

## 2. THE SEMIOTIC SQUARE

### SUMMARY

The semiotic square, developed by Greimas and Rastier, is a tool used in oppositional analyses. It allows us to refine an analysis by increasing the number of analytical classes stemming from a given opposition from two (e.g., life/death) to four – (1) life, (2) death, (3) life and death (the living dead), (4) neither life nor death (angels) – to eight or even ten.

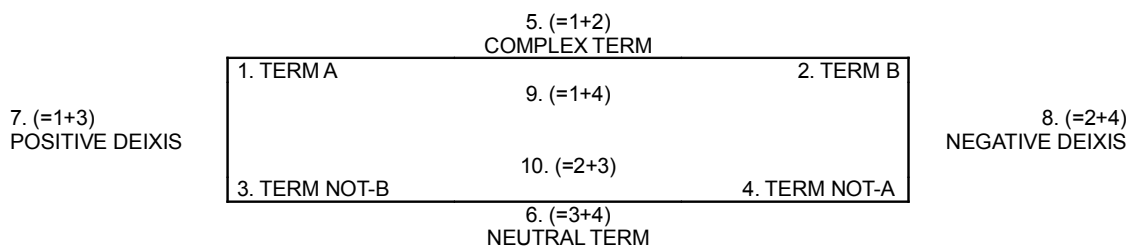
### 1. THEORY

The actantial model, isotopy and the semiotic square are undoubtedly the best-known theoretical models that have emerged from the Paris School of semiotics, a group of scholars with A. J. Greimas as their central figure (Courtés, Coquet, Floch, Fontanille, Zilberberg and others). The popularization of these models as "gadgets", to use Floch's language (1985, p. 197), in a goodly number of more or less "semiotic" texts attests to this.

Like the actantial model, the canonical narrative schema and the veridictory square, the semiotic square is designed to be both a conceptual network and a visual representation of this network, usually depicted in the form of a "square" (which actually looks like a rectangle). Developed by Greimas and Rastier (1968), the semiotic square may be defined as the logical articulation of a given opposition (this definition is adapted from Courtés' (1991, p. 152))<sup>1</sup>. The semiotic square is used to refine an oppositional analysis by increasing the number of analytical classes stemming from a given opposition from two (e.g., life/death) to four – (1) life, (2) death, (3) life and death (the living dead), (4) neither life nor death (angels) – to eight or even ten.

Below is an empty semiotic square (unlabelled, with no specific opposition mapped out).

*Structure of the semiotic square*



**LEGEND:**

The + sign links the terms that are combined to make up a metaterm (a compound term); for example, 5 is the result of combining 1 and 2.

### 1.1 CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS

The semiotic square includes the following elements:

1. Terms
2. Metaterms (compound terms)
3. Relations (between the terms)
4. Operations
5. Observing subject(s) who do(es) the classifying (the real author, implied author, narrator, character, etc.; see the chapter on thymic analysis)
6. Object(s) classified on the square
7. Time (of observation)
8. Transformations and/or successions (in time) of subjects and objects

#### 1.1.1 THE TERMS

The semiotic square is composed of four terms, each corresponding to a position on the square:

<sup>1</sup> The semiotic square was developed gradually, Courtés tells us (1991, p. 152), by building on Lévi-Strauss' research in anthropology and the linguistic theories of the Prague School (or Circle), which brought in the Russian linguists Jakobson and Trubetskoï in the late 1920s.

Position 1: (term A)  
 Position 2: (term B)  
 Position 3: (term not-B)  
 Position 4: (term not-A)

The first two terms form the basic opposition of the square, and the other two are obtained by negating each term of the opposition.

### 1.1.2 THE METATERMS

The semiotic square includes six metaterms. The metaterms are compound terms created by combining the four simple terms. Some of the metaterms have been named. (The complex term and the neutral term, despite their names, are indeed metaterms).

Position 5: A + B, the complex term  
 Position 6: not-B + not-A, the neutral term  
 Position 7: A + not-B, the positive deixis  
 Position 8: B + not-A, the negative deixis  
 Position 9: A + not-A, unnamed  
 Position 10: B + not-B, unnamed

### 1.1.3 RELATIONS

The following relations have been established between the terms on the square:

1. Contrariety: the relation between term A and term B, and between term not-A and term not-B
2. Contradiction: the relation between term A and term not-A, and between term B and term not-B

The term "opposition" encompasses both contrariety and contradiction in this text.

3. Implication or complementarity (Fontanille's term: 2003, p. 60): the relation between term not-B and term A, and between term not-A and term B

Contrariety, contradiction and complementarity are bidirectional relations (that is, A is the opposite of B and vice versa), whereas implication is unidirectional, from not-B to A and from not-A to B.

