



Dictionary of
Semiotics

BRONWEN MARTIN AND FELIZITAS RINGHAM

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Bronwen Martin
and
Felizitas Ringham



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Preface

In the mid-1980s, a professor came to Birkbeck College to give a lecture on semiotics. He was an elderly, relatively short, unassuming gentleman who spoke French and who told us a simple story about a monkey who wanted a banana and needed a stick to get it. The gentleman was the Lithuanian Algirdas Julien Greimas, who introduced us that day – in easy terms – to the semiotic project. Semiotic theory, he informed his audience, is not a branch of philosophy. Rather, it is a practical reflection on discourse, any discourse, not just the verbal sentence. Concerned with values and signification, it tries to unravel the meaning hidden below the surface in an attempt to find sense in life. The monkey and the banana served the purpose to illustrate Greimas's models: keys to understanding how we produce meaning.

This was our first encounter with the founder of the European branch of semiotics. In subsequent years, we were fortunate to meet a number of the Paris semioticians and to attend some of their meetings. Thus we were able to follow at close hand developments of the theory which we have tried to expose in its fundamentals in this small volume. Our enthusiasm for semiotics is shared by more and more people in many different countries. Semiotics is in the air, one might say. It is no longer restricted to literary investigations and academic establishments. Marketing research, the media, law, even visual and gestural discourses make use of the semiotic method. They, like us, believe that semiotics as an analytical tool is shown to be helpful in probing effects of meaning, finding possible answers and even forecasting responses. But more than that: the process of discovery – like that of the explorer in a strange country – opens up the territory of a text, a discourse, to adventures of deeper understanding and new ways of interpretation.

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How to Use This Dictionary

Words or expressions/phrases set in italics are in most cases meant to provide cross-references to related entries. The use of bold face is restricted to emphasizing particular words in the context of an entry. Underlining is used to highlight particular words in examples.

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Introduction

As a literary theory, semiotics has increasingly gained ground in the last two or three decades of the twentieth century. It is now usually included in secondary education literature programmes and in surveys of critical theory. Moreover, the concept has become part of media discourse with regard to film and advertising in Europe and throughout the world. Yet while theoretical research into the discipline has advanced – particularly in France – to many the very term 'semiotics' has remained an enigma and thus its appeal restricted. This book proposes to familiarize researchers as well as university students and their teachers with the semiotic approach. A brief outline of the aims of semiotic theory, its history and working method is followed by a reference section providing definitions of terms and models used in semiotic metalanguage, and finally an example of semiotic analysis applied to a text.

What is semiotics? What does semiotics mean?

The term semiotics is derived from the Greek word *semeion* denoting 'sign'. Already in the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke referred to *semiotika*, which he defined as '*the Doctrine of Signs, [...]; the business whereof, is to consider the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for the understanding of Things, or conveying its Knowledge to others*'.¹

In modern usage the concept semiotics refers to a theory of signification. There are different branches of semiotics under this heading. There is an American branch, for instance, strongly influenced by C. S. Peirce, which focuses on logic and meaning and has become central in linguistics linked to philosophy. Much of Peirce's work is devoted to the development of sign categories such as making a distinction between icon, index and symbol.² This approach differs considerably from European semiotics, represented by the Paris School (*Ecole de Paris*) founded by A. J. Greimas. The Paris School is concerned primarily with the relationship between signs, and with the manner in which they produce meaning within a given text or discourse.

Importance is attached not only to the elaboration of theories but also to their application as methodological tools for textual analysis. Compared to Peirce, the Paris School thus takes a more wide-reaching approach and, in the final analysis, is of greater practical use. The present dictionary is concerned entirely with the theories and practice of this School.

Semiotics according to the Paris School posits the existence of universal structures that underlie and give rise to meaning. These structures are susceptible to representation in the shape of models which – conversely – can also be applied to any signifying object to decode and interpret its effects of meaning. Being concerned with structures, however, does not mean that semiotics is synonymous with structuralism, a theory concerned solely with the perception and description of structures. Neither is it simply a sign system; it should not be confused with semiology. Nor is it confined to the theories of Roland Barthes. Semiotics, in fact, has a much wider aim: the theory purports to explore the generation of signification, any signification, not only that of the written word, meaning in all its guises and to its full extent. Semiotics thus covers all disciplines and signifying systems as well as social practices and signifying procedures.

