

Can Subject Speak?

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Abstract

This study addresses the limitations of current debates on subjectivity, particularly the tendency towards irrelevant inquiries and circular reasoning, by aiming to identify the true locus of power and desire that constitute value. Drawing on Greimasian narrative semiotics, the structure of subjectivity is analyzed with reference to the complex levels that underlie postcolonial and postmodern critiques. The findings show that value lies at the core of subjectivity, while desire and power emerge within the triangle of sender, subject, and object; a subject desires an object only when the sender has invested it with value. Hence, merely condemning the subject's location within stories of oppression or questioning narrative ownership is deemed an irrelevant question. The research concludes that postcolonial and postmodern interventions did not bring an end to the dominant position of marginal subjects, because they solidify fantasies of freedom and agency. The subject is revealed to be scandalous, absent from its own narrative, and condemned to alienation.

Keywords: *subject, object, actant*

Introduction

The first question asked related to subject is always mundane, and the answers are always abstruse (Dreier 2021; Mahon 1992a; Antognazza 2021; Read 2022; Cassidy 2021). Let's begin with the subject in writing since it is the site of intense debate on subjectivity (Derrida 2016:155), and with Greimas. He writes, "When I write, who speaks? Is it me? Which me? Is it that 'I' which is an empty place taken up by various roles one after another? I'm beginning a poor philosophy again" (Sverdiolas 2019:15). Yet the specific problem that Greimas seeks to address is not of recent origin but one that has circulated within semiotic and linguistic inquiry for decades. To situate it properly, we must return to an earlier juncture, Barthes's seminal reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, where the same questions are already at stake (1977). In his reading on Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes asks the same questions:

Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative· where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (1977:142)

To understand Greimas and Barthes's reflections on writer and voice requires further inquiry into the perennial debate on subjectivity, but my explanation above suffices to demonstrate the daunting problem of subjectivity.

Protagoras proclaims, “Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not” (Lee 2005:12). If we still debate Protagoras’s statement, then I can say nothing changes in our debate on subjectivity except the way we talk about it. Therefore, we tend to ignore any discussion on subjectivity, for we will never explain our own subjectivity since our relationship with ourselves is agonistic, and our subjectivity is nothing but our own perception of ourselves—it is fictitious (Norton and Norton 2007:139).

Nonetheless, we cannot think without subjectivity (Descartes 2008). It is through thought that we process and express experience. The very act of doubting, reasoning, imagining, or sensing presupposes a thinking subject. As Descartes famously declared: “Cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”). This maxim is the basis on which he establishes knowledge, from subjective certainty to objective reality (Descartes 2008). This overall conception of thinking highlights the extent to which subjectivity permeates all intellectual activity (Rahmati, Ziashahabi, and Davari Ardakani 2020). This persistent focus on thought processes leaves no doubt as to why thinking, in Descartes’ framework, cannot be separated from subjectivity: thought itself already presumes a subjective perspective.

Kant, locating subjectivity in the transcendental conditions of experience, argues that the subject actively structures experience through categories of understanding (Motta, Schulting, and Thiel 2022). Existentialism and phenomenology redirected attention from the transcendental back to the lived-experience of the subject (Rasmussen 1995, 1995; Rée 1995). Husserl gave precedence to subjectivity as the horizon of intentional consciousness, while Sartre emphasized radical freedom and self-creation, envisioning the subject as a project rather than an essential being (Rée 1995). For Husserl, intentionality speaks to the relation of consciousness to world made possible by phenomenological reduction and analysis of its transcendental conditions; for Sartre, intentionality reveals the ecstatic nature of consciousness—its perpetual turning out toward the world, engaged in projects that define its being-in-the-world. Thus, although Husserl emphasizes the constitutive nature of world consciousness, Sartre emphasizes the world’s insertion of the subject into action and self-formation. This phenomenological shift relocates the interest away from epistemology and to the practical and ethical dimensions of being. Whereas Husserl sought to lay down the requisite structures of consciousness, Sartre employed phenomenological description to reveal the lived truths of freedom, responsibility, and alienation (Spiegelberg 1981).

