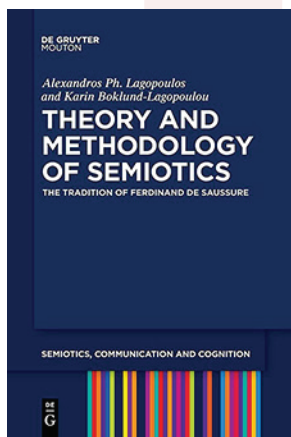


An event in global *Semiotikland*

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Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou
**Theory and Methodology of Semiotics: The Tradition
 of Ferdinand de Saussure.**

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The recent publication of *Theory and Methodology of Semiotics: The Tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure* (which we will refer to here as TMS) by Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou is a veritable event in global *Semiotikland*. The initial aim of the two authors, Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos (semiotician, architect-engineer, urban planner, and social anthropologist) and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou (semiotician, specialist in medieval and comparative literature), was to provide a much-needed manual of Saussurean semiotics, drawing from their ongoing research and teaching at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. This aim is fully attained in the first half of their book and greatly surpassed in the second.

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1. A gnoseology clearly explained and subscribed to

Two parallel commitments fully underpin the book. They are affirmed from the outset in the first chapter, quite agreeable to read due to the concrete examples which illustrate it and the vigorous clarity with which these initial principles are posed. This chapter (“What is semiotics?”) briefly asserts the importance of differentiating carefully between the theoretical

order, i.e., scientific work, and the lived social order of communication and practice. These two areas of action operate with quite different principles, laws, and data, which implies that these two kinds of undertaking demand distinct mental attitudes:

(a) Regarding the theoretical order, the necessary commitment is to be guided only by the unpredictable rationality ruling the discovery of the laws progressively revealed by scientific research. This principle is valid for all scientific domains. From this rationality, with its seemingly unpredictable and capricious rhythms of development, originate tangible and lasting theoretical benefits. We should not mistake the enduring respect they inspire for idealism. Quite the opposite, such a commitment represents profound compliance with the laws of the real, revealed only by respecting the procedures established through a succession of previous discoveries constitutive of each particular scientific domain. This cognitive attitude is sustained throughout the book, but with significant differences from pages 153-154 to p. 233, i.e., in all of chapters 1 to 7. Such a commitment is no longer an issue for disciplines that have attained a genuinely scientific level of performance. Semiotics cannot escape this rule as long as it conceives itself as a scientific project built on cumulative knowledge.

(b) Regarding the lived social order, interactive and practical, the issue is not to violate the moral and sapiential principles ruling our living together and our intersubjective and intergroup behavior. The last 100 pages of *TMS* (chapters 8 and 9) establish a catalog of fourteen models of communication prevalent in societies where speech and text matter. The results of the theoretical work presented up to p. 233 are then examined, in chapter 8, in the light of the global model of communication established by this catalog and then, in chapter 9, considered in sociological terms before being compellingly consolidated in the book's concluding paragraphs (pp. 335-336).

By now, it should be clear that, beyond the project for a university textbook duly completed, an entirely different cognitive adventure, deeply inspired by the views of Ferdinand de Saussure, is at play in the work of Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou.

2. What semiotic theory is at issue in the book?

As the subtitle of the book indicates, it is essentially a presentation, in-depth and didactically very clear, of the semiotics of signification, i.e., what Saussure envisaged as "semiology" (a term borrowed from medicine but quite new for the language sciences at that time and radically different from the "semantics" taught by Michel Bréal between 1868 and 1897).

At the end of a remarkably concise, detailed, and precise itinerary, the reader – whether a student, a researcher in semiotics, or an informed humanist – will have

acquired a panoramic view of what has been learned and implemented to date of Saussure's semiotic intuitions and views, and of the principles and procedures which the semio-linguistic school known as the School of Paris has been able to derive from them so far. Though this is the central axis of *TMS*, the authors have also set themselves the task of following, analysing and occasionally trying out most of the various forms of semiotic research currently active worldwide. In addition, the structure of the book displays a true complementarity between the semiotics of signification (Parts I, II and III) and the semiotics of communication (Part IV).