Because of the relation between them, terms A and B are called the "contraries" and terms not-A and not-B are the "subcontraries" (because they are contrary terms located "below" the contraries); terms A and not-A are the "contradictories", and terms B and not-B are "contradictories" as well.

#### NOTE: THE LOGICAL STATUS OF CONTRARIETY AND CONTRADICTION

According to Courtés (1991, p. 153), contrariety does not have a formal logical status (which contradiction does: it is defined by a privative relation; we will come back to this later): the contraries are simply givens in any particular society. Courtés goes on to say, however, that Greimas "postulates that two terms may be said to be contrary when the presence of one presupposes the presence of the other, and when the absence of one goes hand in hand with the absence of the other. More generally speaking, two terms (s1 and s2) are said to be contrary if the negation of one implies the affirmation of the other, and vice versa" (1991, p. 153). By our observations, the contraries vary not just from one culture to another, but also from one type of semiotic act to another: "The novel, in contrast with poetry, sets Love in opposition with Ambition – a theme that is missing from poetry" (Rastier, 2001, p. 206).

### 1.1.4 OPERATIONS

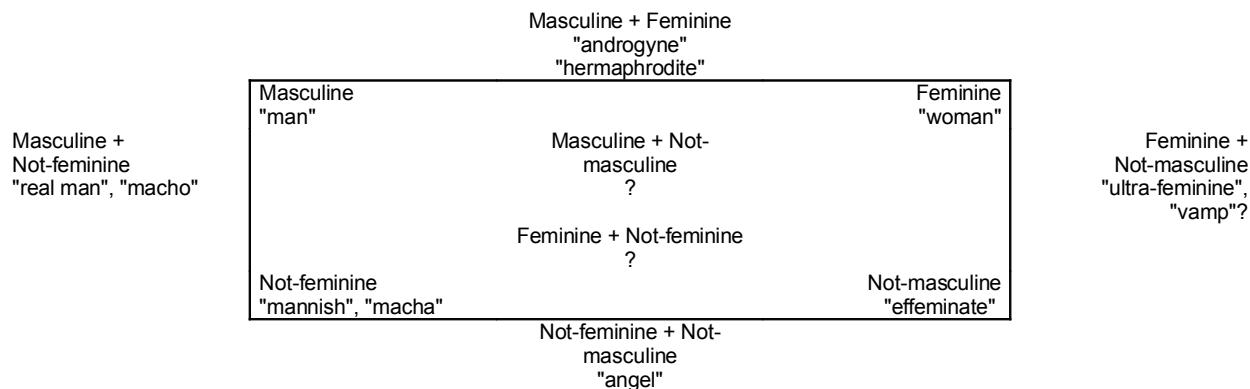
The following operations describe movements on the semiotic square, that is, movements from one position on the square to another (the arrow indicates the direction of movement):

1. Negation: term A → term not-A; term B → term not-B;
2. Assertion (affirmation): term not-B → term A; term not-A → term B.

## 1.2 AN EXAMPLE OF A SEMIOTIC SQUARE

We now have enough background to show an example of a semiotic square filled in and labelled. This one uses the opposition masculine/feminine:

*An example of a semiotic square: masculine/feminine*



The words in quotation marks are examples of concepts that can be classified under a term or a metaterm. These concepts may be represented by the words used here or by others (for example, the concept 'androgynous' could be manifested in a text by the word "androgynous", but also by the expression "he was as masculine as he was feminine"). The question marks in positions 9 and 10 illustrate how difficult it can be to find actual phenomena that correspond to these metaterms. We will look at this square in more detail later.

### 1.3 THREE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

There are ultimately three levels of analysis that should be distinguished:

1. Do the objects covered by a given position on a given square actually exist in reality? That is, in reality, one cannot be dead and alive at the same time, a state exemplified by our worst horror, the vampire.
2. Can a position on the square be lexicalized more or less adequately; that is, can it be named with an existing word or expression in standard usage<sup>2</sup>. For example the neutral term 'neither euphoria nor dysphoria' (that is, neither positive nor negative) can be lexicalized in the word "indifference", or better yet, with a technical neologism, "aphoria" (where the prefix "a-" indicates an absence of). In other cases, lexical choices may be lacking, which appears to be the case with the metaterm composed of euphoria and not-dysphoria.

NOTE: NAMING THE BASIC OPPOSITION ON THE SQUARE

One should not be unnecessarily restrictive in naming the basic opposition of the square. For example, one can just as well use the opposition life/not-life instead of life/death. The subcontraries would then be not-life (whose meaning is different from the first not-life) and not-not-life. The names of the classes on a semiotic square, like those for any analytical class, are labels and conventions more than anything else.

3. Is each position on a given square realized in the corresponding semiotic act? Generally speaking, only some of the possible positions are manifested in a semiotic act. Our masculine/feminine square is an abstract one; it does not describe a specific act.