Semiotics and the Ecole de Paris: a brief history

In 1985, when speaking about the development of semiotic theory, Greimas said: 'My theoretical genius, if I can so call it, was a form of "bricolage". I took a little Lévi-Strauss and added some Propp ...' He also said that as a linguist, he was more inspired by Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss than by other linguists, 'with the exception of Saussure and Hjelmslev of course'.³

It all started at the beginning of the twentieth century with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who was the first to apply scientific theory to the study of language and to relate this science to social psychology. It was he who introduced the term *sémiologie*, which he defined as forming a link between linguistics and psychology.

Saussure viewed language as a social phenomenon. His great contribution to its study was the discovery that meaning does not reside in individual words but in a complex system of relationships or structures. His motto was: 'Il n'y a de sens que dans la différence.' He pointed out that language structures could be explored by describing

them in their current form (synchronically) or historically (diachronically). Saussure is perhaps best known for having divided the phenomenon of language into *langue* (abstract language system, language as structured system of signs) and *parole* (the individual utterances, or speech, making use of the abstract system). In his study of language, however, Saussure went even further. He applied the structure principle to the individual sign or word. The linguistic sign, according to him, is characterized by the relationship of its two components: the 'sound-image' or material substance which he named *signifiant* (signifier) and its 'concept' or *signifié* (signified).

If Saussure and his revolutionary findings⁴ paved the way for structuralism and semiotics, the same can be said for the Dane Louis Hjelmslev and the Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen. Even without any immediate link to the Swiss linguist, Hjelmslev's theoretical approach was very close to that of Saussure, whose work he can be said to have continued. In his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (1943) he formalized language, dividing the phenomenon into 'system' and 'process'. Hjelmslev also refined the Saussurian definition of the two aspects of the language-sign by recognizing two fundamental levels or planes of language, one of 'expression' and one of 'content'. Each one of these, he believed, was possessed of a 'substance' and a 'form'. Hjelmslev's contribution to linguistics included his theory of the semiotic function which he defined as existing between the twin aspects of the signifying act – between signifier and signified (according to Saussure) or between expression and content (according to Hjelmslev). Finally, Hjelmslev extended his semiological studies to incorporate non-verbal language systems such as traffic lights or the chimes of Big Ben.

Like Hjelmslev, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss found a new territory to which he applied a linguistic-structuralist approach. Lévi-Strauss set out to identify the constituent parts of cultural behaviour, which he studied as if it were a language phenomenon. Searching for the semantic structure (the 'language system' or *langue*) that underpins culture, his concern focused on 'myths'. He analysed myths from different cultures and discovered a number of recurrent elements – which he called 'mythemes' (as compared to 'phonemes' or 'morphemes' in linguistics) – and functions that seemed to operate like the components of universal signifying structures.⁵

At the same time an earlier study by the Russian folklorist Vladimir

Propp appeared in English translation.⁶ Close analysis of one hundred fairy-tales had led him to establish an analogy between language structure and the organization of narrative. He identified thirty-one functions or fundamental components that formed the basis of any tale. A function in this sense is a unit of the 'narrative language', such as 'a difficult task is proposed to the hero' (25) or 'the villain is punished' (30). The thirty-one functions, moreover, were distributed amongst seven spheres of action such as (1) villain, (2) donor, (3) helper, and so on. The narrative taxonomy developed by Propp, as well as his model, is still held to be valid by researchers today.

Such was the groundbase that inspired Greimas to compose the founding work of what was to become semiotics: *Sémantique structurale* (Paris: Larousse, 1966). This seminal text contained the axiomatic base of a scientific theory, anticipated hypotheses for subsequent research and provided samples of semiotic practice, demonstrating its value as a tool for discovery. Nonetheless, this 'ouvrage fondateur' was only the beginning. It marked the starting point of a scientific project which is still today in the process of developing. Over many years, Greimas and a group of researchers dedicated themselves in weekly meetings to elaborating, testing, changing and refining a theory of signification. The meetings took place at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris, to which Greimas had been appointed. It was there that the Paris School of Semiotics originated.