Given the current state of semiotic research and teaching worldwide, such a pedagogic and demonstrative manual of Saussurean semiotics is indeed both an essential act and an achievement, Why? Because, after its intensive elaboration and unification under the firm rule of A. J. Greimas, the founder of the School of Paris,¹ who was a demanding taskmaster, semiotic research, always at least nominally of Saussurean inspiration, has in practice become rather elusive both as theory and methodology. It has been greatly diversified, if not fragmented and even diluted, into a number of trends which at the present time no longer debate their respective results and do not make much effort to operate with criteria of scientific admissibility.

TMS takes note of this situation, without overlooking either the vagaries of basic research or the fact that major discoveries that reshape and regroup the principal axes of research cannot be planned by decree. At times there is a long wait before the sudden appearance of a new talent which succeeds in identifying a feasible new way forward, as was the case for Greimas with the systematic utilisation of the modalities: starting in 1974 (the beginning of the seminars on the modalities at the EHSSS²) and up to *Du sens II* (1983), this new orientation began to allow us to glimpse the possibility of a linguistico-semiotic work actually founded on a semiotics of the sensible and the passions. There is a brief reference to this in *TMS*, the authors of which are less enthusiastic about this semiotics of the continuous: they consider that the researchers of the second and third generations have not yet succeeded in bringing their work up to the level of the semiotics of the discontinuous, i.e., the semiotics of action which is currently considered by many, and notably by the authors of *TMS*, as the standard, the semiotics of reference.

¹ With a certain coquetry, Greimas considered it appropriate to thus call his School of semio-linguistics, because in the beginning it was developed in Paris, by himself together with the international research group GRSL-EHESS (the Groupe de Recherches en Sémio-linguistique of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), whose loyalty Greimas, as the author of *Sémantique structurale*, had secured and which he set to work and steadily augmented around him from 1964 onwards, initially with his seminar at the Institut de Mathématiques Henri Poincaré, and later with his permanent teaching at the EHESS until his death in 1992.

² The École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales was formed out of Section VI (Sciences Économiques et Sociales) of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) and became an independent institution in 1975 [transl. note].

The book by the Lagopoulos couple is indeed a courageous and necessary work, in the sense that it is not satisfied with peaceably presenting the achievements of this standard semiotics as elaborated and tested at the end of the previous century. Its 360 pages, dense, clear, indispensable and attractive, are not a mere textbook: they take a strong position, and consequently, because they bring to the table powerful new observations concerning the semantics of isotopies, they reopen the much-needed scientific debate to which Saussurean semiotics was constantly subject during Greimas's lifetime.

3. Composition of the book

TMS is composed of four major parts. Part I ("The field of semiotics") opens with a brief and humoristic introduction ("What is semiotics?") that starts from the shared pleasure of an example of the spontaneous semiotics of the male dress gleaned from a British novel by Lee Child, *Tripwire* (1999), continues with the evocation of the multiplicity of signification systems marking social life and closes with a warning: to begin to acquaint oneself with this young and redoubtably abstract discipline, one should know that "It [semiotics] is an autonomous area of knowledge, which, as all scientific fields, has a systematic theory, and its concepts constitute a strongly coherent system."

Chapter 2 ("A brief history of semiotics") starts with Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce, the founders of modern semiotics, and explores the vicissitudes of the publication and initial diffusion of their work. It continues by discussing, in historical succession, the nine principal variants of European semiotics (Russian formalism, semiotic theory, and Marxism, Vladimir Propp, the Prague linguistic Circle, the linguistic Circle of Copenhagen, the Tartu-Moscow School, French structuralism and semiotics, cognitive semiotics, poststructuralism, and postmodernism). This retrospective account ends with a summary overview of semiotics in the USA.

This section offers a helpful reminder, even for the most experienced researcher. Late in his life, Greimas sometimes worried about all these data and concepts that must "be kept together in mind" to nourish the flair, creativity, and scientific soundness of a true researcher, so that the right questions may be posed and some promising directions eventually be found. The perilous leaps between concepts, which call forth strong research ideas, rely on these long chains of reasons provided by the history of ideas while waiting for the time when it will be possible to consolidate the outlines of discoveries, based on *ad hoc* demonstrations. A rigorously targeted enumeration, as the one we find in chapter 2, can generate some inspired shortcuts on the part of even our most creative researchers.

