

From fundamental semantics to a semiotics of cultures

Peter Stockinger

Equipe Sémiotique Cognitive et Nouveaux Médias (ESCoM)

Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (MSH)

54, Bd. Raspail – 75006 Paris

email : stock@msh-paris.fr

web site : <http://www.semionet.com>

Content

- 1) THE GENERATIVE MODEL**
- 2) DISCOURSE PRODUCTION AND UNDERSTANDING : A TRIPLE DISTINCTION**
- 3) GREIMAS ON FUNDAMENTAL SEMANTICS**
- 4) FUNDAMENTAL SEMANTICS AND BASIC VALUES**
- 5) “FUNDAMENTAL SEMANTICS” AND “CULTURAL PATTERNS”**
- 6) TYPES OF CULTURAL PATTERNS**
- 7) FUNDAMENTAL SEMANTICS AND THEMATIC STANDARD**
- 8) CULTURE AND GENRE**
- 9) CULTURE AND “UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE”**
- 10) UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE AND GENRE**
- 11) SEMIOTICS OF CULTURES**

1) The generative model

The generative model (G.M.) in Greimas' theory of meaning

- the generative model (G.M.) is the model of reference that is supposed to be able to describe (to « simulate ») the production (« constitution ») of a discourse as well as its reception (and comprehension)

the G. M. is constituted by two major components and two principal layers

- the syntactic and semantic component
- the semio-narrative and discursive layers

The semio-narrative layer itself is divided in two more specific layers –

- ⇒ the so called “fundamental” layer and
- ⇒ the narrative layer

- very different « influences » that have led to this generative model

2) Discourse production and understanding : a triple distinction -

- the “**univers of discourse**” and which is prior to a concrete, realised discourse or text (lato sensu)
- on the one hand a **class** of discourses belonging, for instance, to a genre, a – broadly speaking – textual genre
- and on the other hand the internal organisation of a given, **particular discourse** by itself

⇒ This distinction is conceptualised, in Greimas’ theory of meaning by the means of the triple distinction between (in the terminology of Greimas and Courtés) :

- the level of fundamental semantics (and syntax)
- the level of narrative semantics (and syntax)
- the discourse level strictly speaking

Fundamental semantics and syntax, broadly speaking, covers – following Greimas and Courtés – the knowledge and values of a culture (and/or human culture by itself) to which belongs a universe of discourse (or which constitutes a universe of discourse) as well as their classifications and hierarchizations.

Narrative semantics and syntax, broadly speaking, covers typical, recurrent configurations (“narrative topics”, “common places”, “...”) that characterise a genre, a textual genre – or again the genre “by itself” considered as a means or resource for producing, developing “(rhetorical) devices”, for communicating them and for interpreting them..

Discursive semantics and syntax (or discourse semantics) concerns – so to speak – the capacity, the skills – of a discourse producer (the speaker, the writer, ...) and a discourse interpreter (the “reader”, the “spectator”, ...) to realize a specific message, out from the culturally pre-existing elements such as narrative topics, plans, and so on.

3) Greimas on fundamental semantics

there are at least two different interpretations:

a) collectively shared (« cultural ») topics (« épistémés », « value systems », « codes » in the sense of Eco...)

b) the supposed basic semantic categories of human perception and culture such as « life/dead » and « nature/culture », etc.

- first interpretation: is very similar to assumptions made in other disciplines (cultural anthropology, sociology, cognitive science, psychology, ...):

the production of messages (discourses, ...) and their interpretation presupposes « knowledge » or « values » that are compatible with these messages otherwise no (“good”) production nor (« good ») interpretation would be possible

- notion of « cultural competence » (in analogy to a linguistic competence)

“competence” :

⇒ specific to a collective actant (a social organisation, a community, a profession, ...)

⇒ the cultural competence “as such”

4) Fundamental semantics and basic values

second interpretation : “fundamental” in the sense that there exist supposed knowledge and values that are shared by the human species, so to speak :

examples :

- opposition of life and death, culture and nature producing a plethora of “derived” values and figures,
- the “pre-newtonian” physics which corresponds more or less to our daily life physics with the different basic elements,
- basic (“pragmatic”) values corresponding to common needs : food, clothing, reproduction, ...
- etc.

Problem concerning the existence of a “fundamental figurativity”, of basic figures based on :

- human phenomenology and also
- human ethology and ecology
- qualitative physics, etc.

