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Language and the game of chess

Saussure, Hjelmslev, Wittgenstein and Greimas

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Abstract: The comparison between a game, in particular the game of chess, and language, has a long tradition in philosophy and in language sciences. Greimas was thus following in the wake of his predecessors Saussure, Hjelmslev, and Wittgenstein when he put forward a semiotic view of this analogy. I shall review and comment on the texts of these three earlier thinkers as a way of introducing the views of Greimas and examining the shift in his thinking and the position he adopts. An interpretative reading of the brief article he devoted to the question enables us, moreover, to underline what the semiotic action of theorising language actually consisted of, in its method and epistemology, and also to show that underneath the demand for scientificity lies a “quête inquiète”¹ (unquiet quest) regarding the “paraître imparfait” (imperfect appearance) of meaning.

Keywords: language, game of chess, system, rules, (inter)action, communication

Résumé: L’analogie entre le jeu, plus particulièrement le jeu d’échecs, et le langage a une longue tradition en philosophie et dans les sciences du langage. Greimas s’est ainsi placé dans le sillage de ses prédécesseurs que sont Saussure, Hjelmslev et Wittgenstein pour avancer un point de vue sémiotique sur celle-ci. Nous reprenons et commentons les textes des trois premiers pour introduire la réflexion de Greimas et examiner le déplacement qu’il effectue et la position qu’il adopte. La lecture interprétative du bref article qu’il a consacré à la question nous permet par ailleurs de souligner ce que fut le geste sémiotique de théorisation du langage, dans sa méthode et son épistémologie, aussi de

¹ The expression belongs to Denis Bertrand, who very rightly states: “This is why the formalism of Greimas cannot be separated from an ethic. The articulation of significations is inseparable from an unquiet quest for meaning” (Bertrand 1993: 16).

montrer que l'exigence de scientificité est sous-tendue par une "quête inquiète"² sur le "paraître imparfait" du sens.

Mots-clés: langage, jeu d'échecs, système, règles, (inter)action, communication

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and find your bearings; you approach the same place from another side and no longer have your bearings.

–Wittgenstein (2004: 203)³

In a brief text called "A propos du jeu" (Greimas 1980), Greimas – following many other thinkers about language – restates the analogy between game and language. In so doing, he immediately places himself in the wake of Husserl, Saussure, Hjelmslev, and Wittgenstein and their reflections on language, with the game of chess as figurative model – a choice which he considers representative of "the deep episteme of the century." Introducing his subject, he declares that "reflecting on the game is, for me, to reflect on language and, more generally, on our way of being in the signifier world" (Greimas 1980: 29). I will consider three stages in this continuous thinking about game and language and three interpretations of the analogy by reading anew and commenting on Saussure, Hjelmslev and Wittgenstein: this will enable me to identify the way in which Greimas, in the wake of his predecessors, with them and in contrast to them, shifts the questioning by focusing on the players and on what is being played in the game of chess, in order to put his own semiotic imprint on the search for the meaning of meaning.

1 Saussure, Hjelmslev, Wittgenstein

1.1 Saussure

We know of two occasions in the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* [Course in General Linguistics] when language is compared to the game of chess. The first (Saussure 1971 [1916]: 124–129) is when Saussure establishes what he calls the "internal duality" of the value sciences, like economics and, at a level more

² L'expression est de Denis Bertrand, qui dit fort justement: "C'est ainsi que le formalisme de Greimas ne saurait être détaché d'une éthique. L'articulation des significations est inséparable d'une quête inquiète du sens" (Bertrand 1993: 16).

³ Our translation from the French edition (Wittgenstein 2004). French editions of works quoted have been used and translations of these are the translator's own.

demanding still, linguistics, in which value cannot be based on natural data, since language is “a system of pure values.” It is therefore essential, Saussure tells us, to divide linguistics in two, with on the one hand a synchronic linguistics, dealing with states of language, and on the other a diachronic linguistics for studying changes in state. Linguistic acts will be understood according to one or other of these viewpoints, the synchronic point of view being a necessary condition for the knowledge of language. He first makes the comparison between a state of language in synchrony and the projection of an object on a plane surface, which gives it a reality distinct from the object itself; the second comparison is between two ways of cutting the stem of a plant, one longitudinally and the other transversely. The second shows a perspective that is not observable in the first. In this way, Saussure “demonstrates both the autonomy and the interdependence of the synchronic and the diachronic” (Saussure 1971 [1916]: 124).