### 1.4 HOMOGENEITY IN THE SQUARE

As with any analytical tool, a semiotic square should be explicitly coherent (the square should describe a homogeneous universe (Floch, 1985, p. 200)). The analyst is naturally the one who defines what type and what degree of homogeneity are adequate, depending on the corpus and the objectives (all of which are open to discussion, of course).

For instance, in our masculine/feminine square (which is based on Floch's: 1985, p. 199), we chose to represent only the "natural", "spontaneous" states of masculinity/femininity (in a general sense, that is, not just biological), despite having to refer to unreal beings (angels). In order to increase or decrease the number of phenomena it covers, a square may be made more general or more specific. Generalizing will allow us to include in our square the "artificial" phenomenon of transsexuality. A transsexual who was originally a man has gone through the state of not-manhood (castration, etc.) to reach the state of womanhood. Depending on the descriptive stances required, one can say that the transsexual is a woman in some respects (legal, for example) and a man in others (chromosomal, for example). In other words, by changing the focus from the parts to the whole or from one part to another, we can make the classification vary. Classifications may also

<sup>2</sup> There are elements of content that have not been lexicalized in any language; one must speak in paraphrases to talk about them. This is presumably the case with the semic molecule /yellow/ + /viscous/ + /harmful/, which is present in Zola's *L'Assommoir* [*The Drunkard*] (see Rastier, 1989, pp. 167-170).

vary depending on whether one has a class of objects in mind or a specific object. For instance, a radical feminist may consider men in general to be dysphoric (negative), but her life partner would be excluded from this overall judgment. (For details on part-whole and class-element relations, refer to the chapters on structural relations and thymic analysis.)

## 1.5 THE SEMIOTIC SQUARE AND VERIDICTORY STATUS

Veridictory status (true/false) can and sometimes must be included in the analysis, and therefore so must the observing subjects. For the apostles (observing subjects), Jesus (the object being observed) truly did pass from life to death, and then to life. (Later on, we will see that the trajectory is more complex in reality.) For the non-believers (observing subjects), if he existed, Christ simply passed from life to death, like everyone. Because of this, we will distinguish between reference positions or trajectories, which are defined by the observing subject who determines the ultimate truth of the text (usually the narrator), and assumptive positions or trajectories, which may be contradicted by the reference elements. For example, when stating the believers' (assumptive subject) thesis and the non-believers' (assumptive subject) thesis, the narrator (the reference subject) of a Christian essay will validate the former and invalidate the latter.

Changes in beliefs may be represented as a sequence of positions on the square, as long as we indicate the veridictory status (true/false) that applies to each position taken by each object on the square. Thus, for Thomas, after the crucifixion, Christ was in death, which he mistakenly believed until he touched his wounds and then realized that Christ was actually in life.

NOTE: ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE DYNAMICS OF VERIDICTORY STATUS

The transsexual provides another example of how the veridictory categories work. In terms of the veridictory square (see the chapter on this subject), one might say that the transsexual's being has not changed, and that her trajectory, like the transvestite's (which, of course, can play on an ambiguous, simultaneously male and female appearance) affects only her seeming. We can see that using the veridictory square entails moving from one part (being) of the observed object to the other (seeming).

## 1.6 FURTHER DETAILS ON THE METATERMS

### 1.6.1 METATERMS 9 AND 10

Metaterms 9 and 10 are not recognized in classical semiotics, undoubtedly for the sake of observing the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction<sup>3</sup>. However, at least from a theoretical and deductive perspective, given that one can describe a zombie with assertions like "he was dead and not dead" as opposed to "he was dead and alive", we ought to consider the possibility that these metaterms exist, so long as we can rule out the possibility that the two are simply different names for the same thing ("not-dead" being equivalent to "alive")<sup>4</sup>.

However, it is a fact that the apparent contradiction in many "absurd" utterances is neutralized to some degree by dissimulation of meanings (see Rastier, 1987, p. 143 and following). This seems to be the case with the usual opening statement in Majorcan folk tales: "Axio era y no era" (it was and was not) (see Jakobson, 1963, p. 239) and the Confucian maxim "Your son is not your son", where the dissimulations hinge on the oppositions imaginary/real ("it was"/"it was not") and filiation/property ("your son"/"is not your son").

### 1.6.2 METATERMS 7 AND 8

There are two fundamental ways to conceptualize the positive and negative deixes (metaterms 7 and 8). One way is to think of them as intensifying a term by affirming a semantic value and simultaneously negating the opposite of that value (for example, white and not-black). This is the perspective we used in designing our square of the feminine/masculine opposition. (A "macho" man would thus overstate the so-called virile personality traits, and simultaneously attenuate the supposedly feminine traits). This principle also applies to the opposition glory/humiliation in *The Red and the Black* by Stendhal: Julien Sorel seeks glory while at the same time he shuns humiliation; the object of his quest should therefore be placed at the positive deixis.

