

Semiotics and linguistic historiography: counter-hegemonic disciplines

Semiótica e historiografia linguística: disciplinas contra-hegemônicas

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ABSTRACT

From linguistic historiography and the history of linguistic ideas, disciplines such as general semiotics can be considered counter-hegemonic insofar as they challenge the status quo of a given state of science. In light of this, this study proposes a critical reading of how semioticians have dealt with the history of discourse semiotics. Drawing on evidence that highlights the strength of the historiographic approach in semiotic studies, we analyze some of these approaches in semiotics to outline the general framework of a meta-historiography inspired by semiotics.

Keywords: Semiotics, linguistic historiography, history of linguistic ideas, epistemology.

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RESUMO

Com base nas concepções da historiografia linguística e da história das ideias linguísticas, disciplinas como a semiótica geral podem ser consideradas contra-hegemônicas na medida em que desafiam o *status quo* de um determinado estado de ciência. Em vista disso, este trabalho propõe uma leitura crítica do modo como os semioticistas ocuparam-se da história da semiótica do discurso. Partindo de evidências que demonstram a força da abordagem historiográfica nos estudos semióticos, analisamos algumas abordagens historiográficas em semiótica, para propor as linhas gerais de uma meta-historiografia de inspiração semiótica.

Palavras-chave: Semiótica, historiografia linguística, história das ideias semióticas, epistemologia.

THE HISTORY OF SEMIOTICS AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY

The reaction of generative grammarians to my decision to chronicle and analyse the history of the field was more complex . . . They feared that I would become tarred with the brush of being an ‘historian of linguistics’, who, to many generativists, occupy a status level even lower than that of ‘semiotician’. (Newmeyer, 1996, p. 2)

DISCOURSE SEMIOTICS, ALSO known as discursive semiotics, French semiotics, or Greimasian semiotics—formerly referred to as narrative semiotics, textual semiotics, or the Paris School—will celebrate in 2026 the 60th anniversary of the publication of its foundational work, *Sémantique structurale* by A. J. Greimas (1966). In addition to this event, there is also the centenary, celebrated in 2016, of *Cours de linguistique générale* by Ferdinand de Saussure. This work propelled the structuralist enterprise and introduced the so-called *sémiologie* to the scientific panorama of the 20th century—decades after Charles Sanders Peirce defined his “doctrine of signs,” *semiotics*, inspired by John Locke (Nöth, 1990, p. 24).

Whether we consider the more than 100 years or the nearly 60 years as the starting point of discourse semiotics, these temporal markers are significant because they encompass the emergence and decline of various ideas that were translated into intense intellectual activity by several generations of language and communication scholars. The very notion of dating and of a foundational marker—although often cited as a common sense way in which scholars and students typically think about the history of theory—selects and obscures the multiplicity of ideas and schools that underlie or intersect with discourse semiotics as an epistemic framework.

In general, the history of discourse semiotics has been invoked—much like the history of many scientific disciplines—either in its teaching or to justify, relativize, or suppress its alleged flaws and virtues. This invocation tends to be more anecdotal than truly epistemological and methodological. As with language itself, following the classic formulation of Hjelmslev (2003, p. 3), we may assume that the history of the language sciences seeks to be ignored.

From a scientific perspective, semiotics is seen as a unique case within the language sciences. Its novelty, distinctiveness, and consequently, its perceived fragility relative to other linguistic disciplines are frequently intertwined with the sometimes contentious relationships it maintains with general linguistics, other theories of discourse, and the human sciences. In essence, these fields approach the study of human signification through differing lenses.

Judging by the bibliography on the epistemology and history of discursive semiotics, semioticians seem more interested in explaining new objects and formulating new theories than explaining the functioning of semiotics itself. Additionally, they are concerned with developing theories about the conditions for the existence of theories of language, in line with the parameters of formalized linguistic historiography¹ (cf. Koerner, 1989, 1995a, 1995b; Swiggers, 1990, 2012). Semiotics studies typically include extensive chapters on theoretical exposition and definition, as is supposedly required by the traditional monographic method of constructing theoretical foundations. However, it is rare to encounter a historical and epistemological treatment that places theoretical facts into perspective through different approaches, problems, and solutions.

In Brazil, notable exceptions to the indifference toward the history and epistemology of discourse semiotics include the contributions of pioneers D. L. P. de Barros (1999, 2007, 2012) and J. L. Fiorin (1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2016). The former consistently adopted a historical perspective on the institutional and theoretical dimensions of semiotics, a view frequently shared by E. Lopes (1997) and I. C. Lopes (2010, 2011, 2012, 2014). The latter has both historicized and redefined concepts, making decisive contributions to the development of semiotics in its relationship with linguistics, rhetoric, and communication. This rigorous revisionist approach to theory takes on a particularly vivid tone in the reflections of W. Beividas (2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016) regarding the demands of a discursive epistemology—based on Hjelmslevian and tensive principles—which updates the debate on the origins and evolution of semiotics.

