 'persuasive doing' and 'interpretative doing'), reason and contract, as opposed to the use of force or of demagogic forms of appeal to feelings, and to pure chance.

But the same schema can also be interpreted as the expression of a fundamentally utilitarian vision that tends to reduce all interactions, both between immediate partners and with the world in general, to calculated manoeuvres aiming at some form or other of profit. 'What is essential for man,' wrote Greimas, 'is the quest for values, their appropriation, their attribution.'³ This view is not contradictory to the previous one but it radicalises one of its possible extensions. It tends to reduce the intentionality that motivates the interacting subjects – their existential desire to *be* – to an obsessive quest for possession, to the simple eagerness to *have*. Consequently, between subjects (be they individual or collective), the only reason for engaging relationships condenses either in the hope to obtain (in principle by means of agreement)

³ A. J. Greimas. 1983. *Du sens II*. Paris: Seuil, p. 169.

some particular object regarded as deserving to be sought after (wealth, power, honours, knowledge, specific services or favours, ordinary commodities, etc.), or in the anticipation of material advantages or symbolic gains to be expected from the exchange of such objects. In such conditions, society takes the shape of a vast market where goods pass from owners-holders 'in a state of conjunction' to 'virtual' owners, owners-in-waiting, yearning for appropriation. And in the same context, the natural world itself appears as a mere repository of economic resources to be made profitable regardless of foreseeable collateral damages.

In sum, like Janus, the semiotic subject initially viewed as a perfect democrat reveals another, counterbalancing, face: that of a cold calculator and an insatiable consumer. It is probably no coincidence that this 'canonical' schema was developed during the 1960s and 1970s, while mass consumerism was rapidly spreading. Although many semioticians see it as universally valid, it is in fact closely connected with one particular (albeit immensely widespread) philosophical, legal, economic, social and, ultimately, political way of thinking. One might even believe that the two-faceted subject it puts the spotlight on was shaped in its specific form in order to lend ideological support to our society's claim to marry the reign of business and its juicy 'deals' (as one now puts it unabashedly in Washington) with the ideal of democracy, two divergent principles that may be reconciled only by the fiction of entirely free and rational individuals, in particular as economic agents.

However, in spite of all the objections we have to raise against the implications of this semiotic construct, we cannot simply reject it. To ignore it would amount to leaving aside an extremely powerful tool for description, a model perfectly fit to account for a very large number of strategies empirically observable at various levels of social life. And even politically, the idea of a system that regulates civil life on the basis of negotiation and contract (as opposed to the rule of the strongest) is certainly not the worst possible model of society. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to observe that a grammar of interaction exclusively focused on the desire of

possession reflects a very narrow view of life and of the meaning of our being-in-the-world. Besides, everything around us, from socio-economic policies to geopolitical strategies, and of course climate change, has evolved in such an alarming way during the latest decades that we feel the urgent need for new orientations, including at the modest level of our semiotic reflections.

2. Hence the necessity of a more comprehensive modeling – which brings us to the latest stage of our research trajectory. Other culturally attested forms of relationships and other possible syntaxes of interaction do exist, which open quite different semio-political perspectives. Such is particularly the case of the regime of meaning and interaction I call ‘adjustment’ – one of the key-concepts of today’s sociosemiotic model. The syntax in play here differs entirely from the previous schema. It renews the semiotic vision of society and provides arguments in favour of a creative mode of interacting at the level of daily life. But this does not mean that adjustment should ‘replace’ manipulation. In the enlarged narrative grammar I propose, both have their justified and necessary place as alternative interactional regimes. So, what innovations do we claim to add with this syntactic notion of adjustment?

To begin with, adjustment should not be confused with ‘adaptation’. Adaptation pertains to a different interactional regime – called ‘programming’ – in which one of the interactants obeys unalterable behavioural regularities, so that the only possible form of interaction consists in setting these regularities in motion (for instance, when in need of boiling water, heat it up to a 100°: there is no other means). Nor does adjustment consist – as distinct from ‘manipulation’ this time – in ensuring that one of the actants will bend, willingly or not, to the demands of the other. Adjustment is a regime of interaction between equals, in which no one imposes anything on anybody. Furthermore, unlike manipulators, who (no more and no less than their manipulated partners, since both are ‘intentional’ subjects) know in advance exactly what they want or need and act in order to obtain it, the partners of a process of adjustment are devoid of any predetermined volition concerning a

specific object of quest. They are open-minded, unprejudiced and flexible actors. They are ready to 'adjust' to whatever may by chance occur. In a word, they are, one might say, 'available' – *disponibles*. Laurence Sterne's Yorick is their literary model and mentor:

What a large volume of adventures may be grasped by him who interests his heart in every thing, and [has] eyes to see what time and chance are perpetually holding out to him.⁴

By 'availability' (Fr. *disponibilité*) I mean a disposition that, instead of leading one to long for domination through appropriation, aims at no more than fulfilling one's own potentialities and, more precisely, at doing so through the simultaneous fulfilment of the potential of whoever or whatever one encounters, either as a human partner or as a non-human co-actant. 'Available' subjects do not *a priori* crave for anything in particular. Open to what presents itself, to the present moment and to others, they aspire only to 'accomplish' themselves, to become whatever they may turn out to be, interactional conditions permitting.