<sup>3</sup> The classical model does not foresee combining a term and a metaterm, either (ex.: life and not-life + not-death). It seems we must allow for the existence of meta-metaterms. And we have in fact found an example, composed of a complex term and a neutral term: In the eleven-level "scale of thinking" proposed by Zen master Albert Low (1992, p. 62), one of the levels, the dilemma, is described as: "both YES and NO, but neither Yes nor NO".

<sup>4</sup> In order to maintain that the principle of non-contradiction applies to the semiotic square – which would need to be demonstrated – one could argue that there are no "natural" units that combine contradictory elements (as far as the linguistic realm goes, we are talking about lexicalized units, that is units that exist as morphemes, words or expressions). Nevertheless, the fact remains that we can create a profusion of units that combine these contradictories. (In the linguistic realm, we would be working at levels of complexity above the word or expression level, that is, the sentence and the text).

On the other hand, when one integrates a dimension of quantity or intensity in the analysis, the negation of a term may be interpreted as that term at a weaker intensity (for example, not-life is still life, but at a lesser intensity, as in agony). Then the deixes can be viewed as representing a higher intensity of term A or B from which they are derived. For instance, life + not-death would correspond to an intense state of life, as in the prodigious vitality of some of the characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. However, this interpretation disagrees with the quantitative principle, which says that by combining a given element (such as life) with a corresponding element of less intensity (not-death), one obtains an element of intermediate intensity.

### 1.6.3 METATERM 6

By virtue of the semiotic square's principle of homogeneity, the neutral term (metaterm 6) contains only those elements *marked* as 'neither one', not the elements that simply belong to the residual class of the square. For example, normally a concept like 'wealth' is simply absent from a square like life/death and does not enter into its neutral term. The "residual" class of the semiotic square incorporates all elements put into positions other than those selected by the analyst and, of course, all other elements.

### 1.6.4 THE METATERMS: POSITIVE/BALANCED/NEGATIVE

Metaterms 5, 6, 9 and 10 are said to be positive or negative, depending on which of the two contrary or contradictory terms is dominant. For example, relative to the opposition prose/poetry, the expression "poetic prose" is a positive complex term, whereas "prose poem" is a negative complex term (in that the primary feature, poetry, is only partly deflected by the first word). One can also anticipate dominance in the other metaterms, at least in theory. When there is no dominance, we call it a balanced metaterm<sup>5</sup>. If there is no indication whether a metaterm is positive, balanced or negative, one cannot assume that it is balanced; this only indicates that the analysis has made no determination (as of yet) with respect to balance. One can also use a reductive methodology, that is, an intentional simplification, and choose not to specify whether the metaterms are positive, balanced or negative.

### 1.6.5 THE METATERMS AND SUCCESSIVE/SIMULTANEOUS APPREHENSION

How one distinguishes between terms and metaterms depends on whether two terms judged as distinct and different are apprehended successively or simultaneously. The oxymoron "black sun" (Gérard de Nerval) can be counted as a complex term (light + darkness) by predication (there exists a sun that is black); conversely, in the linear (tactical) construction of meaning, it would count as two contrary terms in succession. To give another example, the title *Goat Parasol* (Saint-John Perse) illustrates, as does the text, the clash between culture and nature (in the anthropological sense of the word "culture", as that which is produced by man). If we consider "parasol" and "goat" in isolation and successively, then we have a succession of opposite terms (culture, then nature). Conversely, if we consider the syntagm without breaking it down (a parasol made of goat skins), a complex term emerges (culture + nature)<sup>6</sup>.

#### NOTE: THE RELATIVITY OF OPPOSITIONS AND METATERMS

Within a single semiotic act, one element may occupy different positions, simply depending on the point of reference adopted. Thus, an opposition "has no substance; it is merely a rapport, and a single variable may be associated with one pole, the opposite pole, or somewhere between the two, depending on the context" (Courtés, 1991, p. 170). Consider the opposition nature/culture: In a well-known tripartite division of spaces, French-Canadian rural legend opposes the forest to the land, as well as the land to the city. Thus, the term "land" successively occupies the position of culture relative to the forest (the "land" is organized by man), and the position of nature relative to the city. One can also consider "land" to be a metaterm (a complex term, to be precise) if one thinks of the three terms "forest", "land" and "city" all together, and not in terms of the two binary relations (see the chapter on figurative, thematic and axiological analysis).

## 1.7 TYPOLOGIES OF OPPOSITIONS

Since the semiotic square deals with oppositions, it will no doubt be helpful to formulate a typology of oppositions.