We note that “The semiotics of *langue*” (Part II) is followed by “The semiotics of *parole*” (Part III), following the symmetry imposed by the Saussurean theory of the structuring oppositions of the semantic categories. From this moment, a kind of playful automatism appears in the organisation of the whole volume, with articulations resulting from the systematic projection of semantic categories from one chapter to the next; these sequences sketch out a conceptual architecture that is practically self-generated: *Langue* (ch. 3) vs *parole* (ch. 4); syntagmatic (ch. 4) vs paradigmatic (chs. 5 and 6), but that can also be described as narrative theory or textual semiotics or syntax (ch. 4) vs isotopies (chs. 5 and 6) or semantics (ch. 5); that is to say, on the one hand, work on the narrative syntax as opposed to work on the semantics; on the other hand, detailed verbalisation of the qualitative dimension based on isotopies (ch. 5) vs techniques for the quantitative analysis of isotopies (ch. 6); standard theory (chs. 3-6) vs non-standard theory (ch. 7); semiotics of signification (chs. 1-7) vs semiotics of communication (chs. 8 and 9).

Part II comprises only chapter 3, (“The basic concepts of *langue*”), with twelve sections in which the authors present, clarify, analyse and discuss the validity of the main theoretical points which European semiotics has so far adopted from the teachings of Saussure and the debates which they still generate. This critical evaluation of the principal theoretical *acquis* (gnoseology, principles, operational concepts) owed to Saussure invokes, whenever this may be suggestive, a sample of the debates through which each of these concepts or procedures have been semiotically validated according to the “*inter-rationalité*” (Gaston Bachelard) through which the semiotics of the discontinuous was constructed internationally starting in the late 1940s, with all that had been understood semiotically up to that time of Saussurean theory,³ including Greimas’s famous *Sémantique structurale* (1966) and the journal *Communications* (1964-1981).⁴ This is why Umberto Eco, at that time the very young and very famous author of *La structure absente* (Paris 1972), is at times the target of precise and severe objections (pp. 61-66) on the part of the authors of *TMS*. The negative remarks made by Eco at that stage regarding Saussurism are

³ We recall the first moments of the cognitive adventure which was destined to set off the semiotic spark in France: for the *deux amis* [transl. note: The Two Friends, title of a short novel by Maupassant (cf. Greimas 1976)], Roland Barthes and A.J. Greimas, it started in Alexandria, Egypt, but also in France and Turkey. Each time they were surrounded by intense proto-semiotic epistemological circles (which they were constantly constructing locally on the occasion of each of their new assignments). This emerging semiotics quickly became Saussureo-Hjelmslevian and then, after Hans Reichenbach’s work on the construction of a symbolic notation for narrative calculations had been tested by semiotics, the theory became Saussureo-Greimasian for younger researchers, welcomed into the scientific debate after the first presentations by Greimas at the Institut Henri Poincaré in 1964-1965.

⁴ See Barthes 1964, as well as 1968, 1981.

re-evaluated in relation to the level of abstraction⁵ on which Saussure actually locates his theory of language.

In Part II, the radical renewal brought by Saussure to the theory of language is carefully contextualised and clarified⁶ as it figured in the course of the debates it raised across Europe throughout the 20th century, though there is no mention of the famous article by Greimas *Actualité du saussurisme* (1956).

4. The semiotics of parole (textual semiotics)

If Part II could rightly be entitled “The semiology of Saussure”, Part III – at least chapter 4 – could have as title “The narratology of A. J. Greimas”. Here, the presentation of narrative theory and its applications are fully in compliance with Greimas’s standard theory, as presented in his two volumes of *Du sens* (1970 and 1983), the first volume of *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (1979) and also in *Maupassant: La sémiotique du texte* (1976). Toward the end of chapter 4, we find a fascinating example of canonical narrative analysis applied to a story of the very early Middle Ages, *The life of Saint Alexius*.