Cf. Greimas on the macro-semiotics of the “natural world”

- But in its « standard » formulation, « fundamental semantics » (2nd interpretation) is yet too general, too « philosophical »
- it doesn't yet really integrate the insights of other disciplines concerning such crucial questions as basic values, fundamental figurativity, etc.

Example:

Oppositions such as

« life/death » or
« nature/culture »

are only « labels or « names » but not yet descriptions or theories.

That is:

« behind » these labels are « hidden » cultural, historical , group specific, more or less fundamental (« anthropological ») assumptions and visions of « life » and « death », « nature » and « culture »

5) “Fundamental semantics” and “cultural patterns”

⇒ “Fundamental semantics” – 1st interpretation :

⇒ “Fundamental” means here more peculiarly : the description of “pre-existing”, pre-supposed knowledge and values

⇒ pre-existing or presupposed with respect, especially, to the activities of discourse production and interpretation.

⇒ Greimas and Courtés speak of the “*tacit contract*” between the producer and the speaker; the (mutually) pre-supposed knowledge and values.

⇒ This may be, for instance, interpreted in the sense of Goffman’s socio-linguistic **presupposition**

⇒ pre-supposed knowledge and values :

- “*common culture*”
- “*tradition*” (“horizon” of a culture, in the sense of Schütz)

⇒ fundamental semantics in the sense

- is the study of culture, of cultural patterns
- is concerned with culture constituting, maintaining, evolving, ... patterns or schemas (likely in anthropology; cf. R. Benedict, Goodenough, C. Lévi-Strauss)

6) Types of cultural patterns

In the specialised literature : different sorts of such patterns :

- “themata” in science in the sense of Holton
- “(theoretical) paradigm” in the sense of Kuhn
- “episteme” in the sense of Foucault delineating a specific discursive “positivity”
- “basic skills” of a metier, of a profession
- “basic values” in modern political systems (“Grundgesetz”)
- “stereotypes”, “clichés”
- “topoi” or common places

Example : « common places »

- topoi (common places) in classical rhetorics constitute kinds of « cultural » or more specialized knowledge or value system in which the speaker seeks a subset of themes which are particularly relevant for his purposes.
- cf. the « loci » in the Latin European Literature described and systematized by Curtius (« locus amoenus », « puer senex » « adunata » (« impossibilia »), ...)

7) Fundamental semantics and thematic standard

Important: such patterns are *loci* of knowledge and values to which **refer** a “community” (a collective actant, in the much more neutral terminology of Greimas)

Such patterns : “**standards**”, “**rules**” that are followed by people and that allow people to expect a given behaviour, doing of other people as well as to sanction accomplished actions, doings, behaviours, and so on.

Note :

- obvious relationship here with the semiotics of manipulation, action and sanction, with the **narrative schema**
- cf. Greimas : the narrative schema as a model for reading the “**sense of the life**”
- Here : the narrative schema a kind of a model for describing cultural facts, social **events**, etc.

a standard (rule) is a. cognitive resource (knowledge, skill, ... but also value) by the means of one "behaves" in an "appropriated (allowed, expected, accepted, ...)" manner with respect to a given cultural framework constituting a collective actant

⇒ **standard (technically speaking) :**

- **thematic configurations (schemas, scripts, scenarios)** by the means of which a community qualifies (evaluates, describes, interprets or again compares) situations, objects, histories, but also texts and other intellectual constructions.
- « thematic configuration » is an expression of Husserl and Schütz and means, grosso modo, the creation and fixation of a frame or a framework (a « vision ») for practical or theoretical purposes
- components of a thematic configuration:
 - themes (« semes »,)
 - thematic relations (i.e. relations between themes)
 - referents (i.e. the « objects », « situations », « histories », ... to which refers a theme or thematic configuration)
 - a « contexte » (of validity)
 - finally: a theme = condensed thematic configuration (i.e. a theme can be unfolded in a configuration)

- a thematic configuration is submitted to the **3 principles**:

- 1) **classificational** principle
- 2) **functional** or “narrative” principle
- 3) **statutory** or **contractual** principle

I) the classificational principle

- a thematic configuration identifies and categorizes (« qualifies ») situations, objects, histories, intellectual constructions, and so on

II) the functional or narrative principle

- ia thematic configuration is a « standardized » (more or less complex, more or less adaptable) solution for a class of problems (cognitive, practical, communicational, ...)