<sup>5</sup> A balanced metaterm is obviously less plausible in theory. Given a scale from 0 to 0.9 with increments in tenths, there are more possibilities for dominance (all of the positions from 0.1 to 0.9, except 0.5) than for balance (position 0.5). The notions of dominance and balance pave the way for quantification within the qualitative classification of the square. The relations between the semiotic square and the tensive model (see the corresponding chapter) remain to be established. If we overlay the tensive model on the semiotic square, we can more accurately account for quantitative variations in the elements that make up a metaterm, typically the complex term. For example, the tensive model can be used to describe not just those terms in inverse relation – which already allows for the notion of balance/dominance –, but also terms that are conversely related (or directly related), where an increase in the strength of a term goes hand-in-hand with an increase for the other term, and likewise for a decrease. For the purposes we have just described, the tensive model has a broader application than does the semiotic square, since it does not require elements in opposition; they must be describable in terms of intensity and extent, however.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, whether the units involved are assimilated or dissimilated depends on the level on which the analyst is working (morpheme, word, expression, syntagm, etc.).

The most important kinds of oppositions in semiotics are categorial, incremental and privative (Courtés, 1991, pp. 70-71). (1) Oppositions described as categorial (true/false, legal/illegal) do not allow for an intermediate term. (2) Incremental oppositions take a given semantic axis with more than two divisions and project it onto a scale. For example, the semantic axis ranging from burning to frozen may be set out as follows: burning vs. hot vs. warm vs. cool vs. cold vs. frozen. (3) Oppositions described as privative (life/death, animate/inanimate, relevant/irrelevant, and so on), commonly used in phonology and lexical semantics, are defined by the presence of a given feature in one of the terms of the opposition and its absence in the other; according to Courtés, they are non-incremental. For instance, death is described in all the dictionaries as the termination of life<sup>7</sup>.

#### NOTE: RELATIVITY IN THE TYPOLOGY

Let us say that a given opposition's classification is relative in the typology we have just presented. True/false is a non-incremental opposition in classical logic, but fuzzy logic admits intermediate values (quantifiable or not): For instance, on a scale of 0 to 1, if a proposition is 0.7 true, then it is 0.3 false (see Martin, 1983).

The semiotic square can undoubtedly map out all of the types of oppositions<sup>8</sup>. However, it imprints its own dynamic on the oppositions that constitute it. Oppositions that are considered as non-incremental in the system being described – those with no intermediate term, in theory (like true/false in classical logic) – somehow manage to acquire an intermediate zone on the semiotic square: the two subcontraries, positions 3 and 4 on the square. No matter what the nature of the original opposition, a privative relation is set up between positions 1 and 4 of the square, and between positions 2 and 3. In our opinion, these two privative relations are not necessarily non-incremental (we are applying the same principle of possible gradation to these two relations as we have to the relations on which the other metaterms are established). A question arises regarding the relation between the underlying oppositional structure of the square, which we have just summarized, and the underlying structure of the object being described. For example, in the case of a text that belongs to a non-incrementalist system because of its main theme, its genre or its age, is it relevant to apply incrementalism to its metaterms, other than to evaluate the possible "paradoxical" nature of the object being described?

## 1.8 SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC APPROACHES TO THE SQUARE

The square may be used on a *semantic* ("static") level or a *syntactic* ("dynamic") level (distinguished by the changes in position of each object over time)<sup>9</sup>. In Greimasian semiotics, syntax is the sequencing or succession of semantic values. The syntactic approach to the square shows the successive positions occupied by one object or several objects.

### 1.8.1 THE SEMANTIC APPROACH

For a semantic approach, we proceed as follows:

1. Set up any opposition, that is, two contrary terms (e.g., life/death).
2. Project the sub-contraries (e.g., not-life/not-death)<sup>10</sup>.
3. Create the various metaterms (life + death, not-life + not-death, etc.) by finding satisfactory lexical labels for them where possible (for example, masculine + feminine = "androgynous").

<sup>7</sup> Life could also be described as the absence of death, but it is not, at least in lexicography (the field that handles the production of dictionaries). It generally seems to be the valued term – if there is one – that plays the pivotal role (life, in this case).

