



A. J. Greimas Centre of Semiotics and Literary Theory, established in 1992 at Vilnius University

to medieval commercial companies. According to John Lechte, 20<sup>th</sup> c. researcher of the history of philosophy, 'Greimas's intellectual trajectory is the result of an effort to analyse and formalise every aspect of discourse.'<sup>2</sup> The activities of Greimas as a semiotician were embodied by *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary* (two volumes, 1979 and 1986; edited together with Joseph Courtés) and the major two-volume work, *Exigences et perspectives de la sémiotique Recueil d'hommages pour A.J. Greimas [Aims and Prospects of Semiotics. Essays in honor of A.J. Greimas]*.

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In his native Lithuania, the professor was recognised as rather a literary critic with a penetrating and sceptical glance, as well as a researcher of Lithuanian mythology. His books *Of Gods and Men: Studies in Lithuanian Mythology* (1979) and *In Search of National Memory* (1990) were a major event in the Western world's Lithuanian diaspora, and soon became popular in Lithuania, which was being affected by the 'singing revolution'. For the consciousness exhausted by the Soviet occupation, the critique of Greimas was very important, although it wasn't fully utilised.

His entire life, this world-class scientist was concerned with the fate of the Lithuanian language – already in 1943, in the literary almanac *'Varpas'*, published in Šiauliai, he wrote articles on this topic, which were later published in the Lithuanian emigrant cultural press. He paid a lot of attention to translations of world classics into Lithuanian. Aleksys Churginas and Henrikas Radauskas, Kazys Binkis and Pulgis Andriūšis, Jurgis Baltrušaitis and even Eduardas Mieželaitis more than once came under criticism by Greimas.

Saulius Žukas, who studied the semiotic work of

<sup>2</sup> John Lechte. *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity*. Routledge (Reprint edition), 1994, p. 149.

Greimas, was able to formulate his major views and ideas: Lithuania's political identity (Lithuania with Vilnius and Lithuania without Vilnius as two different things); Lithuania's case for freedom and its connection to the liberty of all the oppressed peoples after WWII; a tolerant relationship with his fellow countrymen under the yoke of the Soviets. In addition to his scientific achievements, this master of a strict and disciplined mind was also, most importantly, a man of political action. Having early-on joined the anti-Nazi underground resistance, from 1943 he led the press and propaganda sector of the freedom fighters from the liberal resistance wing organisation. While in emigration, he was an active player in the the Resistance Union of Lithuania, who, in the palette of Lithuanian politics, represented sometimes the liberal left, sometimes also cultural anarchist views. This is particularly noticeable in articles published in the New York publication *Darbas*. All this was incessantly in harmony with the merciless anti-Soviet attitude that saw its greatest outflow in 1989–1990, when Lithuania, liberated from the fear of and obedience to the Soviet regime, rose up in the fight for freedom – with flowers and songs against the tanks.

Today, as the world is engulfed in a mist, the legacy of Greimas' mind can help us separate material things from trivial ones.

Prof Habil Dr Egidijus Aleksandravičius



Miniature by Ugnė Žilytė – memorial plaque at Literatų g., Vilnius (Literatų street art project)

### COIN DEDICATED TO THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF ALGIRDAS JULIEN GREIMAS

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(TO BE A SEMIOTICIAN IS TO ASK THE QUESTION OF SENSE)

Designed by Rolandas Rimkūnas and Giedrius Paulauskis  
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Issued in 2017

Information at the Bank of Lithuania  
Phone: +370 5 268 0316  
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www.lb.lt

  
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The coin was minted at  
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Coins photographed by Arūnas Baltėnas  
Designed by Liudas Parulskis

We would like to thank the A. J. Greimas Centre of Semiotics and Literary Theory and Habil Dr Kęstutis Nastopkas for their sincere cooperation  
The publication uses photographs from the Greimas heritage digital archive, on the cover – photo by Jean-Marie Floch, 'Greimas at his office in La Chaussée, 1990'.  
Published by the Bank of Lithuania, Gedimino pr. 6, LT-01103 Vilnius  
Printed by INDIGO print, www.indigoprint.lt

Lithuanian  
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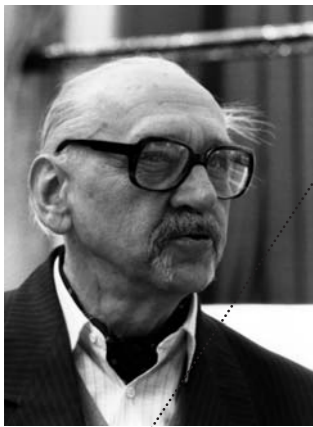
COIN DEDICATED TO THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF ALGIRDAS JULIEN GREIMAS



# Algirdas Julien Greimas – in service of freedom and perception

*Heroics are a performance that cannot stand loneliness and darkness. As such it belongs to particular, nearly extinct, form of civilisation.*

(A. J. Greimas 'On beaux gestes', from the 'Letters from Paris' column in Dirva)



A. J. Greimas, 12 June 1985, 'This is considered the best photograph of me'. Photo from private archive

Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992), one of the most famous thinkers of the modern age, was born in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution, to a family of Lithuanian war refugees. He passed away in the period when Europe was still reeling after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The swift rise of the Republic of Lithuania in 1918–1940, its halt by the Soviet and Nazi occupations, which during WWII crushed Greimas' homeland, post-war Europe's transformation into a continent of exile and the Cold War, the Sorbonne youth rebellion in 1968 and later subsequent events – all of this determined the road that Greimas took.