On the other hand, implicitly, but with significant connotative effects, within Part III, the set of chapters 4, 5, and 6 is juxtaposed, as a positive model, to the relatively negative model evoked in chapter 7 (“Late and post-Greimasian theory”). In effect, without explicitly stating it, chapters 4, 5, and 6 are devoted to the description and implementation of the standard semiotic theory elaborated, tested, and diffused by Greimas “in the best years of his scientific fecundity.” In contrast, in chapter 7, the authors express a certain disillusionment with the nature, assessed as rather disappointing, of the propositions of the later Greimas, renouncing his brilliant work of

⁵ On page 64 of TMS, we read: “Saussure’s position ... excludes the relation of the sign to the external world”. It would seem to us more exact, and more consistent with the general tenor of TMS, to write: “Saussure’s position shifted the possibility of a rational and demonstrative work on verbal signification towards a conceptual level which tends to objectify and make explicit not only verbal significations but also all other ways of making meaning. This, for the Saussurean school, implied that it should be possible to construct biunivocal symbolic notations not dependent on the idiosyncrasies conveyed by natural languages and quite close to the kinds of analysis carried out in laboratories or in the workplaces of structural engineers, neither of which can be accused of using signs that have no relation to the outside world.” This is not the case with Peirce’s Semeiotics, which rests on the spontaneous naturalism of a more figurative philosophy.

⁶ It is true that, paradoxically, Greimas in his *Actualité du saussurisme* does not specify his mental relation to Saussure and the lessons he drew from him (contrary to what we read in TMS). It is as if, concerning Saussure, Greimas suspended his teaching mission in order to be able to fully live this relation of definitive inspiration. He reads Hjelmslev through *his own* Saussure, without even bothering to make explicit what this Saussure is; he is as it were “kept for himself”, though always ready to re-emerge in the slightest oral epistemological debate, for example at Cerisy-La Salle, in the seminar or in a remarkable dialogue with a young researcher whom he supervises, in the form of a furious “*Et Saussure alors!*” (What about Saussure, then?!).

the narratological period – discontinuist yet admirably coherent and innovative – to opt for work that is continuist but lacking coherence and true theoretical creativity. The second volume of the *Dictionnaire* (1986) is seen as the regrettable reflection of this late period, as the counter-example of what the coherence and scientific rigor of semiotic work should be.

We have already pointed out the symmetrical arrangement of a semiotics of signification vs. semiotics of communication. The set of chapters 2-7 of Parts I, II, and III implicitly develops *The semiotics of signification*. In contrast, Part IV, comprising chapter 8 (“A global model of communication”) and chapter 9 (“Social semiotics”), is explicitly entitled *The semiotics of communication*.

Nevertheless, an important reasoning emerges, in the form of an explicit counter-argument, in the last two pages of the book. This reasoning takes on an almost musical power, evoking the chords struck at the end of an opera or a symphony, saturating the book’s final paragraphs, first with the names of Saussure and Hjelmlev and then with Saussure alone.

Chapters 4-6 combine theoretical accounts and demonstrative practices on all kinds of texts, verbal or non-verbal (among them the formal analysis of the medieval *Life of Saint Alexius*). In contrast, chapter 7 expresses disappointment and criticisms concerning the later Greimas and requests clarifications of the incoherent, scattered, and weak propositions of a hypothetical semiotics of passion, through which the Greimassians aspired to produce a semiotics of the continuous vis-à-vis the still thriving semiotics of the discontinuous that this book approves of. It is true that 30 years after the loss of the author of *Sémantique structurale*, the Francophone school of semiotics has no definitive results to show in order to establish a semiotics of the continuous.

However, with chapters 5, 6, and 7, the multi-headed enunciating subject of *TMS* is no longer a teacher who is himself the student of two giants, Saussure and Greimas. The book becomes something more than a textbook. The semiotic work chronicled in these chapters is the expression of an autonomous group, speaking in its own name about a semiotic work that, at this particular moment, it alone could do. *TMS* is the expression of the *Semiotic School of Thessaloniki*.