The development of semiotic theory took place in several phases. The first stage focused, within the context of structuralist thought, on the problematics of semantics as demonstrated by the very title of Greimas's *Sémantique structurale*. Saussure's notion of meaning resulting from relationships had inspired Greimas to analyse and define specific kinds of difference. He first identified the distinctive traits of oppositions in the event producing a typology. Opposite properties were then categorized to be used as working concepts in the elaboration of a rudimentary signifying structure. At the same time, the encounter with Propp's work encouraged Greimas to apply linguistic models to narrative. In an attempt to formulate better the elements of narrativity, he discovered that what Propp had called 'function' was in fact a verb plus actants, in other words, a complete sentence. He also found that it was possible to reduce Propp's seven spheres of action to three pairs of binary opposition (subject/object; sender/receiver; helper/opponent) that would describe any narrative structure.

The theoretical advances made during this first stage of development concerned two apparently heterogeneous areas: on the one hand the search for an elementary structure of meaning comprising the logical classification of paradigmatic differences; and on the other, formulating a theory of narrativity which streamlined Propp's syntagmatic model into the components of a narrative grammar. During the second phase of semiotic research, in the 1970s, attempts were made to find a synthesis between these different fields in order to define a consistent general theory of the generation of meaning.

Concentrating on the surface structures of narrative, semioticians discovered that function, as represented by an action verb, was overdetermined by modalities: two virtualizing (wanting, having to) and two actualizing (knowing how to, being able to). When this discovery was pushed to its extremes, it emerged that the entire narrative grammar was in fact composed merely of modalities plus content, that is, semantics. This allowed for powerful models to be constructed. Moreover, these models could also be applied to social practices, behaviour patterns, etc. Narrativity was no longer seen to be the exclusive property of written texts. From now on it was perceived as underlying all discourse and accounting for the organization of the world.

Research during this period also showed that Propp's formula of the tale could be broken down into important sequences which together reflected the stages of all human action. The sequences – manipulation, action, sanction – were condensed into what came to be known as the canonical narrative schema. This was found to be applicable not only to stories but to a great variety of texts (legal, culinary, journalistic, etc.) and, in the end, to something as basic as man's quest for the meaning of life.

While work on the surface level of narrative structures progressed, essential findings on the abstract or deep level of signification yielded the link needed to perfect semiotic theory. Greimas proposed a visual representation of the elementary structure of meaning: the semiotic square. This is the logical expression of any semantic category showing all possible relationships that define it, i.e. opposition, contradiction and implication. It was discovered, however, that apart from illustrating opposing relationships, this square also portrays the operations they generate. In fact, it allows to retrace a process in progress or the trajectory of a subject performing acts of transformation. In other

words: the semiotic square not only represents underlying categories of opposition but also gives account of surface structures of narrative syntax. At the end of the 1970s, all the semiotic findings of the previous two decades were published in an authoritative work by Greimas and Joseph Courtés: *Sémiotique, dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Paris: Hachette, 1979).

The *Dictionnaire* appeared to be evidence of semiotic theory having consolidated: its working concepts were defined seemingly once and for all, its models ready to be applied. This was not so, however. Research continued. The major preoccupation during the years following the publication of the *Dictionnaire* concerned the discursive level of meaning. This level relates to the figurative and enunciative surface of an utterance which gives expression to, and is supported by, the underlying semio-narrative structures. During the 1980s and 1990s, efforts concentrated in particular on aspectualities, that is, the spatial, temporal and actorial organization of texts. Concern with aspectual problematics also lead to renewed investigation of systems of valuation. How does a being, an object, a time or a place assume value? And to whom? The last few semiotic seminars at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes were devoted to the study of 'Truth', 'Beauty', 'Good and Evil' and how these classic values function in language. It was discovered that the system of valuation for each one of them operated along different aspectual lines. Morality, for instance, seemed to fall within the categories of 'excess' and 'insufficiency', while the study of aesthetics revealed the aspects of being accomplished (perfect) or unaccomplished, unfinished (imperfect) as determining factors. This discovery was all the more important as the aspectual categories concerned were not oppositive or binary but gradual. It was not a question of 'either or' but of 'more or less'.