But of all the comparisons that might be imagined, the most conclusive is the one that might be drawn between the game of language and a session of chess. In both, we are confronted with a system of values and we witness their modifications. A session of chess is like an artificial realisation of what language presents us with in a natural form. (Saussure 1971 [1916]: 125)

The parallel is thus clearly set out: the value of a term depends on its position and its opposition to others; the state of the system is temporary; the rules of the game correspond to the “constant principles of semiology”; change operates on isolated elements; each change affects the whole system; only the state at a given moment counts; and he makes this observation: “Speech only ever operates on a state of language.” But, unlike the chess player, whose moves are intentional, for the language game “we would have to imagine an unconscious or unintelligent player” (Saussure 1971 [1916]: 127). Saussure repeats the comparison in the chapter “Identities, realities, values” (Saussure 1971 [1916]: 150–154), considering that the notions he questions – identity, reality, concrete entity – all come back to the issue of value. If a knight is missing in a game of chess, any other piece, however unlike it, may be substituted and the same value attributed to it. I will complete these retrospections with a quotation given in the Engler-Harrassovitz edition: “A language can only be compared to the *complete* idea of the chess game, involving both the *positions* and the *moves*; both the *changes* and the *states* in the sequence” (Engler and Harrassovitz 1974: 1489).

We should note first of all that Saussure’s comparison relates to a session of chess being played, not to the game as such, and to the “game of language.” The positions of the pieces on the 64 squares of the chess board at a given state of play

as the session progresses results from a series of moves: they are relative positions, more or less central and powerful in the game, and the value of each piece evolves according to changes in the configuration on the board. But whereas states of language, as they follow upon one another, are not finalized, the states of play in the chess game, where the possibilities of reconfiguration are defined with each move, are directed towards a final outcome, each player aiming to capture his rival's king. This current value, defined by position, depends on another, virtual, value, which is the one fixed by the rules: this is what determines how each piece behaves (movement across the chess board: direction or move, number of steps, jumping over or taking other pieces), or the "exchange value" of the piece according to Willems (1971). Each piece's value depends on the way it is allowed to behave, and it also has value in relation to the other pieces. This is why instructions for the game set out equivalent values between pieces: a knight is equal to three and a quarter pawns; a bishop is equal to three and a half pawns, and so on. "Each piece," says D. Willems, "is therefore part of two value systems: one on the paradigmatic axis, through its more or less powerful behaviour in relation to the other pieces, the other on the syntagmatic axis, through its position in relation to the opposing side, particularly in relation to the king" (Willems 1971: 95). There is also in chess a system of conventions for appreciating moves and positions (! = very good move, !! = remarkable move, ? = poor move, ?? = very bad move, ?! = move which merits attention, !? = brilliant move but its consequences have not been fully worked out, etc.).

We have gone from an opposition between synchrony and diachrony and between state of language and historic changes to an opposition between the two axes of association and combination of linguistic units. What does Saussure mean when he states that speech "operates" on a state of language? In the chapter on notions of identity, reality, and value, he questions the meaning of "synchronic identity," giving the example of words used in contexts which create a difference in meaning, or sometimes in realisation.

Each time I use the word *Gentlemen*, I renew its substance; it is a new phonic act and a new psychological act. The link between the two uses of the same word depends neither on material identity nor on exact sameness of meaning, but on elements which must be sought after and which will come very close to pinpointing the true nature of linguistic units. (Saussure 1971 [1916]: 152)

1.2 Hjelmslev

It is this search for a formal matrix that Hjelmslev takes upon himself, approaching the game as a semiotic structure, and restating Saussure's reference to the

game of chess. We might say that he determines in theory what remains undefined in Saussure's comparison when the latter says that rules, in the game of chess, correspond to the "constant principles of semiology" in language.

In one of the chapters of *Prolegomena*, speaking of "Language and non-language," he explains that the theory of natural language is applicable to all semiotic systems insofar as form, dissociated from substance, is similar to linguistic form, whose scale is of an "algebraic" nature, within the theoretical schema of linguistics. Recalling the semiological project of Saussure which, he explains, is conducted "on an essentially psychological and sociological basis," and mentioning the studies which have examined other sign systems than language, he says that Saussure:

outlines at the same time something which we can only understand as pure form, a conception of language as an abstract structure of transformations, which he explains from the basis of corresponding structures while recognising that the essential features of semiological structure, and perhaps all essential features, are to be found in the structures we call games; like, for example, the game of chess, to which he devotes particular attention. (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943]: 136)

It is this immanent point of view, which is also put forward by logicians for the study of language, that, according to Hjelmslev, will enable us to bring together a number of sciences around the project of a "general science of semiotics" to "create a general encyclopaedia of the structures of signs" (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943]: 137). In his reasoning to distinguish semiotics from non-semiotics and identify the place of games, he says that logicians have considered games, such as the game of chess, as a normative example-type of transformation system for what a semiotic is, whereas linguists have seen in games a value system analogous to languages, which are normative systems for defining games: the former exclude taking any account of content, or possible interpretations of the representational figures of games, while the latter, with Saussure, posit the bilateral nature of signs. Hjelmslev tells us that, for language theory, it is not necessary to incorporate the "*sense of the content*"; all that matters is the "*form of the content*" in interaction with the form of expression: "for calculating theory, there is no interpreted system, but only interpretable systems. There is therefore no difference on this point between pure algebra or the game of chess on the one hand and, for example, a language on the other" (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943]: 141). In order to decide whether or not we are dealing with a semiotic, we need to establish whether the system comprises two planes that do not conform to one another, or two conforming planes that can be reduced to a single one. This latter case is that of "pure games in which the interpretation finds a