Further, Foucault reconfigured the subjectivity, speaking to how the subjectivity is historically constituted by practices, discourses, and power relations by situating ethics in self-forming processes. He asserts, “Subject is the place of the relationships one establishes with oneself as the central consideration in any ethical system or moral matrix and as, moreover, the way power intervenes most intimately into our lives”(Mahon 1992b:164). Subjectivity is neither a fixed interior reality but a processual site where ethical self-relation and power intersect. More precisely, the subject is the ground on which human beings produce and reproduce themselves by means of self-driven practices, but always subject to external relations of power. According to Foucault, the subject is not so much shaped by power as conditioned by it—therefore still susceptible to the chance of agency in constraint. In his later ethics, he shifts the focus away from rigid morality codes to ongoing practical experimentation, where subjects are agents in creating themselves (Rae 2023). Subjectivity is not conceived of as being but as becoming. Power thus controls practice in self-becoming, but always reflexively under the form of ethical practice (Bright, McKay, and Firth 2024).

Consequently, recent theorizing on authorship has redefined the “author” that resonates with the Foucauldian account of subjectivity. Authorship is addressed less as a figure of originality than as a relational place diffused across practices, institutions, and discourses (Procházka 2024).

Additionally, Derrida went on to deconstruct the self further by dismantling the traditional idea of the pre-linguistic, fixated subject by demonstrating that subjectivity is generated by language itself, as opposed to merely depicting it. Through his concept of *différance*—a word deliberately selected in order to express the double sense of “difference” and “deferral” in French—Derrida illustrates that meaning is never present but always deferred along a chain of signs. It deconstructs the self as an artifact of playfulness of text rather than some original presence. Language never allows for an undiluted instant of originariness of meaning—every act of expression is already in being in terms of difference, delay, and deferral. Thus, subjectivity is not inner nature or free agent but a product within the interwoven texture of language (Derrida 1982).

Contemporary feminist and postcolonial scholars emphasize the embodied and local nature of subjectivity, constrained by gendered, racialized, and colonial matrices (Dreier 2021). Simultaneously, recent neurophilosophy examines subjectivity as an emergent between-brain-world relation that rethinks the subject as ecologically and materially embedded (Northoff and Smith 2023).

The questions are then: How can we understand the subject when Barthes pronounces the death of the author (1977:142–48)? How can we still apply subject in understanding our being in the world, our relationship with ourselves and the other? With these questions, I do not mean to revisit the debate on **subjectivity** among the philosophers, but to find a way to understand subjectivity as a kind of structure applicable to **answering the questions**. I propose the Greimasian semiotics of narrative in which we focus on the relationship between the subject and the object, and the value constituted in the relationship (Greimas, Perron, and Collins 1989:544–46). It is practically applicable and theoretically inspiring to those who think the concept at the intersection of linguistics and philosophy.

Method

Subject

I will not summarize the perpetual debate on subject but explore its common trajectory, particularly in postcolonialism and postmodernism, since my purpose is to explain how subject emerges through the Greimasian semiotics of narrative. The problems of subjectivity are overarching and daunting, therefore I will limit myself to exploring the semantic chain of the problems by emphasizing the apparent homology by which I can trace the discourses of subject and place them in the Greimasian semiotics to identify the discursive layers in which the conceptualization of subject operates and to explore the discursive relationships that constitute the very notion of subject.

The problem with the subject is not to identify it, but to locate the power and desire that shape it and to intervene by proposing a counternarrative against the oppression. This is done inside the oppressive narrative since the subject is constructed inside the narrative, implying that the oppressed subject is scandalous. It is only possible through its alliance with its oppressor—the narrator. To discover truth is less important than to determine the reliability and intentionality of the narrator. However, again, the narrator is not outside of its own narrative—it is shaped by its own narrative. The question is

then: Who owns the narrative? This question does not throw the reader out of the text. It is aimed at discovering what is silent and absent in the text.

Ideology, collective unconscious, and myth are among the terms often used to describe the postmodern subject, only to end up with conspiracy theory and obscurity as a way to complicate the problem. In response, we ask: How do we make sense of the problems of subjectivity? Why do we ask the wrong question about whether or not the subject can speak or write?