In general, in discourse semiotics, the most frequent studies address the immanent principles of the group's own scientific program, which asserts itself as singular and potentially “revolutionary” (Murray, 1994) in relation to other language sciences. F. Rastier caricatures this insular approach, distinguishing its leading researchers and framing its history, as he states that in Greimasian semiotics:

For a long time, the genealogical model, biblical par excellence, replaced history. Each founder gave rise to a lineage. Thus, until its extinction, the École de Paris was: Saussure *begat* Hjelmslev, who *begat* Greimas, who *begat* Courtés and Fontanille. (Rastier, 1997, emphasis added)²

This way of narrating its own history, referred to by Rastier as “genealogical,” is one of our most consistent objects of study, with the primary goal of laying the foundations of a historiographic reflection on semiotics. This reflection is grounded in the linguistic historiography of E. F. K. Koerner and researchers

¹ In this work, we used the term “linguistic historiography” (also referred to as “historiography of linguistics”) to specifically designate the theoretical framework proposed by Koerner (1989, 1995a, 1995b) and Koerner and Asher (1995), disseminated in Brazil by Cristina Altman and collaborators. The aim was to refer to the historiographical field of language studies in a broader sense, as we do in the title of the article, encompassing linguistic historiography in its narrow sense as well as the history of linguistic ideas, as conceived by S. Aroux.

² In the original: “Le modèle généalogique, biblique par excellence, a longtemps tenu lieu d’histoire. Chaque fondateur donnait naissance à une lignée. Ainsi, l’école de Paris s’est tenue jusqu’à sa disparition à: Saussure *genuit* Hjelmslev, *qui genuit* Greimas, *qui genuit* Courtés et Fontanille.”

such as P. Swiggers, S. O. Murray, and C. Altman, providing a critical reading of the epistemological and methodological aspects involved in the development of discourse semiotics. In turn, this discipline is treated as socially and historically situated. It is also engaged with problems and solutions that its time, scientific program, rhetoric, groups, leaders, and researchers could produce.

As is seen later, research on the historiography of semiotics developed intuitively in Europe, giving rise to both historical chronicles of encyclopedic nature, such as those by Hénault (1997) and Hénault and Beyaert (2004), and works such as those of Coquet (1982). These chronicles recount the historical genealogy previously mentioned by Rastier, with some variations. They offer considerations and applications to concrete objects of analysis, including innovative contributions, as seen in the works of Badir (2013), Zilberberg (2004), and Landowski (1997), which propose historical recoveries dominated by the epistemological framework of theory, evaluated according to the original proposals of the theorists themselves.

Both the chronicles and the innovative works, although exploring the epistemology and history of semiotics in different ways, do not present an explicitly structured historiographic perspective. What stands out in these works is primarily the effort of specialists and scholars revealing the outcomes of the original connections they establish. However, they often do not lead us to reflect on the nature of their sources or, more importantly, the aims underlying their reflections.

Another common aspect of these studies is their nearly exclusive internalist perspective, focused on the scientific program itself. It established few or no connections with other disciplines, or with so-called external, social, and historical dimensions.

Among the rare studies on the history of semiotics that employ explicit historiographic methodologies, we can cite the works of Broden (2013) and Almeida (2010), which respectively address the intellectual biography of A. J. Greimas regarding the development of semiotics and its tensive strand at the University of São Paulo (USP) from 1994 to 2008. In his own way, the aforementioned Lopes (1997) should also be noted as the first comprehensive work of a Brazilian semiotician addressing the epistemology and history of semiotics.

The strictly internalist perspective, which focuses solely on the epistemological dimension of a discipline, clashes with the essential principles of linguistic historiography. The latter considers, in a dynamic and complex manner, the writing of a discipline's history:

. . . the work of the historiographer of the language sciences must focus not only on the cognitive dimension of the discipline's development, the so-called internal dimension, but also on its social, or external dimension. Writing the history of linguistics, therefore, entails the task of reconstructing the "facts" from which the historiographer builds their system of references. It also presupposes the task of selecting and interpreting how linguistic problems were constituted and reformulated over time. (Altman, 2012, p. 29)

Between internal and external, i.e., in historiographic terms, between the theoretical and the historical, semiotics has its own way of synthesizing these two dimensions in the textual record, as we attempted to explain.