magnitude of content corresponding to the magnitude of each expression (piece or other)” (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943]: 142). He concludes that the “logicists” have incorrectly generalized the mathematical or logical model of a monoplane semiotic, which does not correspond to a real semiotic structure. And he proposes naming these non-biplane interpretable structures “*systems of symbols*,” the symbols indicating “non-semiotic interpretable magnitudes.” “It would seem,” he says finally, “that there is an essential relationship between the interpretable pieces of a game and the isomorphic symbols, because none of them permits the subsequent analysis in representational figures that is characteristic of signs” (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943]: 143).

In his text on “Language and speech” (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943], Hjelmslev establishes a distinction between three meanings of language, which he names *schema* for language in its pure form, *norm* for the concrete form of language, and *usage* for language as a set of customs and habits. He puts forward the view that Saussure supports schema-language, and that this is the only meaning “which justifies the famous comparison with the game of chess, in which the concrete nature of the pieces remains unimportant, whereas their reciprocal position and their number are the only things that matter” (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943]: 83). As with the analogy made between linguistic magnitude and a silver coin, it is not the logical, mathematical value that justifies the comparison but “*the exchange value of economic science*,” the form playing the part of constant and the substance (such as a coin or note) containing the variables, which have changing values, “just as a sound or a meaning can change in value, which is to say in their interpretation in relation to different schemas” (Hjelmslev 1971 [1943]: 85).

Thus the values are variable – norm and usage for language presupposes a constant, which is the schema for language. We can further illuminate this concept by reference to the history of the game of chess, in which the values of the pieces have been able to change without bringing into question the structure and fundamental principles of the game as such: its schema.⁴ The

4 It is thought that

the present game ... emerged from a game which appeared in India around 570 A.D.... Called *chaturanga* (‘game of the four kings’), it was played over $8 \times 8 = 64$ squares, between four adversaries, each playing for himself and possessing a ship, a horse, an elephant, a king, and four pawns. The players took it in turns to play, a throw of the dice indicating the piece they were obliged to move, although the choice of the square could be made by them after due reflection. After a few years, the dice (and, consequently, the role played by chance) disappeared, the players started to play in pairs, then put their pieces side by side, and eventually each side came under the direction of a single player. (Le Lionnais and Péchiné 2015)

question is to know what changes are possible within the boundaries of this schema and on the basis of what modification the schema of the game must be rethought, possibly moving on to another form of game.

1.3 Wittgenstein

This question is connected to the division between constitutive rules and regulative rules,⁵ which is to say the rules which define and create the game and the rules for usage. According to Wittgenstein “A person who, when cooking, follows other rules than the right ones, cooks badly; but the person who follows other rules than those of the game of chess plays a different game” (Wittgenstein 1970: 90). What would be the constitutive rules of a language, those which condition its game, if what we mean by this is usages or uses, terms favoured by Wittgenstein, and for which we use the word “meaning” to signify the uses of a word in language?⁶

Games, and more particularly the game of chess, is very much part of this philosopher’s thinking and helps him cast light on what a language rule is. He remarks that the act of showing someone a chess piece such as the King, while saying “This is the King” does not explain its use unless the person already knows the rules of the game and has learnt them without ever having seen the objects that are the pieces. He also imagines the case of someone who has learnt to play, through observation, without having learnt the rules and without ever having formulated them, and to whom the piece is shown under an unusual guise, but still with the words “This is a King.” Here too, according to Wittgenstein, the explanation for its use is only of any worth if the person has already mastered the game.

The first case involves knowledge gained by explicitly learning the rules, without the pieces and even without a real chess board, with for example the so-called algebraic notation of the squares on the chess board (Latin letters for the

The game spread in several directions and the moves of some pieces underwent certain changes, until “apart from a few details, all the really important rules of the game (including the optional move forward of the pawns, capturing en passant, promotion and castling) were acquired by the late fifteenth century” (Le Lionnais and Péchiné 2015).

⁵ A distinction made by Searle in *Speech Acts*.