Chapters 5 and 6, particularly, labeled in principle as qualitative approach vs. quantitative approach, begin, as all the others, by marking their relation to the existing literature on semantics and its isotopies while showing little dependence on this literature. Subsequently, they present the results of a research that has carried further than anyone before the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative networking that characterizes the semantic play of isotopies. Starting from p. 152, under the title “The empirical textual network and the hierarchy of isotopies,” the Semiotic School of Thessaloniki demonstrates some of its theoretical results and how they can be visually rendered through graphs and diagrams. The section concludes with interesting results concerning a semiotics of spatiality, accompanied by an application to the spatial discourses on the city of Thessaloniki.

All this fertile work of both theoretical and applied research on the semantics of isotopies allows us to hope that it may be in this direction that some important contributions could be forged to the semiotics of passions, which is presently lacking many of the conceptual and experimental tools necessary for the realisation of its ambitions.

5. Effectiveness of theory and methodology of semiotics: The tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure

That which is formulated, with moderation and fairness, in this book constitutes a trigger for a vital debate which all researchers committed to the question of the semiotics of passions need to support to guarantee the progress of this new research horizon, the necessity of which was evident well before the required semiotic paths had been envisaged that would enable it to be pursued in perfect coherence with the undisputed *acquis* of the discipline.

In the most glorious period of this collective research, Greimas's apparent boldness was compensated by his profound prudence. He confessed, privately, that he always had a head start of at least three years concerning the theoretical and practical views he submitted to the collective work of the seminar. Is this perhaps still the case today? Have we not underestimated the real significance of works such as *De l'imperfection* (1987)? We still need to await some new results before this book finds its proper place in the Greimassian schemas.

6. Some paths to follow, perhaps?

In the present condition of our discipline and on all continents, two or three generations of researchers lay claim to what has been diffused, little by little, of the semiological views of Saussure and his first European disciples. These generations have a poor understanding of each other. Simultaneously, epistemologists from the hard sciences have begun to publish precise assessments of the last generation of semiotic works. Their voices will be influential in continuing a work of classification comparable to that accomplished by *TMS*.

Actual discoveries cannot be planned but assert themselves when the general state of knowledge is finally sufficient for a new synthesis to emerge. This is what happened, in its own time, with the narratology of the discontinuous. The beautiful analyses of Michel Arrivé, and especially chapters II and III of his *À la recherche de Ferdinand de Saussure* (2007), among which "La sémiologie saussurienne entre le CLG et

la recherche sur la légende” [Saussurean semiology between *CLG*⁷ and the research on the legend], demonstrate by what painful pathways the concepts of semiotics had to pass before finding their proper form. As in all the hard sciences, the eureka moments of semiotics are dearly paid for.

This is the reason why, in response to the justified objections of Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou on the current state of research in post-Greimassian semiotics, we hope to see a series of live exchanges and debates as intense as those that marked the progress of semiotic theory between 1975 (the beginning of the work on the modalities) and the death of Greimas in February 1992, to create the conditions for some tangible progress on the semiotics of passions, which seems to have become one of the necessary points of passage of semiotic research.

7. To conclude

In conclusion, *Theory and Methodology of Semiotics: The tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure* by Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou is an essential work:

(a) Because it is a profoundly responsible manual for a university initiation in semiotics.

(b) Because it creates the conditions for a constructive inter-rationality to debate, as much as necessary, on the *acquis* and the latent perspectives of all actual research orientations of semiotics in general and, in particular, on the semantic subtleties of the semiotics of passions. Though it is true that this approach has been on the agenda of semiotic research since 1977 and had already begun to take shape in the various prepublications realized after that date before the appearance of the more important publications starting in 1991 – among which *Sémiotique des passions* [The semiotics of passions] and some other works by the same group duly examined by *TMS* – it is also true that it would have everything to gain by such an extension of the research.

(c) Because its theoretical work testifies to a rigor and an exigency far above the fray, and because these qualities are the expression of a mindset indispensable for the transmission and perpetuation of the scientific quality, and thus the *raison d’être* of the research that has given birth to semiotic theory, as it was imagined and made possible by the entire scientific work of Ferdinand de Saussure.

⁷ The *Cours de linguistique générale*, the book on Saussure’s theory constructed from lecture notes by two of his students (see Saussure, 1968-1974) [transl. note].

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