Lacan observes the multi-layers of the signifiers, and the speaking (performing) subject is never fully inscribed on the Saussurean semiotic algorithm; there is always a fissure, the bar that creates the boundary between the speaker and his or her speech. He construes that referentialization of the signified is never complete (linguistic) because of the arbitrary relation of language and psyche, subjectivity and emotion. *S/s*, which *S* represents Signifier and *s* signified, is the topography of the unconscious (1977:163). The line separating the Signifier and the signified is the sovereign border; *S* and *s* never coalesce to be constitutive of (absolute) meaning(s). Crossing the border is an unfulfilled subjective desire. Hence, reading the unconscious through physical movements or reflexes can be delusive since their relationship is symptomatic: “So it is only by an abuse of the term that unconscious in the sense is confused with psychical, and that one may thus designate as psychical what is in fact an effect of the unconscious, as on the somatic for instance” (Lacan 1977:163). What is important for Lacan is the gap between subjective desire and psychoanalytical destiny (1977:172). The analysands situate themselves, their desire, in their refusal of the signifier: a lack of being in their very expressions, and their destiny (prescribed by their psychoanalyst) that remain mysterious for them. The analysands then resort to a melancholic projection of the self, as Lacan states, “there where I am not, because I cannot situate myself there” (1977:166). Lacan suggests that *I* should be described within the limit of its discursive context. *I* is never an autonomous identity but a discursive position. Each time a person says *I*, it is said in a chain of signifiers and determined by the symbolic order (culture, law, norms). The subject has no essence apart from these discursive limits—it is always positioned, divided, and mediated by language. To describe the subject, one must analyze the discursive structures that produce it, including their contradictions and failures (Fink 2004).

In contrast to Lacanian subject whose autonomy makes it distinct from its own articulation of self, Merleau-Ponty asserts that “what I communicate with primarily is not ‘representations’ or thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the ‘world’ at which he directs his aim” (2002:213). The ‘world’, for Merleau-Ponty, “is not a manner of speaking: it means that the ‘mental’ or cultural life borrows its structures from natural life and that the thinking subject must have its basis in the subject incarnate” (2002:225). In an interaction, phonetic gesture, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, leads to “a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence, exactly as a pattern of my bodily behaviors endows the object around me with certain significance both for me and for others” (2002:225). What constitutes meanings in Merleau-Ponty’s account is the embodiment endowed with

figurative signification, that is, “a certain way of bringing the body into play suddenly allows itself to be invested with a *figurative significance* which is conveyed outside us” (2002:225). It should be noted that the semantic process is not constituted through a chain of systematic actions but of unconscious ones. It occurs through habit in which the body incorporates new meanings without explicit reasoning. This habitual body is a repository of figurative significations that are readily available for expression. Recent scholars note that habit is not mechanistic but expressive; it enlarges our being-in-the-world and enables new modes of significance to emerge (Moya 2014). Recent scholarship emphasizes that this process is non-representational; meaning is in the doing itself, not in a mental representation (Mazis 2025). This notion of meaning fundamentally challenges empiricist views by grounding signification in the pre-reflective, embodied engagement of the living subject with their world. Meaning is not constructed through deliberate, systematic actions or linguistic articulations but emerges unconsciously from the body’s motor intentionality and its figurative interplay with the environment. The embodied responsiveness sustains the intentional arc: the integrated unity of perception, intelligence, sensitivity, and motricity. It is through this motor intentionality that significance is grasped immediately, especially fragmented in certain cognitive disorders (Netland 2020).

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty postulates intersubjectivity as a way of being in the world, critiquing the autonomy of the subject. Perception is constructed with the involvement of the whole body. He asserts that language is similar to the body as a way of being in the world. Speaking subject is situated in his or her capacity to react unconsciously, spontaneously—*motor intentionality* in Merleau-Ponty’s term (2002:127). Meanings are produced in what Merleau-Ponty calls *intentional arc* in which sensibility and motility are integrated (2002:157).

Subjectivity, Bourdieu demonstrates, emerges in the interaction with others in which one represents his or her body under the gaze of others (1990:74). The spontaneous, automatic kinesthetic mechanism is what regulates and disciplines the body, therefore regularity and consistence, as Bourdieu suggests in his concept of *doxa*, mark the presence of subjectivity. This does not mean that Bourdieuan subjectivity is static, but it has a certain duration and might change if the field is changed through a repetitive process until the body acquires the motor skills, what Bourdieu calls *body hexis*—it is how the subject engages with the object, undergoing changes through the system of values and meanings of the object (1990:74). And, Bourdieu asserts, “The world of objects, a kind of book in which each thing speaks metaphorically of all others and from which children learn to read the world, is read with the whole body, in and through the movements and displacements which define the space of objects as much as they are defined by it” (1990:76). Therefore, subjectivity is always bounded in *habitus*, for