⁶ “43. For a *wide* category of cases in which it is used – but not for *all* – the word ‘meaning’ can be explained in the following way: The meaning of a word is its use in language” (Wittgenstein 2004: 50).

columns and numbers for the rows), each piece being named by a symbol (first letter of the name: K, Q, R, B, N) and the moves of each piece visualised by cross-ruled diagrams and marks for the possible movements, with the moves (steps and taking of other pieces) explained and shown on the paper. This knowledge would be completely theoretical. But if these examples are transposed to language, the act of presenting an unknown word in its concrete form to the speaker of a language, even while saying “this is a word of the language,” does not explain the use of this word. The speaker can at the most agree to recognize it as a word, of which he only perceives the figure without being able to conceive of its signifying form. It would be the same in the second case, for someone who had learnt the language without explicitly being taught, by means of what is called linguistic immersion. Hjelmslev, following Saussure, perceives the semiotic system of language as a system of relationships. This conception fits perfectly with the game as a structure, as defined by the philosopher Colas Duflo in his essay on games:

The object of play is therefore not defined by its imaginary content, nor by its materiality, but by the

rule that this imaginary content and this materiality embody. In the system of rules of a game, which form a structure, it is its position which indicates it ... The structural position is primary in relation to the objects which occupy it (in a way, the player himself occupies a structural position). (Duflo 1997: 115)

Wittgenstein’s questioning about the rule shifts the problem of structure to activity and to the situations in which the activity is exercised. If the grammar of a language is the complete system of constitutive rules defining it, when determining what it is possible to say in a sensible way in this language, the rules are functional and the grammar is a grammar of usage. Wittgenstein’s conception of grammar is worthy of note, since it indicates that to speak is to engage in an activity, guided by rules, according to a linguistic practice. The reference to the game of chess, which begins with the comparison to axiomatic games, leads to a differentiation between the language of the game and mathematical language in the way they are applied and in their relations to other activities. The philosopher became increasingly interested in linguistic activities, which were part of “forms of life”; he therefore made a list of examples of speech acts considered as “language games”: giving orders or acting on orders, describing a perceived object, recounting an event, putting forward a hypothesis, inventing a story, resolving a mystery, making a joke ..., or perhaps: translating a language, thanking, swearing, greeting, praying ..., but also other acts: creating a drawing according to instructions, representing the results of an experiment by a diagram, resolving an arithmetical problem ... In using the term “language game”

(*Sprachspiel*) Wittgenstein seeks above all to show the diversity of our language games in linguistic practices, these being part of a whole set of practices belonging to a linguistic community, which he calls a “form of life” (*Lebensform*). In this, the language game is not like the game of chess. The language game as a whole is defined as “the whole formed by language and the activities with which it is intertwined” (Wittgenstein 2004: 31). By focusing on “language games,” Wittgenstein has highlighted the interactions at play in language and thus emphasized its pragmatic dimension, “over and against the tendency,” says the philosopher of usages Jean-Pierre Cometti, “to detach meaning from it, either by elevating it to the status of a mysterious entity or subordinating it to rules which are immanent to the working of the mind or of language itself” (Cometti 2011).

2 And Greimas

Greimas takes up the broad outlines of the parallelism laid down by Saussure and Hjelmslev, who provided the means to define structurally what a system of signs is, by making the players themselves figures identified with the figures of the game (pieces and positions in the regulated system of the game). Returning to this structuralist point in time, which produced “The image of a society made up of disembodied and personalised figures,” he shifts the set of problems by turning his attention towards the players to try and understand “what is happening ... inside their ‘heads’,” taking care to explain that this form of understanding must be considered as “preconditions” or “logical presuppositions conditioning their logical movements” (Greimas 1980: 30). In accordance with semiotic epistemology, conceptualization therefore deals with the conditions for possibilities of what makes sense, leaving aside any realist or ontological interpretation.

Starting from the game’s dual dimension – restrictive rules and free action for playing within the space/time defined by the rules – the semiotician’s reflection is directed by a questioning of the modes of action and communication between players: the persuasion, the cunning and the pretence, on what is played out under the visible signs, which turns out to be a questioning of meaning and its guises.

2.1 Strategy and deception

The game of the players is a game of action and interaction. Before engaging in a session, each player has knowledge of the rules – the basic skills – which is matched by knowledge of the game, by virtue of experience. During the session, he will

develop knowledge of the game being played, as it progresses, as well as knowledge of the opposing player. Greimas tells us that this is “skill in interpreting the interlocutor’s performance” so as to link up the moves into so many “effective acts-utterances.” “Syntagmatic intelligence” and intellectual empathy with the other player, in an intersubjective relationship of reciprocal supposition of intentions, determine the game as strategy, with actors who mutually capture one another according to their modal skills (knowing/wanting/being able to do). This is how the shifting of the pieces across the chess board comes no longer to be seen solely as a series of moves and positions, changes of configuration in the system, with so many “abstract actants,” but as “programmed discursive actions,” depending on the sequences of actions carried out and on the actions planned, for players who are “‘historic’ subjects.” But the strategy is not limited to a programme of direct and efficient actions to achieve the desired aim; it also operates through detours and manipulation of the opposing programme, through a “faire-faire” [making the opponent act] and a “faire-croire” [making him believe], “a second-degree cognitive activity, a game of pretence and cunning.” The “programming, interpretative and persuasive action” of the player can then become a model for developing, over and above the system of the game, “a cognitive organization ... based on a typology of skills and their interactions” (Greimas 1980: 31).