While the new findings added to semiotic knowledge, they also challenged earlier notions including the logical bases of the elementary structure of signification. In 1983, Greimas wrote an article, 'Le Savoir et le Croire: un seul univers cognitif', in which he presented for the first time a semiotic square based on gradual transformation and not on contradiction and oppositive stages.⁷ In 1986, the second volume of *Sémiotique, dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* was published. It reflects both the large numbers of contributors now engaged in research and a science still in the process of being defined.

In his final years Greimas's semiotic concern focused on 'passions'

and the thymic sphere. No longer describing passions in terms of modal structures, he and his colleagues now embarked on re-interpreting them in aspectual terms and specific discursive sequences. Simultaneously, attempts were made to define deep-level aspectualities which concern specific valorizations.

Greimas died in 1992. We have only given a very brief outline of his semiotic investigations, and of what in Paris is called basic semiotic theory. The work is by no means completed and research is still in progress. Future findings, however, or even changes if necessary, will not be able to alter the description of the scientific project Greimas set for himself and for us, that is, the study of semiotics, defined as a 'théorie de la signification. Son souci premier sera d'expliciter, sous forme d'une construction conceptuelle, les conditions de la saisie et de la production de sens [...]'.⁸

Semiotics as a tool for analysis

What, then, is the semiotic approach? How does it work? Semiotics takes as its fundamental premise that there can be no meaning without difference. There can be no 'up' without 'down', no 'hot' without 'cold', no 'good' without 'evil'. As Greimas says,

We perceive differences and thanks to that perception, the world 'takes shape' in front of us, and for our purposes.

There are four basic principles on which the semiotic analysis of texts is based:

1. Meaning is not inherent in objects, objects do not signify by themselves. Meaning, rather, is constructed by what is known as a competent observer, i.e. by a subject capable of 'giving form' to objects. To give an example: confronted with an implement from a different culture, say African or Asian, we would probably be incapable of grasping its significance. However, left alone with it, we will give it a meaning that is based on what knowledge we have and what will suit our purpose.
2. Semiotics views the text, any text, as an autonomous unit, that is, one that is internally coherent. Rather than starting with ideas/meanings external to the text and showing how they are reflected within it, an approach that is still widely adopted in the academic

world, semiotic analysis begins with a study of the actual language and structures of the text, showing how meanings are constructed and, of course, at the same time what these meanings are. Semiotic analysis becomes, then, a discovery method and is clearly an invaluable tool for all those engaged in original research.

3. Semiotics posits that story structure or narrativity underlies all discourse, not just what is commonly known as a story. For instance, it underlies political, sociological and legal discourse. One can even go as far as to say that narrativity underlies our very concept of truth: recent studies in the field of legal discourse, for example, have shown that those witnesses in a law court whose account conforms most closely to archetypal story patterns are those whose version is most likely to be believed.
4. Semiotics posits the notion of levels of meaning: it is, for instance, the deep abstract level that generates the surface levels. A text must, therefore, be studied at these different levels of depth and not just at the surface level as is the case with traditional linguistics.

Keeping in mind these principles, semiotic analysis is aided further by *schemas* or *models* whose application contributes to decoding the meaning of texts. We will give a brief survey of the most important of these and explain how they relate to different textual levels.

The discursive level

The discursive level is a surface level of meaning or level of manifestation. Here we examine the specific words – or grammatical items/structures that are visible on the surface of the text. Most grammar teaching – and indeed textual analysis – has hitherto been concerned exclusively with this level. Key elements on this level are:

The *figurative* component: by this we mean all the elements in the text that refer to the external physical world. They are known as figures. Figurative reality, then, is that reality that can be apprehended by the five senses – vision, smell, hearing, taste and touch. It can be contrasted with the inner world of the conceptual abstract, that is the third and deep level of meaning.

To explore the figurative component we start with examining the vocabulary. We try to extract the most important lexical (semantic)