III) the contractual or statutory principle

- it is a « standard » : « norm », « law », « habitudes », ... which has a « contractual » (« communitarian ») value
- but is fallible, it is controverse, normally negociable, more or less valide; there are different, concurrent references, standards, « normes », ...:

8) Culture and genre

⇒ diversity of types of culture or cultural styles : popular culture, scientific culture, sub-culture, daily life culture, national culture, etc etc.

⇒ In a certain sense, these types of cultures : types of standards and languages producing and **allowing** specific forms of discourses or discourse types, i.e. genres, textual genres.

⇒ Well known, naturally, media culture with its more or less specific genres.

⇒ But also similar observations concerning any type of cultures

⇒ A culture by itself is a genre :

a social life genre, a “pattern” of how to lead and to accomplish a social life

⇒ cf. narrativity and the construction, organisation, comprehension and manipulation of the social world (Greimas, Schütz, Ricoeur)

9) Culture and “universe of discourse”

⇒ universe of discourse :

constitutes means to produce a concrete discourse, to interpret a discourse and to judge a discourse with respect to its “conformity” to a given cultural standard.

Example : (political elections)

the **political culture** as it seems to organise the production and understanding of discourse concerning elections

- only one aspect : the thematic aspect – the **knowledge** and **values** (what is a democracy, what is liberty what is authoritarian system, what are our preferences for, for we ought to withdraw, etc.).
- These patterns – thematic configurations – are selected in the reports, the articles for speaking, judging, etc.
- But these configurations are only one part, one component in the production and understanding of admissible discourses.

Other parameters :

- Organisation (“syntax”, “narrative syntax”) in form of typical syntagma, for instance organising the reporting, chronology of events, inquiry concerning the reasons of the defeat or the victory of a political leader, ...
- Discourse types (example : discourse of experts, discourse of witnesses, discourse of “vox populi”, ...)
- Codes, languages of expression
- Formal and physical structures of textualisation
- Etc.

⇒ These means that – approximatively - a universe of discourse is composed by different classes of elements :

- Thematic configurations (topics, ..)
- Discourse types (following Greimas ; volitive, cognitive (assertive, definitional, descriptive, persuasive ...), deontic, performative, ..)
- “syntax” to produce a message and to understand it (“narrative grammar”)
- expression languages (not only verbal language)
- pre-organised typical schemas (genres)
- visual “templates”,
- larger cultural context and (textual) references
- etc.

Culture vs universe of discourse :

- ⇒ a universe of discourse seems indeed the specific “culture” for producing and interpreting admissible discourses;

- ⇒ in this sense there is a difference between both in the sense that a universe of discourse is a specialised cultural component;

- ⇒ others are for instance practical culture of “doing”, the culture of “perceiving”, etc.

10) Universe of Discourse and Genre

- a *universe of discourse* is the virtuality of all discourses produced within a community
- a *genre* is a typical class of discourses to which one concrete discourse belongs (partially, totally)
- a *concrete discourse* is a produced message within a universe of discourses and belonging more or less clearly to one or more genres.

⇒ Cf. the notions in Greimas' semiotics of "virtualisation", "actualisation", and "realization"

⇒ A genre is a recurrent cultural pattern for producing and interpreting but also transmitting, conserving, using, exploiting messages within a collective actant sharing a common culture.

⇒ Such a cultural pattern may be used and because of a given experience, because of a scholar tradition, by the means also of a stipulative decision (a "standard" or a "convention" in the modern sense as it is the case, for instance, for many genres organising the commercial communication, the administrative communication, the technical communication, etc.).

11) semiotics of cultures

Coming back to the cultural standards : they are are “**definitions**” or – in a more traditional sense – “**qualifications**” (i.e. definitions and descriptions) of situations, events, objects, ... that are references for a group, its behaviour, its dealing with the environment, their coordination, and so on ...

⇒ A “cultural standard” (properly speaking) can be :

- Thematic standards
- Rhetoric standards and genres for creating and interpreting, for anticipating, etc
- Language standards (verbal and non-verbal ones,)
- Standards in the sense of monumenta, of privileged persons, situations, etc.

Cultural standards or references : foundation of specific semiotics, of specific semiotic objects

daily life semiotics,
technical semiotics,
political semiotics,
semiotics of popular culture
semiotics of a given literary style (“écriture”)
etc.

founding principle:

⇒ what kind of cultural standard, of cultural reference ?

⇒ What themes (themata), what basic thematic configuration ?

elements for a semiotic theory of cultures

- cultural standards
- collective actant
- “setting” (context)
- languages and genres
- activities