Greimas replaces the game session itself – “the *hic and nunc*” of the session as he calls it – at the center of the semiosis of the game, and thus of language, in its historicity and its diachrony, the players being endowed with an understanding of the game that goes beyond simple awareness of the system: it is the language of the speaking subject according to the Saussurean view; or to take account of a certain usage of the schema in Hjelmslevian terms; or, again, to consider the session as a language game, if we wish to follow Wittgenstein.

Herman Parret, in his text introducing a collection of tributes to Greimas (Parret and Ruprecht 1985), strongly emphasized that subjectivity, in its rational and intentional components, can only be reconstructed, for a practical semiotic, as a modal skill or the driving force for a programme of action. Intentionality must be separated from any psychological and ontological determination; the “being-directed-towards-the-world” of phenomenology then becomes an actor whose action is motivated and finalised in a trajectory, between a before and an after, and whose subjective state, in his knowing-what-to-do, is a tension between being-able-to-act and wanting-to-act. Since subjectivity cannot be directly analysed in discourse where it is stated syntagmatically, it will be catalyzed (Hjelmslev) through an explanation of what is elliptical (subjectivity in its enunciation), that is to say through an interpreting procedure based on what is manifested contextually.

During the course of his development, Greimas made an excursus into the world of information technology by speaking of the artificial intelligence of computers that, although algorithms can be implemented giving second-degree programmatic power (the player's pretending), can always be overtaken by the player's capacity for reflexivity, elevated to a higher level of power (pretending to be pretending). It should be pointed out here that the history of chess automation does not involve simply teaching the calculator, from a given position, the tree of variables to determine the correct moves; this would require an immense number of possibilities starting from the initial position. More economic programmes have been developed to include a certain number of basic principles, and a pairing has been made between programmes and databases of recorded and analysed parts, which are growing all the time. Computers can also now correct their own errors. And if the analytical capacity of machines allows cheating, this is with the collusion of humans, as a player with an electronic earpiece can communicate with a partner responsible for analysing the game in progress on a computer!

2.2 Feigning and fiction

Furthermore, Greimas replaces interaction, in the game and language, in the context of communication, which is concerned not to tell the truth about the state of things but to defeat and persuade, in a struggle for recognition. The "analogical reasoning which uses the model of the game" allows communication to be highlighted, in the dialogue between subjects, no longer as a codified exchange for making-known, but as "a confrontation between wants and powers; more than for expressing truths and untruths, communication submits to the principle of efficiency" (Greimas 1980: 32). In the same period, this pragmatic tendency of semiotics is proclaimed in a significant turn of phrase by Eric Landowski who, translating Austin's title *How to do things with words* into French used the term "Quand faire croire, c'est faire faire" [When to make someone believe is to make them act] (Landowski 1983: 16), thus putting the truthfulness modality at the center of a semiotic of action.

During the 1980s, Greimas also turned to the theory of language acts (Greimas 1983),⁷ recognizing its contribution to a theorising of communication based on a "grammar of significant actions and interactions" and for a general theory of language postulating the complementarity and entanglement of

⁷ Paper written for the symposium *Semiotics and Pragmatics* organized by Gérard Deledalle at the University of Perpignan, in 1983.

syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic relationships. Just as he is interested in the decoys and trompe-l'oeil effects displayed by players, he accepts, in the work on Anglo-Saxon pragmatics, the untruthful artifice of discourse:

one of the recent discoveries of pragmatics appears to be that of the indirect and prevaricating nature of discourse. This can only gladden the hearts of Europeans who, well before Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, saw in language not a cloak, somewhat modulated by the values of truth and the reality of things, but a web of lies and a tool of social manipulation. (Greimas 1983: 7)

In the tradition of these predecessors, Greimas does not only say that a game session is the actualization of the game structure as a system of relationships and that the various series of moves and sequences obey the schema that organizes syntagmatic succession: structural creativity. Nor does he develop this idea of a formalization of the game structure's productivity, in this case the game of chess, which is habitually presented as a game with complete and finished information; that is to say a game in which each person knows what his possibilities for action are, as well as knowing the possible actions of the others and the possible outcomes, and supposes that the other is a rational player in whose place he can put himself. He takes for granted the modal competence of the player in an agonistic space where everyone exerts a power of persuasion over the other. His thinking about the dual game in action as a mode of communication is close to the games analyses which talk of "réflexion rusée" [cunning reflection] (Thom) and the qualitative extent of the game's tendencies, together with the element of uncertainty in subjective interpretation, and taking account of the lived experience of the game in its temporality and in an inter-subjective relationship. Beginning with the game's contract, when the decision is made to play, the relationship between the players changes into a calculated effort to reduce the opponent's freedom to their own advantage – this is done by means of an art of the opportune moment (*kairos*), which demands prudence (*phronesis*) and cunning (*metis*).