SEMIOTICS: THE COUNTER-HEGEMONY OF LANGUAGE

Semiotics and linguistic historiography, as scientific and social projects, considering their origins and purposes, can only establish themselves as disciplines of resistance against the commonplace, against what has already been said, against crystallized ideas, prejudices, privileges and commodified visions aimed at guaranteeing the epistemic status quo. We—semioticians and historiographers—are or ought to be outsiders, as our craft requires a displacement, a misalignment with the present, and many doubts about the past and the future.

Semioticians, linguists, and historiographers are not police officers, detectives, or judges, as Fiorin reminds us: "[analysis] is not a police investigation" (Fiorin, 2007c, p. 49). Similarly, Landowski states, ". . . neither indignation nor revolt against (the) discriminations replaces analysis" (Landowski, 2002, p. 20).

Yet, we cannot ignore what we know and what we discover. We cannot forget what language and history reveal to us.

American semiotics, rooted in philosophy, logic, the natural sciences, and even the psychology of its time, proposed a rupture in the consideration of linguistic phenomena. Slavic-Germanic semiotics, whether in its cultural or cognitive branches, countered the merely literary and social knowledge of its era, proposing a reflection on cultural codes in various dimensions.

On the other hand, discourse semiotics, due to its structural origins, was received in the literary studies of its time as an ahistorical theory seeking autonomy from social order. This situation is quite different today, but the fracture or, at least, the separation between the semiotic and the social persists. Broadly speaking, if we think about it in a very general way, it is not completely unrelated to the conceptions of the different semiotics.

General semiotics, with its unwavering commitment to language and semiosis, can only position itself as a counter-hegemonic discipline with its own clearly defined object. This holds true across various theoretical currents, regardless of the particular approach.

LINGUISTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE COUNTER-HEGEMONY OF HISTORY

The “meta-” aspect demands the adoption of a “distanced view.” If the conceptual spatial metaphor of “distance” or “good distance” is not appealing, we might prefer the term “situated view,” retaining the spatial metaphor as it suggests a circumspect and informed view of the implications of observing and examining—an interplay between object and viewpoint.

Linguistic historiography, regardless of the theoretical current, is a revolutionary or potentially revolutionary discipline. This is because, through documents (texts and discourses), it dynamically brings forth histories, either as complements or as counterpoints.

REWRITING HISTORY

From this doubly counter-hegemonic foundation of semiotics and historiography, we excavated, compared, and doubted. Over the past decade, we have composed a broader explanatory framework to understand how discourse semiotics developed and positioned itself among language theories starting in the 1960s.

In summary, we understand what follows.

- (a) According to Portela (2016), the Franco-Belgian theory of comics history developed during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s almost entirely apart from discourse semiotics, at times with considerable skepticism toward so-called semiotic assumptions.
- (b) Greimasian narrative semiotics became enriched through engagement with the narratology of the 1960s and 1970s, incorporating contributions from Bremond, Todorov, and even Dundes (Santos, 2014);
- (c) The currently underestimated semiology remains an ally of cities, mass culture, and emerging arts. Beyond Saussure, Mounin, and Barthes, semiologists from the 1970s explored diverse languages without perhaps the most appropriate tools but with remarkable insight, as exemplified by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (Granado, 2021).

- (d) Paul Ricoeur, a great friend and careful critic of Greimasian semiotics, not only raised objections to narrative semiotics but, in his unlikely encounter with semiotics (a term coined by Louis Panier), significantly expanded the theory's awareness of the interpretative act (Santos, 2014).
- (e) The term "ideology," according to Portela (2019), was scarcely or never used by European Greimasian semioticians, despite being defined in their dictionaries with clear meaning. However, it posed no issues for Brazilian semioticians in the 1970s and 1980s, who incorporated it into Marxist discourse analysis.
- (f) In Greimasian theory of enunciation, the term "shifter" owes not only to R. Jakobson's reflections but also to Burks (1949). Burks, studying Peirce's classification of signs, particularly concerning the nature of symbols and indices, concluded that shifters do not have a single meaning (Prado, 2018).
- (g) The emergence of the sensitive can already be seen in Greimas's early writings, particularly in *L'actualité du Saussurisme* (1956). From this text, spanning 1966 to 1991 (in coauthorship with Fontanille), the sensitive dimension appeared in both the rhetoric and the immanent theory (Moreira, 2019).
- (h) The notion of figurativity originates from the visual arts and rhetoric. It is one of the few concepts in semiotic theory that has endured decades of theoretical experimentation and remains both relevant and central to semiotics today (Santos, 2020);
- (i) It is possible to quantify and qualify textual influence through citation analysis by means of tensive operations (Moreira et al., 2021).