Today, with the world commemorating the centennial birth anniversary of this important 20<sup>th</sup> c. thinker, the mul-

ti-faceted heritage of Algirdas Julien Greimas is becoming clear. For some, he is undoubtedly an authority. For others – a tireless, wise, and rational fighter for the freedom of his own nation and all others who have been enslaved. In answering the question whether Lithuania had prepared him well for his fate, the professor replied:

'I cannot answer your question if it is to be understood as dividing my life into two isolated periods: one when I lived in Lithuania, was a Lithuanian and behaved as such, and the other when I lived in the West, in France, as a Frenchman. Such problems could be understood better in the light of the co-existence of two cultural worlds completing each other and opposing one another. I have spent all my nearly mature life as a schizophrenic. Both geographically and spiritually.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Algirdas Julien Greimas. *Iš arti ir iš toli. Literatūra, kultūra, grožis* [From Near and Far. Literature, Culture, Beauty]. Vilnius, Vaga, 1991, p. 21.

This thinker was destined to live parallel lives: that of a unique French scientist and a Lithuanian freedom emigrant, political figure and tireless cultural critic.

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This future authority on semiotics made his first steps into the great world of science while he wasn't yet an emigrant. In 1934, he began to study Law at Vytautas Magnus University, at the same time earning money as an assistant notary. In 1936–1939, he studied linguistics at the Uni-



A. J. Greimas, 1937, Grenoble. Photograph from private archive

A. J. Greimas, 1937–1939, Grenoble. A trip to the mountains, 16 February 1938. From left to right: Greimas, Aldona Dirmantaitė, engineering student, Ramutė lešmantaitė, Prof Antoninas Duraffouras, unknown person, Birutė Sirutyte, Birutė Skučaitė, Jonas Kossu-Aleksandravičius, Ženė Kučinskaitė. Photo from personal archive of Ramutė lešmantaitė-Ramunienė



versity of Grenoble. Nearing the end of his studies, Greimas became interested in the Provençal dialect, but having earned in 1939 his *licence es lettres* (Bachelor of Arts Degree in Letters, Arts, and Sciences), he was called up for military service and returned to Lithuania. The rapid modernisation of his native country's life in this pre-war period, in his own words, 'seemed open, yet led nowhere'. The key reason was the start of the Second World War and the occupation of the Baltic countries through the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

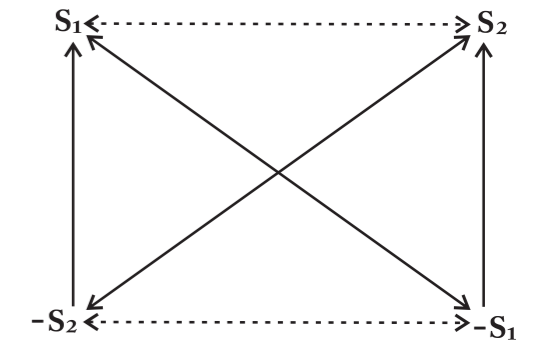
In the autumn of 1944, as part of the flow of war refugees, Greimas once again found himself in France, yet he didn't feel as if cast into the hell of emigration. He actively participated in the anti-Soviet resistance and continued settling in his academic homeland. In 1944–1949, at the Sorbonne he prepared and successfully defended his doctor's thesis '*La Mode en 1830. Essai de description du vocabulaire vestimentaire d'après les journaux de modes de l'époque*' ['Fashion in 1830. A Study of the Vocabulary of Clothes based on the Fashion Magazines of the Times']. He continued his academic work at the University of Alexandria (in Egypt), together with Roland Barthes and other intellectuals cherished the hope that through a deeper understanding of language and its criticism as a system of ideological symbols, one could change society for the better. Having briefly stayed in Ankara (Turkey), Greimas was introduced to Georges Dumézil, an authority on mythology, and later gained a permanent position in the French academic community.

Greimas earned his scientific fame through contributions to lexicogra-

phy. In 1965 was elected *directeur d'études* (in general semantics) at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris. On the basis of the Semio-Linguistic Research Group that he was head of and a special seminar, the *École de Paris*, the Paris school of semiotics, was founded and is known in the world of science as the Greimas school. This group included Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Gérard Genette, Christian Metz, and the famous Italian writer and scientist Umberto Eco. By expanding on the linguistic insights of Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev, successfully combining them with the philosophical and anthropological views of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Greimas created his own 'structural semantics' (1966), which in the mid-1960s – the golden age of structuralism – became a significant scientific event.

In 1968, he published a dictionary of ancient French, which to this day makes a big impression due to the author's aspirations for precision and stringency. At that time Greimas' horizon was expanded by increasingly varied forms of discourse: from language and literature, to legal grammar, which, as he himself would claim, was different from the grammar of natural language. Legal discourses were linked

Greimas Semiotic Square



Contrary:  $\leftarrow \dots \rightarrow$   
Contradictory:  $\leftarrow \text{---} \rightarrow$   
Implication:  $\text{---} \rightarrow$