In addition to the semiotically familiar notion of 'virtuality' I have just introduced that of 'potentiality'. Although they may seem equivalent, they must be distinguished. It is crucial in our discussion. Whereas what is at play in a manipulation is the calculable realisation of something already virtual, what is at stake in a process of adjustment is the conjectural accomplishment of something yet only potential. As a consequence, while the result of a successful manipulation is predictable, the outcome of a felicitous adjustment will always be to some extent a surprise. Why?

Virtual, as a metaterm of the narrative grammar, applies to objects that are positively identified (whose nature, shape, use, value, etc., are known, more or less exactly) but placed in a position of 'disjunction' from a given subject; if positively valued, their being 'disjoined' (which basically means not possessed) turns them

⁴ L. Sterne. 1938 [1768]. *A Sentimental Journey*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 47 ("In the street. Calais").

into objects of quest, motivating thereby manipulative strategies of acquisition (or 'conjunction'). On the contrary, the *potential* development of an object, of a situation or of a person cannot be precisely known in advance. One may for example hope for the accomplishment of the hypothetical capacities – the supposed 'promises' – of an apparently talented child, but it is only once it is grown up that it will become possible to check whether these potential capacities we believed in did exist. Only retrospectively, once some concrete achievement has proved the existence, hitherto latent, of such potentialities, shall we be sure that they existed and know what exactly they would eventually make possible.

Hence two utterly different forms of interactions. To manipulate in order to obtain such or such 'virtual' object of value is a realistic and reasonable calculus since, at least, one knows in advance what precise result can be expected in case the conditions for acquisition are satisfied and the bargain is concluded. To confide in the unknown – and beforehand unknowable – potential of a partner is on the contrary always somewhat hazardous. It is making a bet. But this is exactly what engaging in a process of adjustment requires! Adjustment starts from a gesture of gratuitous confidence and generosity towards the other, as opposed to cautious self-serving strategies of manipulation. Contrary again to manipulation, which is on the side of prudence, adjustment is related to adventure. And precisely insofar as it is risky it is propitious for novelty, whereas manipulation tends to reproduce the identical under surface changes.

Simple surface changes in one case, creative renewal in the other: more accurately, what distinguishes these two forms and degrees of variation? No doubt, the 'state of junction' of both manipulator and manipulated is all the time liable to change. Should they obtain what they long for (conjunction), they would switch from a virtual to an actual state of possession. Or the reverse in case they become deprived of what they actually have (disjunction). But would this change what they are? Someone wants to become President, wins at the elections but, for some reason, is soon obliged to resign. In all

three successive situations – coveting power, then enjoying its exercise, and in the end lamenting its loss – the same world view, the same life-project, the same ambition rule this person's actions and fluctuating states of mind. Circumstances vary but at the bottom, whatever happens the subject keeps being from beginning to end the same 'power-hungry' person. No fundamental change occurs.

By contrast, under the regime of adjustment, what interaction modifies is not limited to external attributes that one may win or lose. More in depth, mutually adjusting implies, on both sides, a renewal of one's way of making sense of the world. The simple fact of dealing with one another regardless of predetermined purposes gives each partner an opportunity to discover, from one's own part as well as from the part of the other, potential capacities by definition formerly undisclosed, potentialities of which one was previously uncertain or even completely unaware. And on this basis something profoundly new, a form of existential metamorphosis, may emerge.

Of course, it all depends on chance – on some unforeseeable happy accident: to be lucky enough to meet an adequate partner, equally open to such a form of relationship. This logically entails that on either side self-accomplishment through adjustment is highly depending on the other – on the other's availability, which never can be taken for granted. And if it is not granted – if the interlocutor is not ready for that form of relationship but, for example, is definitely attached to the usual sphere of manipulation (or, a fortiori to programming) – then seeking adjustment would end up in a fiasco or some kind of accident. If only from this point of view, privileging this regime is always slightly risky.

3. In order to summarise the whole matter in more all-embracing terms, I would say that whereas under the regime of manipulation identity undergoes purely quantitative variations, adjustment allows for qualitative metamorphoses.

In the first context, as noted just above, one remains the same person no matter whether accumulating or losing property, fame, power or whatever other kind of 'objects of value'. Quite

the opposite, on adjusting mutually, the interacting partners discover themselves inwardly different from what they believed they were. Each partner's move (be it some verbal modulation in a conversation or a gestural opening, as in a dance) works as an inducement for the other to improvise an adjusted reaction, and so forth reciprocally. Inducements are not explicit manipulative requests but discreet hints to be grasped as invitations to let some potential be accomplished.