The ‘subject’ born of the world of objects does not arise as a subjectivity facing an objectivity: the objective universe is made up of objects which are the product of objectifying operations structured according to the same structures that the habitus applies to them. The habitus is a metaphor of the world of objects, which is itself an endless circle of metaphors that mirror each other *ad infinitum*. (Bourdieu 1990:76–77)

However, Butler argues, it is citationality that constitutes subject (1993:15). It constitutes subject in a way that we do not choose our own names, but we must speak in the given names, otherwise we are not recognized (Butler 1993:225–26). Therefore, subject, as Derrida points out, is never present outside of language, it is constrained within the rules of language (1982:15).

Subjectivity emerges at the level of enunciation. Benveniste asserts, “*I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker” (1971:226). In a dialogue, the speaker and interlocutor project their subjectivity into the personal pronouns *I* and *you*. Only in the first and second person personal pronouns emerge subjects; the third person pronouns refer to non-subject, non-person (Benveniste 1971:229). *I* and *you* are indicative of personhood, however the relationship between the personal pronouns and personhood is exterior since they are shaped within the discourse (Benveniste 1971:225). Subjectivity emerges as a fundamental property of language (Benveniste 1971:224). Benveniste postulates that the linguistic status of a person reflects the speaker’s perception of himself or herself, his or her very consciousness of being (subject). He states, “It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in *its* reality which is that of being” (1971:224). And it is in the paradigmatic structure of I-Thou, subjectivity is constructed. In the reciprocity and reversibility of the I-Thou relation, Benveniste situates consciousness (1971:225). This consciousness is dynamic since “[language] permits each speaker to *appropriate to himself* an entire language by designating himself as *I* (Benveniste 1971:226). By uttering “*I*”, the speaker does not merely refer—they constitute themselves within the linguistic system (Paolucci 2022). By doing so, the speaker situates themselves in the linguistic system (langue) and modifies it through their specific utterance (parole). The speaker mediates between the shared structure of language and their individual agency. In this enunciation is where the subject emerge. (Paolucci, mask). And, the enunciation involves not just the “*I*” but a network of mediating instances, positioning subjectivity as decentralized and relational (Paolucci 2025).

Greimasian Subject

Greimas postulates that subject is a concept. It can be playful and speculative about the human unconscious, yet it is still founded on the solid ground of narrative, where the subject emerges as an actant, occupying actantial positions, undergoing transformation, and maintaining its coherent identity throughout the narrative program (Greimas 1982:320). This is shown in the actantial mythical modal (Greimas 1983:207).

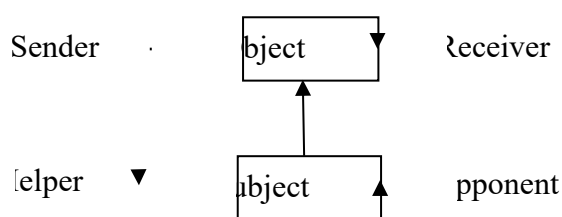


Figure 1: Actantial mythical modal.

To occupy a position as a subject, an actant requires an object. The object must be invested with value in order to be desirable (Greimas 1982:216–17). On the other side, the subject must have competence to be able to acquire the object. The sender persuades the receiver to acquire an object, thus investing value in the object. This constitutes a contract that transforms the receiver into a competent subject. The object the sender invokes, as a value or a threat, will determine the subject's performance (Greimas 1982:203–6). The subject does not emerge for itself—it is for the object. Greimas argues, “the subject as being can be affected modally only by the mediation of the investment of the object” (1993:4), or in other words, “the modalization of the state of the subject ... is conceivable only if it begins by modalizing the object, which, in becoming a ‘value,’ imposes itself on the subject” (Greimas 1993:4).

The subject exists at the level of function, while the sender exists at the level of communication. Yet, communication in the actantial structure does not end at the receiver's understanding. It is where the narrative begins. In Greimas's semiotic structure, the function of doing is where the subject is related to the object, and the function of communication is where the sender persuades the receiver of the value of the object. At this point, Greimas demonstrates how communication works in semiotics, in which, unlike in pragmatics, the receiver is not an empty position. Communication endows the receiver with competence—it transforms the receiver into a subject. Competence situates the receiver within the modal categories of knowing, wanting, being able, and having to—conditions for subjectivity within narrative action (Greimas 1982:256). This transformation occurs through what is called “communicative doing” (Greimas 1971:800). One crucial aspect is the transfer of a “non-actualized program of doing” from the sender to the receiver. The sender communicates an object, often a set of values or a program, to the receiver, convincing the receiver to become the subject of doing the object and actualize it (Greimas 1971:801). This persuasive act, which often involves a fiduciary contract between subjects, instills the necessary competence in the receiver (on meaning xxxiii-xxxiv) (Greimas, Perron, et al. 1989:xxxiii-xxxiv). The receiver is no longer an empty position but is endowed with the capacity for action.