Greimas even goes so far as to think of the manipulative sequences of the player designed to foil the antagonist's arguments, by cunning tactics, as a way of attaining a form of incommunicability by making himself incomprehensible. The pretence, the feigning to act in order to make the other person act, by ensnaring the other in the net of false appearances, then connects up with the fictional *as if*, the art of simulating and dissimulating; the two words 'feinte' [feign] and 'fiction' [fiction] have a shared etymology, the Latin *fingere* meaning 'to fashion, to shape, to mould; to imagine; to invent falsely.' And this figurative language which does not say what it seems to be, according to Greimas, "the outline of a second language." Whereupon, he declares: "Efficiency linked to

incommunicability and to figurative representation; these are some characteristics that the game of chess – but other games too – share with poetic language” (Greimas 1980: 32).

2.3 Appearance and meaning

Semiotic thinking, in its refusal of all realism and ontology, leads to a horizontal conception of discourse, like a sequencing of actions, when it concerns interaction between subjects and a ‘faire transformateur’ [transforming doing]; or else a vertical conception, like a superposition of signifying layers, when it concerns the poetization of discourse. This depth can itself give rise to a syntactical display, in formal schematization. If the task of theorising is to devise semblances of the semblances that are texts, the question of experience arises and of what theoretical discourse has to say about this, genuinely or probably, depending on the option chosen; this question is put in Greimas’s most Barthesian essay: *De l'imperfection* (1987). The “aesthetic capture,” as a “particular journey of the subject,” whose appearance is described by the author through his reading of literary texts, is a crossing through this “screen of appearing” that is figurative representation. It is also an elementary syntax and comes about through the union of the perceiving subject and the object perceived. Greimas, in his quest for meaning, then wonders what aestheticized semblances of literature are able to tell us about real human experience, insofar as they can be considered as discursive models: “A question of method that semiotics constantly asks itself, and that it experiences with lucidity” (Greimas 1987: 72). The question should therefore be matched by another question about the credibility of the semiotic model of these discursive models. In his epistemology, Greimas accords prevalence to the criterion of internal coherence of theory over and above the criterion of appropriateness to the object of study. And he approaches phenomena through their “how,” not for what they are, their “essence,” by constructing the conditions of possibilities of meaning, and the route by which these are generated, always on the lookout for what is hidden under the signs.⁸

The Greimas of the imperfection of appearances, the displacement of meaning that is “nevertheless part of our human condition” and who is watching out

⁸ Greimas speaks of his “discovery” that it was necessary to go beyond the surface level of signs and sense, which are not relevant to the understanding of phenomena, in the answers he gives to the questions asked during the symposium devoted to him at the Cultural center of Cerisy-la-Salle in 1983. See Michel Arrivé and Jean-Claude Coquet (1987: 302–330).

for a tear in “this smokescreen,” speaks to us of Nietzsche’s philosophy of language (1973),⁹ declaring that it is the art of dissimulation that dominates in humans; that only appearance is accessible; that deviation is the condition of meaning; that words, which cannot be descriptions corresponding to realities, are merely metaphorical transpositions of intuitive impressions; that language draws its restricting power from convention, like money, and that it is first and foremost *pathos*: perception, passion, affect. There is no accurate perception, in other words no appropriate expression of an object in the subject; there is only an *aesthetic relationship* between the sphere of the subject and the sphere of the object: “that is to say, in my view” says Nietzsche, “an approximative transposition, a stuttering translation into a completely foreign language” (Nietzsche 1973: 18). It is interesting to point out that the philosopher avoids using the word ‘phenomenon’ (*phainoménon*, *Erscheinung*), preferring the word ‘appearance’ (*Schein*). The will to turn the images into schemas and to create concepts is the responsibility of humans:

In the domain of these schemas, it is possible to succeed in what was always impossible while in thrall to intuitive first impressions: to build a logical pyramid ordered according to divisions and degrees, to introduce a new world of laws, priorities, subordinations and demarcations, which would then be opposed to the other world, the intuitive world of first impressions, as being better established, more general, better known, more human and, for this reason, like a regulating and binding authority. (Nietzsche 1973: 15)

There is therefore in humans a force which drives them towards concepts: “the concept – hard as bone and cubic as a dice and, like this, interchangeable” (Nietzsche 1973: 15). Note that Greimas, emphasising the importance of figurative models like the game of chess when developing theories of language, states that he was guided by the one he found in Merleau-Ponty, namely the cube, a stable object which was identical on each of its different sides: “Here” he adds, “is a good definition of discourse as an autonomous object – outside of the text, no salvation!” (Greimas 1987: 311) Discourse exists as text, as a semiotic object, whose existence is “pure ideality.”