Practicing this interactional regime thus leads to enlarge and somehow recreate one's own identity, disclosing aptitudes yet unsuspected to one's own eyes (and the other's). It leads, as the title of one of Paul Ricœur's books put it already a long time ago, to discovering *oneself as another*.⁵ Almost a rebirth. More generally, in many domains of activity (education for instance, most sports, teamwork of any kind, art, design, and even semiotic research!), mutual adjustment with one another appears likewise as a condition for creation or re-creation. The status and the nature of the 'other' in entirely open. It may obviously be someone else, but also, possibly, any kind of other living being, even a sophisticated machine, or the resisting matter of an artistic or intellectual work in progress.⁶ Even one's own body is liable to be treated under this regime.⁷ At any rate, at the level we took here as main reference, that of social encounters, when availability is reciprocal, the dynamics of the intersubjective relationships may take the form of a process of co-creating meaning and, so to speak, of reinventing life.

Let us imagine a context in which interaction is neither exhaustively subject to rigid physical or social determinism (as in programming), nor left to chance (as under the regime of accident), nor depending on the result of difficult negotiations between divergent intentions or interests (as in manipulation). Life could then be conceived, or at least idealised, as a free, creative, and therefore

⁵ P. Ricœur. 1990. *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Seuil. Eng. transl.: *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press. 1999.

⁶ Cf. E. Landowski. 2021. Plaidoyer pour l'esprit de création. *Semiotika* 16.

⁷ Cf. Avoir prise, donner prise. *Au risque du sens*. *Op. cit.*

rewarding adventure. In the immanence of relationships between entities at once interdependent, sensitive to each other and attached to the preservation of their respective autonomy, the potential of each co-actant could be fulfilled through the correlative fulfilment of the other's (or others') potential. This syntax is, for example, that of friendship, a form of relationship that involves a dynamic of reciprocal incentives without pre-established goals or rules, thanks to which a new way of being, thinking and living together can be invented between partners and reshaped at any time.

However, like manipulative, programmatic or random-based syntaxes, adjustment syntax is neither good nor bad in itself, in absolute terms. Just as manipulation appears to be axiologically ambivalent – positive as the basis of democratic processes, negative as the principle of a form of mercantilism – so too does the syntax of adjustment have two opposing sides. Applied at a collective level, it may lead both to a true redefinition of social relationships and to the worst forms of populist demagoguery.⁸ This means that even if, grammatically speaking, it paves the way for dynamics that are more diverse, more complex and more likely to give life a deeper existential meaning than the three other interactional regimes, the semiopolitical value of its enforcement depends, as with the others, on multiple contextual factors: on the precise modalities of its implementation, the field of activity concerned and the way in which its syntax articulates with that of other regimes simultaneously at play in a given situation.

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For a long time, structural semiotics recognised only one kind of interactional processes, namely manipulation strategies, in perfect accordance with the mainstream lifestyle in our societies. This implicit alliance between semiotic theory and an ideology of pure appropriation and domination already seemed to me incongruous

⁸ Cf. E. Landowski. 2020. Semiotinè populizmo kritika. *Semiotika* 15.

a long time ago.⁹ And today, with the varied crises we are living through, we cannot avoid to observe that the systematic implementation of the semiopolitical orientation that such a 'canonical' schema implies only led to ever increasing inequalities between nations and, inside nations, between citizens, to the multiplication of social clashes and international conflicts, and finally, above all, to the ever accelerating destruction of the environmental conditions for life: in a word, to an overall loss of meaning.¹⁰

We sociosemioticians therefore join the many who campaign for what we see as the exact opposite: for an ecological practice of meaning and interaction aimed at forms of mutual fulfilment in our relationships with others on all levels, from interpersonal encounters to the global treatment of the environment. This choice is not dictated by transcendental moral principles, nor is it the expression of a simple individual preference. What justifies it is the difference in the respective potential (for, at this level too, the notion applies) offered by each of the regimes of meaning as interdefined by the interactional model we propose. Reasoning in these semiotic terms, we have come to the conclusion that only through practices guided by the quest for adjustments between interactants a little more meaning (both in world affairs and personal life) might have a chance of reemerging from the present chaos. And that, at a global level, a sustainable form of life might, in spite of all, be reinvented.

There is therefore a politics of semiotics. The construction of an adequate theory and of a coherent metalanguage accompanying the development of operational models make up the necessary and visible scholarly side of our discipline. But this work cannot be separated from a practice of sensemaking that engages with the world and day-to-day life: this is the complementary side, where scholarly concerns meet effective commitments that impact on lived experience. Greimas's semiotics already sought to 'bite on reality'. However, in privileging broad overviews and universally

⁹ Cf. 2017. Petit manifeste sémiotique. *Actes Sémiotiques* 120.

¹⁰ See J.-P. Petitimberty. 2023. Mehr Licht. *Acta Semiotica* III, 5.

valid principles it also tended to take a distance from contingencies. Eminently rational, it was reasonable too. Our sociosemiotics strives to be no less rigorous – conceptually – but does not seek to be so reasonable. On the contrary, we would like to reenchant the world! While acknowledging that this may be somewhat utopian, we persist in seeking the path to another politics of meaning: a renewed semiotic programme for another twenty years?