<sup>8</sup> According to Courtés, incremental oppositions pose some problems when it comes to the syntactic progression allegedly dictated by the semiotic square. The semiotic square supposedly dictates a strict trajectory (here S1 = A, S2 = B, -S1 = not-A and -S2 = not-B): "In contrast to the Klein 4-Group, the semiotic square dictates a set trajectory, from S2 to S1 via -S2, and from S1 to S2 via -S1" (Courtés, 1991, p. 153). Other theorists believe that the required trajectory is from S1 to -S2 and from S2 to -S1. However, Courtés minimizes the fixed nature of this trajectory: "two terms, S1 and S2, are said to be opposite if and only if the negation of one term *can* bring about the affirmation of the other term, and the reverse" (Courtés, 1991, p. 157). For instance, in the opposition rich/poor, not-rich does not necessarily imply poor. Courtés attributes this behavior to the incremental nature of this opposition. In a 4-Group such as the veridictory square (see the chapter on this subject), movement will occur in all directions, but the trajectory will not be completely without limitations. According to Courtés (1991, p. 145), one cannot bypass a metaterm by going directly from illusion to secret, for instance, in the veridictory categories. Fontanille formulates a typology of trajectories (2003, p. 62) and identifies prohibited progressions (from A to B or B to A, from not-A to not-B or not-B to not-A), canonical progressions (from A to not-A to B or from B to not-B to A) and non-canonical progressions (from A to not-B to B or from B to not-A to A). Our position is the following: If a required trajectory on the semiotic square can be a valid notion in a model that generates opposite meaning from a source term – and this remains to be proven –, then these trajectories and restrictions on trajectories should not be fixed *a priori* for the semiotic square or the 4-Group. For example, there is no reason to preclude a text that goes directly from position S1 to S2 (from A to B) with no narrative ellipsis.

<sup>9</sup> The  $\mu$  Group (1977, pp. 58-62) would call these the tabular and linear approaches.

<sup>10</sup> Visually speaking, note that the contradictory terms (A and not-A, B and not-B) are not placed one under another, but on the diagonal.

4. Examine the semiotic act in question for all ten semantic possibilities (the four terms and six metaterms). To each of the ten classes, assign the elements that manifest these possibilities. A single semiotic act – even an elaborate one like a novel – will not necessarily use all ten of the possible classes. The most frequent ones are the two contrary terms ('one or the other'), the complex term ('both') and the neutral term ('neither one').

In textual analysis, one cannot be bound by lexical labels. For example, an element may fall under the class 'death' without actually appearing as the word "death". "Deceased", "last journey" and similar expressions will do just as well. Conversely, a figurative expression like "dead tired" (or "dead battery") will not fit under 'death' unless the text is playing with double meanings – a frequent occurrence in literature –, such as a vampire who claims to be "dead tired".

### 1.8.2 THE SYNTACTIC APPROACH AND TIME

The syntactic approach entails examining the successive positions occupied by the objects on a square. Increasing numbers indicate the sequencing of the various positions occupied (by a single object or from one object to the next as one progresses through the text). As with any analysis that focuses on content, one can take into account three fundamental kinds of time: time as represented in the story, narrative time (the order in which the events of the story are presented), and tactical time (i.e., the linear sequencing of semantic units from one sentence to the next).

We also offer a representation of the semiotic square in table format. This allows us to easily represent both the movements on the square in terms of the selected temporality and the possible interplay between the observing subjects (the narrator, characters, etc.) who are apt to see things differently.

*An example of a semiotic square in table format*

No	Time	Object(s) (element placed on the square)	Object's position on the square (1-10)	Observing subject

## 2. APPLICATIONS

### 2.1 APPLICATION: THE PASSION OF CHRIST

We shall adapt an example from Courtés (1991, pp. 152-154): in the *Bible*<sup>11</sup>, with respect to the opposition life/death, Christ goes through the following stages:

1. Not-life + not-death: the divine existential state, beyond life and death.
2. Life: the Nativity, which makes Jesus a human.
3. Not-life: the agony of crucifixion.
4. Death: he is pierced by the spear, confirming his death, and placed in the tomb.
5. Not-death: the process of resurrection. (Is it instantaneous or does it occur over time? In the latter case, there would be an ellipsis: why, and with what effect on the narrative?)
6. Life: emerging from the tomb. Other interpretations are possible: The resurrection brings Jesus back to not-life + not-death, right here on Earth, or it grants him boundless life, liberated from death (life + not-death). To simplify the picture, we shall say that Jesus is in life, and that the Ascension is what brings him back to not-life + not-death.
7. Not-life + not-death: beginning with the Ascension.