These demarcations or research findings enable us to understand why semiotics and historiography hold the potential to rewrite the history and the theoretical-methodological framework of theories.

CHRONICLERS AND INNOVATORS IN THE HISTORY OF DISCOURSE SEMIOTICS

Among the delimitations or findings we previously highlighted, one aspect remains unexplored: how to foster a dialogue between semiotics and linguistic historiography in the writing and analysis of history itself. Our starting point is the way the history of linguistics has largely overlooked semiotics and how European semioticians have engaged with their own history (Portela, 2018).

D

There are several approaches to address the problem of constructing and understanding history. In the field of historiography (the history of history or, more precisely, historical research)³, the history of a discipline can be built through what we might term “intellectual history” and “conceptual history,” both stemming from the history of mentalities and cultural history. For contemporary historiography⁴, intellectual history deals with broad and transversal scientific and cultural issues or delves into biographical or disciplinary research, while conceptual history focuses on concepts and terms, analyzing the lexicon mobilized in a given disciplinary field or era.

This distinction—intellectual versus conceptual—did not significantly shape debates on the intellectual history of the language sciences in the French domain, in which the term “history of ideas” has been broadly employed to describe historiographic projects. Terms such as “history of ideas,” “history of thought,” or “conceptual history” are often used interchangeably in the field of linguistic historiography. For instance, P. Swiggers presents his views on the history of linguistic thought as a research endeavor with a conceptual orientation.

This is not an encyclopedic history of linguistics and does not intend to replace works that provide a historical overview of linguistics. Its perspective is different: it is neither an inventory of the acquisitions of the language sciences, in their evolution from antiquity to the 19th century; nor is it about presenting “the great figures” in the history of linguistics and putting certain “actors” in the foreground. The history proposed here is a *conceptual history* of linguistics that takes “linguistic thought” as its object. (Swiggers, 1997, pp. 1-2, emphasis added)⁵

The project *History of Linguistic Ideas*, directed by Sylvain Auroux, which is of particular interest here, was initiated in 1982, according to Auroux himself, at the suggestion of Michel Meyer. This project resulted in three major volumes on the subject: the first, covering Antiquity, was published in 1989; the second in 1992; and the third in 2000. In terms of the period covered, the third volume extends to the late 1930s.

Auroux’s project is not the only one to contribute to the history of linguistic ideas. It is important to note the contributions of Koerner (1989, 1995a, 1995b), Koerner and Asher (1995), Altman (1998, 2021), Batista (2023), Batista and Bastos (2020), Coelho (2018, 2021), among others, especially from the methodological perspective of a meta-historiography. Nevertheless, Auroux’s project constitutes a significant reference for those interested in the historiography of linguistics, as it offers highly current methodological proposals:

³ According to Marie-Paule Caire-Jabinet (2013, p. 13), “. . . historiography opens vast horizons to historians: analyzing concepts and debates, studying practices and discourses.” In the original: “. . . l’historiographie ouvre de vastes horizons aux historiens: analyser concepts et débats, étudier les pratiques et les discours”.

⁴ Here, we refer to the two monumental volumes organized by C. Delacroix et al. (2010a, 2010b), *Historiographies I and II: concepts et débats*.

⁵ In the original: “Cet ouvrage n’est pas une histoire encyclopédique de la linguistique, et ne prétend pas remplacer les travaux qui brossent un panorama historique de la linguistique. L’optique de celui-ci est *différente*: il ne s’agit pas de faire un relevé des acquis des sciences du langage, dans leur évolution de l’Antiquité au XIXe siècle. Il ne s’agit pas non plus de faire défiler ‘les grandes figures’ de l’histoire de la linguistique et de mettre à l’avant-plan des ‘acteurs’ particuliers. L’histoire proposée ici est une *histoire conceptuelle* de la linguistique, qui prend comme objet la ‘pensée linguistique’”.