However, the actantial modal square does not show the relationship between the receiver and the subject, and most importantly, sender and receiver as the types of subject. This problem is resolved in the form of a narrative project: $NP = F [S1 (S2 Ov)]$ (Greimas 1982:245). Within this form, the Narrative Program (NP) consists of the function (F) of utterance of doing $[S1 (S2 Ov)]$. What the subject of doing (S1) performs is the utterance of state (S2 Ov). The utterance of state is an utterance performed by the subject of state (S2) to constitute value in the object (Ov) (Greimas 1982:245). Now, it becomes clear how the narrative program works through the interaction between those layers. But, more importantly, the forms clarify the confusion in our notion of sender and receiver at the level of communication in the actantial modal square. At the level of communication, the sender is the subject of state since its utterance invests values in the object and therefore requires a response from the receiver, and the receiver is the subject of doing since it enacts the subject of state's utterance (Greimas 1982:369). We

follow the journey of the subject of doing, but never question the value the subject of state endows to the object.

To use the other terms, there are two kinds of subjects: the subject of being and the subject of doing. Being is placed in opposition to doing, in which being is the realization of knowing, while doing is that of being able (Greimas 1982:195, 1993:4, 23–24). Hence, to put this understanding into the actantial mythical modal, the subject of being is the subject of knowledge (as previously explained), and the subject of doing is the subject of power.

Yet, the notion of being requires further explanation. Greimas's concept of being never escapes logic and value, for it is constitutive of our very notion of truth. Greimas remarks that "the four terms [whatever categories we put in the semiotic square] of the category are not defined in a *substantial manner, but only as points of intersection, as the results of relations*" (1982:310). Further, he describes that two relations of contrariety enter into the relation of contradiction between themselves, and two relations of complementarity establish the relation of contrariety between themselves (Greimas 1982:310). In our case of being, it can be illustrated in the following figure:

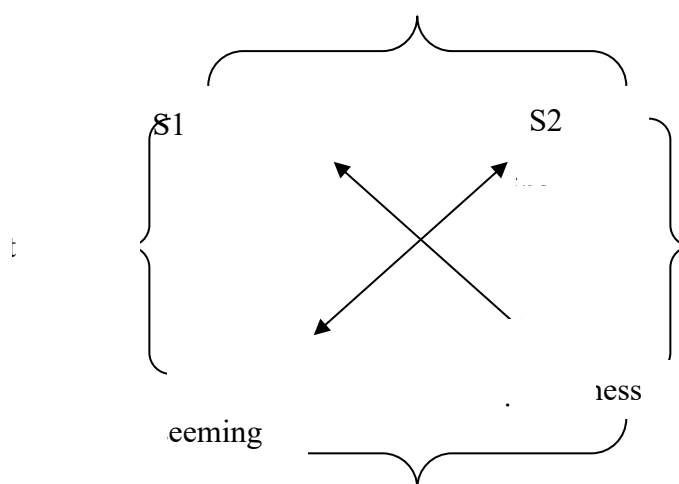


Figure 2: Illustration of the second generation of categorial terms (1982:310).

Figure 2 demonstrates that a claim for truth is constituted by corporeal presence, secret by invisible or unarticulated being, lie by visible or articulated non-being, and falseness by invisible or unarticulated non-being. It should be noted, however, that "an opposition between doing and being (understood not in its ontological sense, but according to its semiotic acceptance), an opposition which derives from the duality of enunciation vs. utterance" (Greimas, Courtès, and Rengstorf 1976:433). Therefore, "the subject is but a virtual focal point (a space ab quo), or, more precisely, a logical subject whose enunciative act may be semiotically constructed from his presence in the utterance, with the help of a corresponding logicosemantic simulacrum, totally

independent of historical or biographical contingencies, springing from other disciplines”(Greimas et al. 1976:435).