2.4 Freedom with conditions

Starting from the principle that any injunctive system, operating by prescription, leaves room for what is not forbidden and not prescribed, Greimas, in a final

⁹ See in particular, to back up this reference and echoing Greimas’s comments, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vérité et mensonge au sens extra-moral* (1973) [On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense].

section of his text on games, makes a connection between the notion of the game as a play activity organized by rules, and another meaning of the word “play” – “free and easy movement of an object in a space.” This definition is taken from the list in the dictionary *Le Petit Robert*: “Mouvement aisé, régulier d’un objet, d’un organe, d’un mécanisme” [Free, regular movement of an object, an organ, a mechanism]. The system has play in that it provides a space for play, giving “aisance” [ease] to the player. Greimas thus makes a connection with the state of being at ease, associated with the freedom of feeling oneself without hindrance or constraint. He proceeds to map out a syntax of transformation of the subject’s states when, faced with a ‘faire’ [to do] according to injunctions F1 and a ‘faire’ according to the free positions of system F2 (we should note that the etymology of *aise* [ease] comes from the popular Latin *adjacens*: an empty space next to someone), he has the possibility of moving from one to the other. The subject then finds himself in an operational state giving rise to a P1 passionate state, the feeling of being at ease, which itself has a rebound effect on the ‘faire’, optimising it and leading to a P2 passionate state. This is confirmed by dictionaries, which define ease as “épanouissement de joie” [peak of joy] (*Le Petit Robert* says “contentement, joie” [contentment, joy], as used for example in the expressions “combler, remplir d’aise” [to satisfy, to fill with ease]).

Greimas’s semantic exercise is brief and, above all, passes too quickly over the specific nature of the freedom induced by games, the freedom of play, which Cola Duflo calls the “legaliberty” inherent to games, defining it as follows: “The game is the invention of a freedom in and through a legality” (Duflo 1997: 57). The freedom granted by games is not a freedom won in the margins, between prescriptions and interdictions; it is regulated negatively and the player cannot do other than what the rules give him the freedom to do. The completely theoretical situation described by Greimas is one where the player whose freedom to choose and to decide what action to take, and the pleasure he derives from this, are determined by the legal framework of the game. The space of the game is a set of latitudes (Latin *latitudo*: “largeur; faculté, pouvoir d’agir, librement” [breadth; ability, power to act freely]). The player has all latitude to act, within the limits of what the rules allow him to do. And the aim of the game of chess is to gradually reduce the opponent’s area of latitude, by progressively closing up the game. “To allow” then becomes equivalent to “making possible” and it is the entire set of rules which creates the possibility of playing chess.

The fact that people can, while held within a system of constraints, move about with ease and even flourish there, leads to Greimas’s final remark: “Language is perhaps not entirely a prison without gates, as certain people claim” (Greimas 1980: 34). This phrase “as certain people claim,” which closes the text, alerts the reader’s attention and provokes a question. What springs to

mind is the most contemporary and the closest of semiotic thinkers – in the distance taken after his initial period of apprenticeship –, Roland Barthes, with his inaugural lecture for the chair of literary semiology at the Collège de France given in 1971. In this lecture, he gives his judgment on the “fascism” of language: “But language, like the performance of all speech, is neither reactionary nor progressive: it is quite simply fascist; for fascism is not preventing someone from speaking, it is forcing them to speak” (Barthes 1978: 14). Assertion and repetition are synonymous with subservience to an order – the Latin *ordo* means “both apportionment and commination” Barthes reminds us – to the legislative order of speech of which language is the code. The system of rules of grammar, syntactical and morphological, is a form of alienation. Barthes sees language as a “closed door.” There is only one way out, and that is through literature, “That salutary cheating, that sidestep, that magnificent illusion, which allows language to be heard outside of power, in the splendour of a permanent revolution of speech” One of the strengths of literature, its semiotic strength, is “to *play* the signs” (Barthes 1978: 28). And semiology, at that point in the Barthesian adventure, is marked by a return to the text (Text), which works by a “movement of *mirage*,” over and against – and it is Nietzsche who is quoted – “this pressure to form concepts, types, aims, laws ... this world of identical cases” (Barthes 1978: 34).

Thus we have, unexpectedly, made Greimas and Barthes come together in Nietzsche – a strange coincidence for two such divergent voices, but ones which demonstrate the same attention and passion for the text. Barthes’ “negative” semiology will not therefore be scientific; without positivities, it is said to be “*apophantic*” (Nietzsche again). And this definition echoes Greimas’s “smokescreeen”: “I would willingly called ‘semiology’ the course of operations along which it is possible – even expected – to play with the sign as with a painted screen, or perhaps with a fiction” (Barthes 1978: 39–40). The method to follow, to break free of the power of the concept, is that of “*excursion*.”