- (1) *Despite the title of the project being History of linguistic ideas, Auroux often prefers to refer to the “sciences of language” rather than “linguistics” because, according to him, the term “linguistics” is very recent, as it was introduced as a neologism in Germany in 1777. It was subsequently used in French for the first time in 1812 to satisfactorily encompass theoretical currents of sciences of language, both before and after the 18th and 19th centuries*
- (2) *One must exercise caution in reconciling the past and the future: as Auroux (1989, p. 14) stated, “Knowledge (the instances that put it into practice) does not destroy its past, as we often mistakenly believe; it organizes, selects, forgets and idealizes it, just as it anticipates its future, dreaming it while constructing it. Without memory and without a project, there is simply no knowledge.”*
- (3) *A methodological conception cannot rely solely on predefined definitions intended for the internal or external apprehension of constructed knowledge. Its method seeks to: (a) “identify, in each case, the core knowledge within natural language and trace its evolution”; (b) “examine the constitution of disciplines in their interrelations, avoiding preconceived boundaries or limitations”; and (c) “ultimately, address the sociological or institutional dimensions of this knowledge, including the social context, as well as the interests and practices underpinning its production” (Auroux, 1989, pp. 15–16).*

Thus, the historiography of the sciences of language emerged as a project to revise tradition (hegemony). This is because it can help us deconstruct certain deeply rooted myths across the diverse methodological currents in the scientific field.

THE “NATURAL” OMISSION

Auroux’s efforts in constructing and understanding the sciences of language overlooked the foundations of contemporary theories of discourse, semiology, and discursive semiotics. In the domain of linguistic historiography, narrowly understood, researchers’ interests focus exclusively on units situated below the sentence level: phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax, particularly the latter. Linguists and linguistic historiographers are interested in these areas, privileging grammatical theories and their aspects of formalization and description. At most, they turn to the philosophy of language.

This exclusion of discursive or semiotic thought from the field of linguistic historiography could be considered a “natural” omission. After all, the pioneers of linguistic historiography had no reason to expand their scope to include subjects they neither addressed nor recognized as scientific.

However, this “natural” omission—always in quotation marks—reveals a conception of linguistics that is narrowly disciplinary or even sectarian, stemming from a refusal to incorporate semantic problems (M. Bréal had already accused linguistics of his time of doing precisely this) and, broadly speaking, issues related to discourse and the meaning of other forms of language. From this perspective, the omission or exclusion discussed here appears as a choice that, in the end, erases one of the twentieth century’s most pivotal contributions to linguistics: the study of text and discourse.

The third volume of *History of Linguistic Ideas*, organized by S. Auroux (2000), exemplifies this issue. Semantics and pragmatics receive minimal attention and regarding semiotics, the situation is no different: the chapter titled “The Order of Signs” includes a section named “Semiotics,” authored by the German Achim Eschbach, a specialist in Charles Morris. This section heavily cites Peirce and dedicates half a page to F. de Saussure. While acknowledging that the 1930s were chosen as a temporal cutoff, it seems that the author’s selection for the section on signs and the scant attention given to Saussure’s ideas were not accidental. If the determining criterion is time, then M. Bakhtin and V. Volóchinov, for example, who dialogued with 19th and early 20th century European linguistics, should appear in this work, if not in the section on signs, then in a chapter entirely dedicated to their linguistic thought.

While we appreciate the ideas of Auroux and his collaborators, this does not prevent us from lamenting their omissions and, above all, problematizing them. It is quite clear that if semioticians do not write the history of their discipline, it is futile to expect others to do so. In this regard, it is inevitable to recall what Auroux (2014, p. 7) states in one of the epigraphs chosen for this work: “. . . to define one’s own historical status, one is never better served than by oneself!”.

Lastly, as a counterpoint, it is essential to consider a relevant issue in the construction of history and, therefore, in the historiography of scientific disciplines: the temporal distance from the object of analysis plays a decisive role in observing phenomena. When Auroux began working on his project on the history of linguistic ideas, between 40 (at the start of the project) and 60 years (at its conclusion) separated him from his subject. In 1982, it may have been difficult to assess the relationship between general linguistics and the disciplines of text and discourse. There was a great deal of novelty, agitation, and conflict.

However, in 2017, we found ourselves in the position of privileged observers of our pioneers of the 1970s and 1980s.

ARE WE ALL HISTORIOGRAPHERS?

In a certain sense, by working in a field like semiotics, we are not wrong in thinking that we are all, in some way, historiographers. This is due to our interest in gathering sources, organizing and clarifying the definitions that underpin our thinking, and, above all, positioning ourselves regarding tradition. Generally, the importance of justifying and explaining ourselves makes us methodologically conscious and often leads us to assume clearly defined positions. It could be said that our need to elucidate the nature and relevance of semiotics is “instinctive.”

This drives us to appropriate the history of the theory, embellishing it with our own nuances. At times, we have no interest whatsoever in explicitly justifying our theoretical choices. We settle comfortably within the domain of semiotics to create models and reflections, without realizing that silence can be as significant—if not more so—than declarations.

Thus, we see that the activity of the somewhat distracted historiographers we all are does not solely encompass “intentional projects”, those that are explicitly and consciously historiographic. This authorizes us to suppose that historiographic thinking is intrinsic to scientific thought, particularly within the human sciences, in which the notion of progress is always in the process of being constructed and defended.