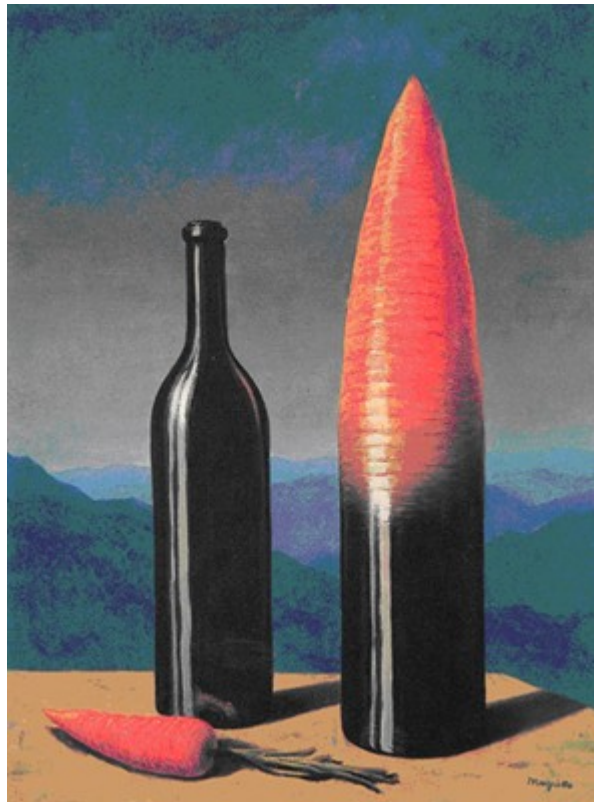
Notice that this syntactic description has the advantage of eliciting some much-debated theological positions and pinpointing them within a framework. These debates are interpreted in terms of "conflicts" over different classifications on the same semiotic square. For instance, some people maintain that when Jesus was placed in the tomb, he was not actually dead, but in a state of not-life (agony), thus explaining the seeming resurrection. Changes in beliefs may be represented as syntactic movement on the square, as long as one applies the appropriate veridictory status (true/false) to each position that is taken. Thus, for Thomas, Jesus is in death, not in life, which he mistakenly believes until he touches Jesus' wounds.

<sup>11</sup> In Greimasian semiotics, in the theory of the generative trajectory of meaning, the deep structure of any semiotic act is simple and abstract; the surface structure is concrete and complex. Thus, on the deep level, the category life/death can describe the story of Christ, but by necessarily condensing it. On the surface level, this story is manifested by a multitude of other semantic values.

## 2.2 APPLICATION II : *THE EXPLANATION* BY MAGRITTE

\* \* \*

*The explanation*  
Magritte (1952)



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\* \* \*

Using the semiotic square, we will give a brief analysis of *The Explanation* by Magritte. The basic opposition for our square will be carrot/bottle. Note that, unlike other oppositions we have presented (masculine/feminine or life/death), this one is specific to the image being analyzed, and therefore has a solely contextual value. The opposition between these two wholes is reinforced, if not recognized, by the oppositions between some of their parts, and each one of these oppositions could be the basis of a semiotic square (for example, edible/inedible). However, between other parts a relation of identity is established, showing a possible connection between the two objects, a connection that appears to be justified to some extent (both of them have an oblong shape, for instance).

We shall make use of three of the analytical classes of the semiotic square: the two contraries, where the carrot (position 1) and the bottle (position 2) are situated, and the complex term, where we have the carrot-bottle (position 5).

Is this complex term balanced, or does one of the contraries dominate? In other words, is it a CARROT-bottle or a BOTTLE-carrot, or is it equally a carrot-bottle and a bottle-carrot? Clearly, everything depends on what criteria are used. If we use "realism" and scale-based criteria, we could conclude that the bottle is dominant. Between the bottle and the bottle parts of the carrot-bottle, there is a consistency of scale, which is not the case between the carrot and the carrot part of the hybrid object. The effect could indeed be a prevalence of the bottle object over the carrot object, a sort of "real" bottle with a deformed, "fictitious" part added on – a disproportionate carrot.

Let us briefly distinguish two ways of producing complex terms corresponding to objects: fusion and juxtaposition. In *The Explanation*, Magritte proceeds by fusion, as shown in the intermediate zone of the hybrid object, where the colors and textures of the two objects are intermixed. The painter also uses fusion in some other works (the boot-feet in *The Red Model* (1937), for example), but he also uses juxtaposition (the various



pieces on different scales that make up the woman in *Delusions of Grandeur II* (1948) can be seen as simply being placed on top of each other).

The series established by the term, its contrary, and their "merging" into the complex term is correlated with another series that is significant in the West: the custom of "reading" from left to right. The hybrid object is to the right of the objects from which it is composed. In this story consisting of three "time" units, the synthesis arrives "after" the thesis and the antithesis<sup>12</sup>. In other paintings, Magritte gives only the hybrid object, leaving it to the mind of the viewer to create the confrontation between the initial objects. (For an analysis of Magritte's and other hybrid objects, see the chapter on the semantic graph). In this painting, Magritte dots his /'s and gives the genetic explanation, as the title indicates, for the fictitious shape.

We shall conclude by summarizing the main relations of identity and opposition between the three objects in the painting (the characteristics already mentioned are not included, such as the small, medium and large objects).