The expression “language prison” is, moreover, sometimes used to refer to what is called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and to mean that a language carves up and analyses reality according to categories imposed upon thought which constitute a world view. Attributed to Nietzsche, it would appear to come from an incorrect English translation of the German aphorism: “Wir hören auf zu denken, wenn wir es nicht in dem sprachlichen Zwange tun wollen, wir langen gerade noch bei dem Zweifel an, hier eine Grenze als Grenze zu sehn,” which can be translated as: “We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation” (Nietzsche 1968: 283). But another translation has replaced

“constraint of language” by “prison house of language,” repeated by Fredric Jameson in the title of his book, which was widely commented on at the time it appeared: *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (1972). This matter of translation would be of little relevance to our commentary if it were not that, in the conclusion to his work, Jameson criticises the inability of structuralism to treat the signified as other than a signifier. He nevertheless perceives a way out of this dilemma in Greimas’s definition of meaning as the possibility of transcoding. The Greimassian approach appears to him to introduce a dynamic and liberating quality into structural analysis, by making this into a new type of hermeneutics: “Only thus can Structuralism free itself from the ‘prison house of language’: it is only, it seems to me, at the price of such a development, that the twin, apparently incommensurable, demands of synchronic analysis and historical awareness, of structure and self-consciousness, language and history, can be reconciled” (Jameson 1972: 16).

In his paper delivered to the symposium on Greimas, in 1983, Herman Parret made transcoding, understood as a transposition, the condition for possibility of meaning, or rather of meaning captured in its articulation, the meaning of meaning, by distinguishing between discursive form-giving transposition: the paraphrase; semiotic form-giving transposition: description; and scientific form-giving transposition: metalanguage. And he specifies semiotic discourse, epistemologically, as a “*descriptive transposition* projecting a *depth-identification*.” This depth-identification, characteristic of semiotics, describes research, in crossing over surfaces, as identity relationships, by isomorphism. We see here Greimas’s semiotic activity in action, scrutinizing the underside of appearances to construct models, at varying levels of depth, articulated along the way, in the expectation of a “completed conceptual theory” of semiosis, at the moment, he said, when it reaches the “surface of surfaces,” textualisation. And he pointed to two means of reaching this point: “mathematisation” and “linguistisation” (Greimas: 329).

3 Concluding remarks

I should first point out that in the texts we have looked at we have gone from speech to language and from language to speech acts and discourse, without these distinctions really being explained; whereas the analogy with the game of chess varies in its interpretation depending on which one of these is being

referred to. Greimas's approach, based on the "Saussurean postulate of a structured world whose meaning can be captured" (Greimas 1956: 193), evolved from a widening of the linguistic object of study, embracing "all the systems of signifiers, as long as they are presented as relational hierarchized structures," as declared in his presentation in the journal *Langages*, when it was founded in 1966.¹⁰ Returning, in 1983, to the distance covered by semiotics, he reminds us that it is always a question of attaining the logical-semantic level of speech, which organizes surface discursive manifestations. The semiotician's task is therefore, as the epistemologist Jean Ladrière says in relation to philosophical discourse, to capture and make intelligible, throughout its whole development, the articulations of meaning already present, and enveloped, in the reality of phenomena. But unlike philosophy, which might be ontological or realist, semiotics does not claim to reconstruct a reality other than that of the signifier world structured in the semiotic system that it develops – a system that "appears as the display of what, in its initial phase, imparted itself only in unmanifested form, as a potentiality seeking to become reality" (Ladrière 2015). The aspects of the signification process that the system proposes to represent are expressed in categories, organized in relation to one another and defined by their mutual connections. In the analysis, the operation of crossing surfaces in depth is transposed into a concatenation, the logical form of semiotic thought. This is how, in the game of chess, the series of moves and structural changes of position, showing the strategy of the players and the complex thinking in the game at several levels of interpretation, presents itself as a sequence of cognitive and affective states schematized by a transformational route. We are then able to reverse the analogy and say that it is the figurative model of the game of chess that reflects the semiotic model of language.

If Greimas was fixated on the representational figures of the square and the cube, other language scholars have been captivated by different figures, like for example the shunting yard, for René Thom (1990) or, close to this, the forked path for Antoine Culioli (Ducard 2006), or perhaps the rhizome for Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari 1976). What do these similarities of choice tell us? Probably something about what unites movement, imagination, and conceptualization¹¹ in the creation of theoretical discourses.

10 The journal *Langages* was created in 1966 by R. Barthes, J. Dubois, A.-J. Greimas, B. Pottier and B. Quemada, and published by Larousse.

11 I allude here to the distinction made by François Rastier between three levels of practice: the (re)presentational level, the semiotic level, and the physical (pheno-physical) level and three means of objectivation for each level: imagination, formulation, and movement (Rastier 2001).

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