CHRONICLERS AND INNOVATORS

It is difficult to take a comprehensive view of the historiographic production in the semiotics of discourse. The discipline is young and dynamic, with its own particular demands. Furthermore, historiography among Greimassians, as we have observed, except for the works of Thomas F. Broden (2013) has not produced a methodologically explicit program. Generally, we have focused on the analysis of conceptual systems (what Koerner (1989) refers to as the immanence of theory) and have paid little or no attention to (1) the rhetoric of theory, (2) the ideas that permeate and surround conceptual systems, and (3) the social and institutional aspects. Our work, all too often, fails to distinguish books, journals, or conference proceedings as texts granting access to theory and does not unfold into the construction of a corpus of testimonies and interviews. Unsurprisingly, the historiographers *tout court*

of the language sciences struggle to recognize our initiatives within the theoretical framework of historiography.

Broadly speaking, we currently recognize two historiographic approaches in semiotics:

- (1) approaches based on memory, i.e., chronicles concerning scientific, associative, and institutional aspects, exemplified by works such as *Sémiotique: l'École de Paris* by J.-C. Coquet (1982) and *A Concise History of Semiotics* by A. Hénault (1992, 2009); and
- (2) approaches grounded in theoretical problems, often transversal, seeking synthesis or resolution. This is the case with the first two parts of *Raison et poétique du sens* by Claude Zilberberg (2004) and the preface by A. Hénault to *Atelier de sémiotique visuelle*, organized by A. Hénault and A. Beyaert (2004).

The first approach can be termed memorialist or chronicler, oriented essentially by the diachrony of theoretical facts (“theoretical facts” being conceptual occurrences belonging to a system, just as we define “linguistic facts”). It seeks to demonstrate their correspondences, continuities, and discontinuities in relation to the broader scientific scene of an era, in the form of an intellectual narrative or an “epistemological dramaturgy,” to use the evocative expression of J.-C. Chevalier and P. Encrevé (2006).

This approach is often linear and causal in its manner of understanding theoretical facts, as it relies, for the coherence of the narrative being told, on the actors and actants of science, as well as on the programs, trajectories, and frameworks in which they participated. For instance, chroniclers will often state that Saussure gave rise to Hjelmslev, who in turn influenced Greimas, and so on.

The second approach, which we might call critical or innovative, does not reject diachrony—this remains the domain of history—but employs it differently. The diachrony perceived in this approach is not that of theoretical facts, which, according to the dates of publications and events deemed relevant, succeeded one another in time. Instead, it is the diachrony that converts into synchrony to produce results: the historiographer goes beyond, suspends temporal constraints and “makes a system” out of theoretical facts, not infrequently reconstructing the system itself and innovating. According to the innovators, Hjelmslev can reveal Saussure, and Greimas can illuminate Hjelmslev. This is what H. Parret observed about Zilberberg’s thinking in the preface to *Raison et poétique du sens*: “Semiotics . . . is a dynamic entity, and its becoming is identified with a return to its foundations and origins, dialectically engaging the contributions of its

founders and continuators (Hjelmslev as the ‘founder’ of the founder Saussure, Greimas as the ‘founder’ of Hjelmslev)” (cited in Zilberberg, 2004, p. 12).

This polarized characterization between chroniclers and innovators serves only to sketch the broad outlines of historiographic activity in semiotics and does not consist of a evaluative or “moral” assessment. This is because we are convinced that the two approaches are suited to different purposes and have, each in their own way, a place in the transmission and construction of semiotics as a discipline.

CHRONICLER OR INNOVATOR?

It is essential to bear in mind, of course, that there are other ways to conceive of the historiographical approach in semiotics. Such methods explore the two previously described perspectives differently.

For instance, Éric Landowski’s preface to the Lithuanian translation of *Structural Semantics* (2007) offers an example. In this text, the semiotician presents the semiotic project of *Structural Semantics* to an experienced reader while situating himself within that project and outlining major lines of theoretical evolution. To achieve this, Landowski (2007) actancially disperses the figure of Greimas, dividing him into three—or rather, five—different personas: the semanticist, the semiotician, and the phenomenologist, joined by the lexicologist and the writer, both mentioned in a footnote. According to the provocative author of *Passions sans nom* (2004), each of these personas corresponds to “. . . very different and even, to a great extent, rival families of thought” (Landowski, 2007):