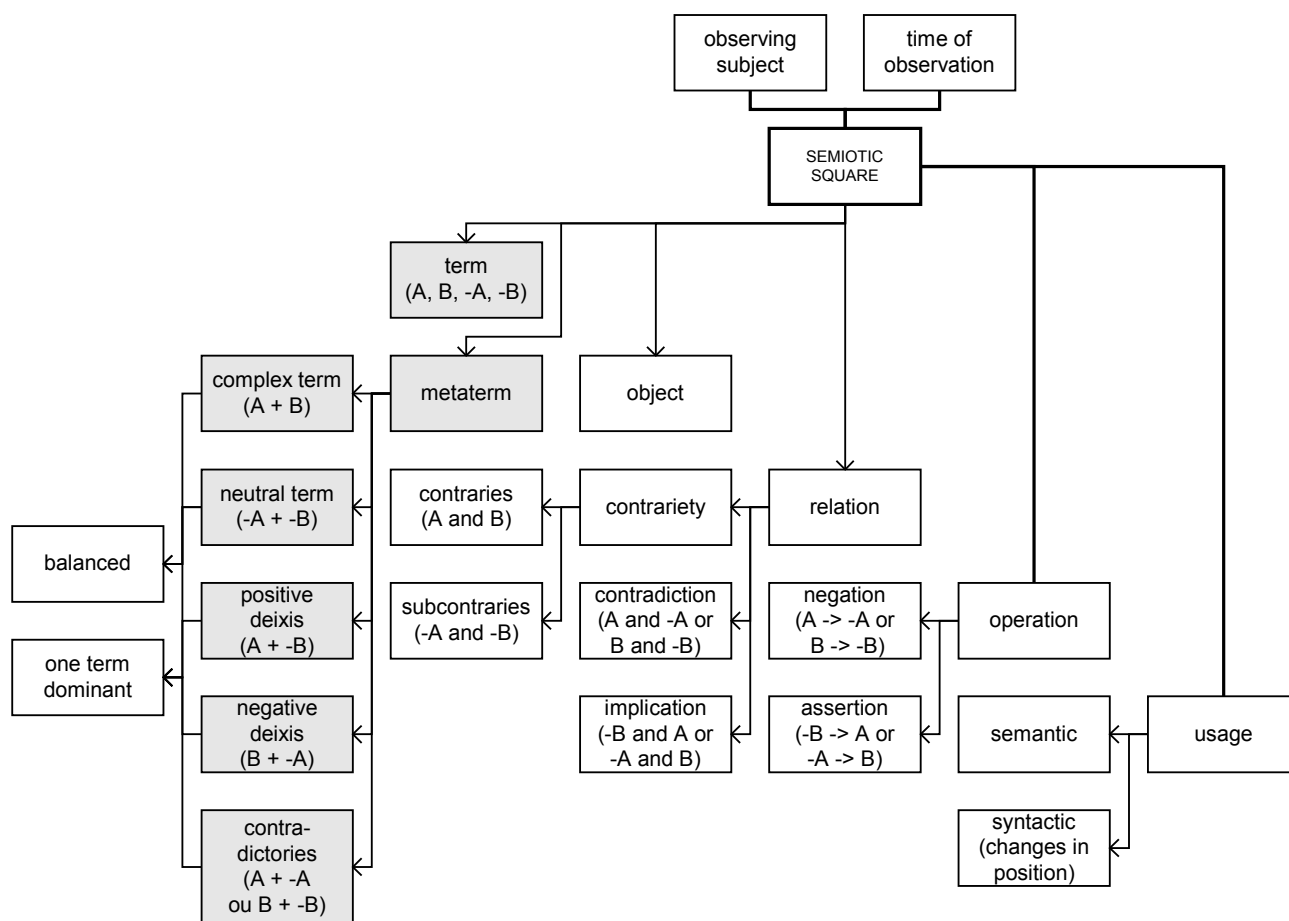
*Relations of identity and opposition between the objects in the painting*

CARROT	BOTTLE	CARROT-BOTTLE
oblong shape	oblong shape	oblong shape
cylinder-cone	cylinder-cone	cylinder-cone
horizontal position	vertical position	vertical position
textured material	smooth material	smooth and textured material
bright color	dark color	bright and dark color
bipartite shape (root and top)	bipartite shape (base and neck)	bipartite shape
narrow upper part	narrow upper part	narrow upper part (that becomes thinner)
wide lower part	wide lower part	wide lower part
organic item	inorganic item	?
edible item	inedible (but designed to contain an edible element)	?
unbreakable object	breakable object	?
natural item	manufactured item (artifact)	?
existing object	existing object	fictitious object

<sup>12</sup> Another series is superposed onto the first two: small object, medium object, large object.

### 3. SUMMARY DIAGRAM

Diagram summarizing the semiotic square



#### LEGEND

1. Vertical arrows: components (for ex., a semiotic square is composed of terms, relations and so on)
  2. Horizontal arrows: classifications (for ex., a metaterm is classified as a complex term, a neutral term, etc.)
  3. Bold-face link with no arrow: other relation
  4. Minus sign: negation (for ex., -A = not-A), plus sign: combination of two terms to create a metaterm (for ex., A + B)
- The results of the analysis depend on both the time of observation and the observer (subject) whose point of view is being reported.