Lacanian subject remains secret, for it is projected in its resistance to full articulation due to limitation of language and lack of competence (including psychological obstacles such as paranoia, phobia, and trauma). Butlerian subject is situated in being and seeming, however we should note that what Butler means by materiality, being, is not outside of discourse. The reason Butlerian subjectivity seems ambiguous is because Butler does not depart from being as we might expect, but from seeming, or performativity in Butler's term. It problematizes our ontological expectation of what performativity might produce. Subjectivity is suspended on a chain of repetition, and through this repetition, sedimentation or *materialization* is established (Butler 1993:15–16).

Discussion

Non-Enunciative Subject

In dealing with scientific discourses, Greimas et al. remind us that “in order to be accepted as true, [scientific discourse] tries to appear not to be the subject's discourse, but rather a pure utterance expressing the necessary relations between things. It thus, to the extent possible, erases all marks of enunciation” (1989:658). Greimas et al. construe “enunciation as an arrangement of knowledge, that is, the production of knowledge, the mechanisms of its transmission and of its reception;” and “utterance as an eventual representation, as a string of recounted events, bearing meaning” (1976:436). The *subjectivising* and *objectivising* camouflages, the terms Greimas et al. propose, emerge since in the discourse, “the subject of enunciation passes itself off as an I [je] that is the guarantor of truth” (1989:658). *I* in a discourse is not really enunciating I (Greimas, Collins, et al. 1989:658).

In a similar vein, Bourdieu also reminds us of the fissure between theory and practice. Social science must not only, as objectivism would have it, break with native experience and the native representation of that experience, but also, by a second break, call into question the presuppositions inherent in the position of the ‘objective’ observer who, seeking to interpret practices, tends to bring into the object the principles of his relation to the object, as is shown for example by the privileged status he gives to communicative and epistemic functions, which inclines him to reduce exchanges to pure symbolic exchanges. (1990:27)

Bourdieu's concern implies a very daunting, if not impossible, task for researchers to articulate what happens in their field research. This is what Greimas underscores as he points out the difference between the enunciation of doing (narrative): EN1=F doing (S→O) and that of communication (discourse): EN2=F communication (D1→O→D2). In the first enunciation of doing EN1=F doing, subject S does an object O (S→O). In the second enunciation of communication EN2=F communication, the sender D1 communicates the object O to the receiver (D2 D1→O→D2). EN1 emerges at the level of narrative, since it contains what the subject has to do in a narrative program, the modal order: willing (knowledge) and being-able

(competence). EN2 at the level of discourse, for it contains an account of competence (Greimas 1971:800–801). The different layers in EN1 and EN2 lead to different perceptions of the competence and performance and different actantial relationships (Greimas 1971:804–5).

The combinations of the two canonical enunciations result in two different narrative programs: $EN1 \rightarrow EN2$, and $EN2 \rightarrow EN1$, and $EN2 (D1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow D2) \rightarrow EN1 (S \rightarrow O)$ (Greimas 1971:801). In the first narrative program, the first enunciation of *active doing* EN1 indicates that subject S does an object O ($S \rightarrow O$), which then in the second enunciation of *commutative doing* EN2, sender D1 communicates the subject's doing of the object to receiver D2 ($D1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow D2$). Hence, what sender D1 communicates is an event. In the second narrative program, the second enunciation of *commutative doing* EN2 shows that sender D1 communicates an object O to the receiver D2 ($D1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow D2$), which then the receiver D2 as subject S does the object O ($S \rightarrow O$) (Greimas 1971:801). The object sender D1 communicates is a non-actualized object to convince receiver D2 to become the subject of doing the object (Greimas 1971:801). In other words, the first narrative program begins with an event and ends with a contract, while the second narrative program begins with a contract and ends with doing. And, I need to underscore what event and contract mean. An action can be identified as an event because not merely that the subject performs it, but also that the sender acknowledges the action—an event is an appreciated action. And, *contract* is what bounds the sender, the receiver, and the subject and transforms them (Greimas 1982:59).