The *first* gathers a generation of researchers who, faithful to the spirit of *Structural Semantics*, dedicated themselves to the development of a textual linguistics and a semantics of cultures. The second continues to this day to regard the *Dictionary* as its main reference work. This occurs through the strict application of the narrative and modal syntax that form its core, as defenders of the so-called standard semiotics, or through efforts to enrich and systematize these principles, particularly in the domain of so-called “tensive” semiotics. The third, in turn, found inspiration primarily in *On Imperfection* and currently seeks to promote a semiotics focused on experience, capable of integrating the sensible dimension as well as the random one, in the analysis of the production and apprehension of meaning.⁶ (Landowski, 2007, emphasis added)

Landowski (2007) does not only highlight the three major “families” of semiotics. In a footnote, he identifies them: the first family is associated with

⁶ In the original: “La première regroupe une génération de chercheurs qui, restés fidèles à l’esprit de Sémantique structurale, se sont consacrés au développement d’une linguistique textuelle et d’une sémantique des cultures. La deuxième continue jusqu’à maintenant de faire du Dictionnaire son principal ouvrage de référence, soit en prenant tels quels les modèles de la syntaxe narrative et modale qui en constituent le noyau et en les appliquant scrupuleusement — ce sont les tenants de la sémiotique dite standard —, soit en cherchant à les enrichir et à les systématiser, principalement dans le cadre de la sémiotique dite « tensive ». La troisième, trouvant pour sa part son inspiration surtout dans *De l’imperfection*, tente actuellement de promouvoir une sémiotique en prise sur l’expérience, capable d’intégrer la dimension sensible et aussi celle de l’aléa dans l’analyse des conditions de la production et de la saisie du sens”.

F. Rastier, the second with J. Fontanille and Zilberberg, and the third, finally, with J.-M. Floch, J. Geninasca, and Landowski himself.

This figurative embodiment of theoretical issues through various actors in the theory shows how a chronicler's strategy can be used to foster innovation within the theoretical space. Landowski (2007) does not simply recount the history of semiotics—indeed, there is no single or simple history—but reconstructs it according to his theoretical understanding. The past of semiotics contains within it the seeds of its future: what begins as a diffuse idea eventually becomes a school or family over time.

SEMIOTIC PRINCIPLES OF META-HISTORIOGRAPHY

Semiotics can play a crucial role in shaping a discourse-based historiography, i.e., a historiography that goes beyond establishing general methodological principles of a purely historical nature and instead recognizes the discursive nature of the texts it examines.

The coexistence of the methodological dimension of classical historiography with the analytical apparatus of semiotics seems perfectly feasible and desirable. This is particularly true regarding the historiographical issues outlined below, which represent semiotic principles of meta-historiography or, as Santos (2020) suggests, a *semio-hystoriography*.

- (1) *The very nature of historiographic practice.* Semioticians cannot limit themselves to approaching the history of their discipline through the historian's lens (source accuracy, primacy of the materiality of documents, delimitation of objectives, respect for the conditions of knowledge production and circulation, narrative ambition). Instead, they must treat the historical narrative and its texts as semiotic objects, subject to discursive, narrative, tensive, and other forms of analysis. This suggests that the nature of historiographic practice is inherently dual: both historical and semiotic.
- (2) *Overcoming “internal” and “external” analysis in historiography.* Semiotics, by establishing the interdependence between texts and discourses proliferating in the scientific field, enables the historiographer to integrate elements inherent to the construction of theory and the sociolectal universe in which it is conceived into a single analytical project. For instance, Greimas's initial focus on content analysis is an internal theoretical presupposition of his theory while simultaneously serving as a point of contact with various discourse theories of his

time. By extension, if different theoretical discourses, such as discursive semiotics and French discourse analysis, prioritized content analysis in the 1970s, it suggests that these theories explored properties of the same system of ideas. To reach such a conclusion, it is unnecessary to delineate the “interior” and “exterior” of the text—text and “context”—but rather to engage with the discourse that configures each “climate of opinion” (a term valued by K. Koerner) and weave its intertextual and interdiscursive network.