Competence

Competence is defined as “that which causes to be” or “all the prerequisites and presuppositions which make action possible” (Greimas 1982:45). It is essentially a “knowing-how-to-do” that enables a subject to perform an action (Greimas 1982:45). It is a modal structure, a “hierarchical organization of modalities” that guides human action (Greimas 1982:45). These modalities form a syntactic trajectory for action, typically flowing as it is shown in Greimas's syntactic trajectory: $want \rightarrow know \rightarrow being-able \rightarrow do$ (Greimas and Porter 1977:37). A subject's journey through a narrative often involves the successive acquisition of these modalities, culminating in performance. A subject first wants an object, then knows how to acquire it, then is able to act, and finally does the action (Greimas, Perron, et al. 1989:137–38).

Essentially, competence “belongs to the study of human action and sets up the subject as actant” (Greimas 1982:45). It is central to the actantial relationship in the actantial modal square. It is defined in terms of being, in contrast to performativity as corporeal activities. It is fiduciary and demands enactments under the modalities of necessity, free will, intention, and accountability. The modalities are very constitutive of the subject. It contains prescription, optionality, obligation, and prohibition (Greimas 1982:73). It is the process by which we know how the structure becomes a norm and how the norm operates to judge whether the subject succeeds or fails in accomplishing the goal (Greimas 1982:46).

The competence the subject possesses as the implication of the sender's manipulation serves as the basis of the narrative program. Competence is "a system of constraints (a set of positive and negative injunctions)" (Greimas 1982:45). It leads to what it seems are the options in which the subject determines its own destiny (Greimas 1982:44–46). However, the subject is never the agent of its own transformation, if agency means that the subject creates its own narrative. It exists inside the narrative, which is not its own.

Subject: the Doer

Then, at last, to echo Spivack (2023), the question is: Can the subject speak? It is a rhetorical question, but it is a persuasive counternarrative as long as it is articulated as an irony. The subject exists not for speaking about itself. When it speaks about itself, it objectifies and alienates itself. The subject becomes a subject because it does something, and therefore it gains recognition from the sender. But never question the sender and the value it invokes, for the answer must be common sense. They are "the result of the semiotic articulation of the collective semantic universe" (Greimas 1982:149).

When a value is placed within the actantial relation, and the subject is put in pursuit of the value, then we have a discussion on ideology, for "there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subjects. Meaning, there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, *by the category of the subject* and its functioning" (Althusser 2014:308).

Can a subject speak? If this question is oriented towards a system of value (axiology), then semiotics offers an interesting solution. Greimas et al. suggest,

Interest was focused on subjects' trajectories, which are indeed realized by means of narrative programs in discourse, or in the subjects' own lived experiences. This made it possible to consider in detail not only the problem of objects of value which are sought after by subjects and the organization of these objects into axiological systems, but the organization of values as well into specific axiological discursive sequences. (1989:546)

Semiotics turns into the problems of postmodernist morality as it attempts to answer the questions of manipulation, competence, and judgment. Greimas et al. propose three types of semiotics with their specific purposes: "a semiotics of manipulation—how the sender manipulates the subject; then a semiotics of action—how competence is acquired to carry out performance; and finally a semiotics of sanction—that is to say, passing judgments on self, on others, and on things (1989:543).

Greimasian semiotics allows us to dig deep into the perceptual center on which values are constructed. And, subject becomes a useful concept to understand why and how life is lived.

Conclusion

The essential problem of subjectivity lies not in defining it, but in determining the power and desire that constitute its inherent value. The subject is inextricably linked with the object, and its desire is primarily initiated whenever a sender imparts value to that object.

The Greimasian model reveals the subject as an actant, who is largely present to “do” rather than “speak about itself,” and whose self-identified agency and autonomy are often mythic constructs in grand narratives. It is a perspective that relocates the subject’s relationship with its narrative as being predestined to self-estrangement and never actually speaking on its own terms. This approach attempts to erase traces of enunciation in academic discourse, allowing it to present itself as objective truth by imitating the dynamic relationship between the subject of being and the subject of doing.

Greimasian semiotics provides a critical framework for interpreting how subjects and values are discursively constructed and juxtaposed within the predicaments of postmodern ethics. The three kinds of semiotics developed in this work—manipulation, action, and sanction—present a model for how competence is learned by subjects, action is taken, and judgment is rendered. It would be intriguing to explore the dynamic interaction between these modes of semiotics in various cultural and social narratives, drawing on the insight that the subject is a necessary concept for grasping how thoroughly individuals do and ask questions about life. Through this approach, there would be potential to go beyond superficial criticism in order to deconstruct the underlying structures that make up identity, power, and meaning in today’s world.

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