- (3) *Defining theoretical facts and their dynamics within a scientific system.* Theoretical facts, like linguistic facts, are particular occurrences that point to broader continuities and discontinuities within the scientific system. They can be analyzed according to semiotic modes of existence (virtual, actual, potential, realized), through a diachronic or synchronic perspective, or through their identity and alterity within the system (variation and change). This allows for the semiotic study of the emergence and disappearance of theoretical facts and their evolution within a single system or across derived systems. For example, when J. Fontanille (2008) conceived a generative trajectory of expression, homologating expression with semiotic experience, it is evident that expression acquired a new depth as a theoretical fact, becoming a distinct variant within Fontanille’s idiolect.
- (4) *Analyzing the enunciative and rhetorical dimensions of scientific texts.* Understanding the modes of enunciation and narration (delegation) in the production of scientific texts is essential. This entails analyzing how the enunciator constructs ethos and pathos and delegates distinct epistemic competences to various actors within the enunciation. This creates a genuine positional field with sources, targets, and obstacles. From the perspective of the constitutive heterogeneity of discourses, direct or indirect citations are key to revealing many of these enunciative phenomena.
- (5) *The programming and persuasion of theoretical discourses* concern what a theory does (the theoretical enunciation) and what it claims to do (its enunciated enunciation). Theoretical discourse, both expository and explanatory, operates through the extensiveness of its programming (quantity) and the intensity of its assertions (quality). In this way, it constructs its object while ensuring its continuity and significance through enunciative strategies that highlight or downplay specific aspects of the scientific program. A notable example is the evolving status of the notion of the expression plane in analytical practice throughout the development of the theory (Castro, 2022).

- (6) *Borrowing and redefining metalanguage.* Metalanguage is a classical category of analysis in linguistic historiography (see the works of P. Swiggers and O. Coelho) and often operates through borrowing and redefinition. It provides insights into how theories are formalized and the influences crystallized within them—whether explicitly acknowledged, implicitly embedded, forgotten, or erased through successive blends and refinements. Mapping metalanguage is essential for situating a discipline among its peers and radically different ones, both in terms of terms (lexically condensed and stabilized) and concepts or notions (discursively expanded in definitions).
- (7) *Figurativity in theoretical discourses.* In general, figurativity in philosophical and scientific discourses is rare, although many texts by G. Bachelard and G. Deleuze demonstrate the contrary. Particularly in scientific discourses, figurativity often manifests explicitly as diagrams (charts, tables, visual representations) of a verbo-visual nature, and implicitly through metaphors, especially spatial ones (*depth and surface, lower and upper, layers or levels, transversal, internal and external, central and marginal or peripheral, boundaries and thresholds, etc.*). These are largely rooted in the usage of various natural languages. Describing the figurativity of a theory, when adequate, provides insight into its cosmogonic potential.
- (8) *A modular perspective on language theories.* A module encompasses the hypotheses, objectives, limits, laws, principles, and analytical methods mobilized by a given theoretical construct. It organizes itself either as a broader and more encompassing theory or as a zone of theoretical concentration, often emerging from the study of a new object of analysis or theoretical issue. From this perspective, in discursive semiotics, we can identify various modules: narrative semiotics, discursive semiotics, semiotics of passions, tensive semiotics, semiotics of practices, and semiotics of forms of life, among others. These modules have thresholds and points of articulation, and while they may not be simply complementary. They can be used and combined in diverse ways without risking to be inconsistent or contradictory in investigations. The outcomes of different modules within a theory are homologous.

These principles, collaboratively conceived through the friction of ideas between semiotics and linguistic historiography, were developed and refined based on three main guiding axes:

- (1) history, historiography, and semiotics itself are texts, discourses, and practices that require linguistic, semiotic, and historical treatment;
- (2) discursive semiotics does not synthesize the entirety of diversity, nor is it the sole approach to producing semiotic hypotheses in the context of theories of language, discourse, and text. Just as there have been linguistic ideas before, during, and after the emergence of linguistics as a discipline, many of which were not formulated by linguists per se, semiotic ideas can be apprehended in popular knowledge, as well as in techniques, procedures, and conceptions from related or distant disciplines;
- (3) Like any other discipline or theory, semiotics does not need to be defended, justified, or rhetorically shielded in its scientific project. It is inherently subject to doubt, critique, and, most importantly, change. These changes are often driven more by socio-economic factors—such as national culture, literate traditions, politics, art, educational demands, linguistic domains, and intellectual collaboration or dependency—than by the discoveries or formulations of an individual scientific figure. Institutional factors, including training, affiliations, career structures, and the characteristics of academic groups, journals, and associations, also play a significant role in shaping its evolution.

The problems, principles, and axes outlined above, with a suggested semiotic approach, aim to outline the general framework of a historiography that examines (the historiography of) semiotics through distinctly semiotic methods.

Semiotics must now compose yet another chapter of its counter-hegemonic mission by engaging deeply with scientific texts and discourses, thereby contributing to a semiotically inspired meta-historiography. This undertaking is both timely and essential in an era in which science and history no longer stand as grand muses (poor Clio!) and the intricate, demanding task of rendering truth as truth has been subverted by fervent declarations and bravado, often devoid of evidence, logic, argumentation, or respect for history. ■

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