

Research environment

Thesis entitled

The boundary, frame of the architectural utterance: A semiotic analysis of daily practices in the Medina of Qairouan (Tunisia).

Abstract

This research, which transposes semiotics to architecture, aims to understand the establishment of boundaries, deemed to constitute elementary units, around and within the space of the medina of Qairouan in Tunisia by its inhabitants.

The main questioning asks how each inhabitant engages in the interpretation of space and, conversely, how, by means of the same spatial-topological element (the boundary), the inhabitant divides and frames the space each time differently.

We will answer these questions through the perspective of the School of Paris by calling upon two approaches: the Theory of Enunciation (Benveniste, 1970; Dondero, 2020 (English)), and the Semiotics of Practices (Fontanille, 2008).

These two approaches will be supported by the linguistics of interaction (Goodwin, 2013; Mondada, 2000), a field inspired by various American researches in the sociology of interaction and in ethnomethodology (see in this respect Erving Goffman 1974), more specifically as pertains to the city.

The research makes the main following assumption: Each boundary, acting as a frame, is the spatial and architectural equivalent of an utterance. Conversely, any utterance produced through three-dimensional means draws boundaries – it enframes.

Key words: Boundary, frame, enunciation, semiotics, practices.

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The Center for Semiotics and Rhetoric (CESERH) develops an original approach to the analysis of texts and images stemming from two theoretical traditions: discursive semiotics and rhetoric. The joining of these two traditions is rooted in the pioneering work of Groupe μ .

The boundary and the construction of the frame of the architectural utterance: A semiotic analysis of the Medina of Qairouan

A- The research

I- Problem statement and hypothesis

The boundary is the unitary element of architecture, that by which the space is produced and assumes a very precise configuration.

It is from their delimitation, by means of boundaries, that spaces are made to emerge. The boundary, the enclosure, enframes the space it encloses: it distributes it according to oppositions and hierarchies, often making it thence possible to differentiate between two areas.

The boundary is the fundamental unit of architecture. It detects all the qualities that form the configuration of space and its meaning. It enframes areas, delimits daily scenes; it closes off, reopens, and so on.

This research aims to understand the establishment of the boundaries around and within the space of the medina of Qairouan in Tunisia by the inhabitants. The ability to (re)construct, appropriate and interpret the space's enframing is highlighted.

Our main question is: How does each inhabitant engage their interpretation of space? Conversely, how, by the same topological element (the boundary), does the inhabitant divide and frame the space each time differently?

In the form of a wall or partition, the boundary often constitutes an interfacing limit, marking the juncture, as well as the separation, between the inside and the outside, the public and the private, the permitted and the forbidden.

However, it also marks a discontinuity, an interruption, an opening, and a rupture. It is at the same time a passage, a threshold, an interface, and a bridge.

The boundary is the fundamental element of architecture: for there to be a space, there must be a boundary.

The questions addressed in this research are those of the establishment and construction of the boundaries of space by the inhabitant. Indeed, this construction involves the matter of meaning and significance. The division of the topological space by its users is carried out in accordance with the operations of appropriation, negotiation, selection, negation or even transgression.

In other words, the research aims to uncover, through the phenomenological and narrative experience of the inhabitants, the different meanings given to the boundary in space. It thus

seeks to explain and grasp the complexity of the boundary, which constitutes the fundamental element of architecture.

The boundary concentrates all the complexities of spatial enunciation, and it is through this layered thickness that the research develops:

(1) It is akin to the *seme*, that is to say, the minimal unit of meaning; it reveals all the qualities that forms the design and the advent of the space – as well as its meaning. It encloses (enframes, surrounds, etc.), but subsequently reopens (enabling passages, transitions, etc.). It partakes to the paradigm of opposites, but is not contradictory, since opposites coexist ontologically: such is the fair essence of our concept. In addition, the boundary solicits the frame and the utterance; each time there is a boundary, there is a statement and, logically, its presupposition is the enunciation.

In fact, the boundary is, on the one hand, the immediate given *in situ* of the space for the user; it is a design tool for the architect, on the other. We focus on the first case in this study. Knowing that the medina of Qairouan is the result of vernacular architecture, built without an architect, the spaces were erected through the skills and know-how of the builders of the city.

Thus, the research questions the boundary, as an elementary object of architecture, by which users and inhabitants of the space developed their appropriations and meanings. Despite concerning the same topological element, boundaries are manipulated and articulated each time differently. According to the semiotic experience of users, boundaries change.

In addition, a variety of resources, forming a multimodal corpus, are mobilized by the participant, these being verbal, somatic, gestural, cognitive, as well as spatial elements – boundaries in our case. All these elements are in current co-construction and influence one another in a syncretic environment.

The research asks the following main questions:

- How does the boundary define the initially isotropic space? How does it generate it?
- How does it articulate the architectural and spatial utterance?
- What is the spatial boundary? What are its different configurations? What are its connotations and meanings in architecture? How to highlight, in addition to the nature of its materialities, its immaterial faculties of meaning and signification?
- What is the boundary for the user of the space? How does this use define it and use it?

Besides, the research makes the main following assumptions:

1. A boundary configures space, it is its delimitation
2. A boundary separates and connects, it is a passage, a transition
3. More than being a line, the boundary is itself a space¹ – it has a thickness

¹ See in this respect the “Castel” – inhabited and thick wall– of Louis Kahn

4. Each boundary, like a frame, is the spatial and architectural equivalent of an enunciation. Reciprocally, any enunciation performed by three-dimensional means draws boundaries, establishes a frame.

It puts into perspective the following objectives:

- Explain and understand the complexity of the boundary, be it even linear or elementary
 - Understand the architecture-related statement made by the inhabitant
 - Propose a heuristic construction of the boundary from its enunciation and associated practices
- This work finds a twofold justification: firstly, by its reflection on a circumscribed element of architecture that is rarely studied or made the focus of interest. Secondly, by appealing to semiotics, we demonstrate that architecture is suitable for developing general semiotics.

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Latest Author's publications

Paper 1 : (2022) _La notion de linéaments chez Alberti. Tracés graphiques ou traits mentaux ? (Fr) Laboratoire d'analyse d'architecture (Laa). Catholic University of Louvain Belgium. Published.

URL : <https://orbi.uliege.be/handle/2268/268144>

Paper 2 : (2021) _Limites et Frontières dans le Monde Arabo-musulman Médiéval. De l'Asie Mineure à Qāirawān: Dynamique et épaisseur des *Hudūd*, Thūgūr, *ʿAwāṣim* et *Ribāt* dans une anthropologie de la limite (Fr). Al-Sabīl: Maghrebien History, Archeology and Architecture. Published.

URL : <https://orbi.uliege.be/handle/2268/260164>

II- Corpus

The medina of Qairouan was founded in 670 CE, and it is delimited by an enclosure made of four main gates that open onto the exterior: the Tunis Gate (*Bāb Tunis*), the Gate of the Floggers² (*Bāb al-Ġallādīnes*), the New Gate (*Bāb al- Ġdīd*), and the Gate of the Small Door (*Bāb al-Ḥūḥa*). It is flanked by three towers with a Qasbah on the north side with two communicating doors: one opening onto the interior (medina), the other opening onto the exterior. The ramparts exceed 3 km in circumference and date back to the 18th century, following a series of demolitions and reconstructions. Nowadays, a new city has been grafted onto the old historic space commonly called the medina.



Map 1. Recent map of Qairouan @ ASM Qairouan.

The graph below shows us the discontinuity of the *continuous* boundary by showing the closing (wall) vs the opening (gates) of the enclosure:

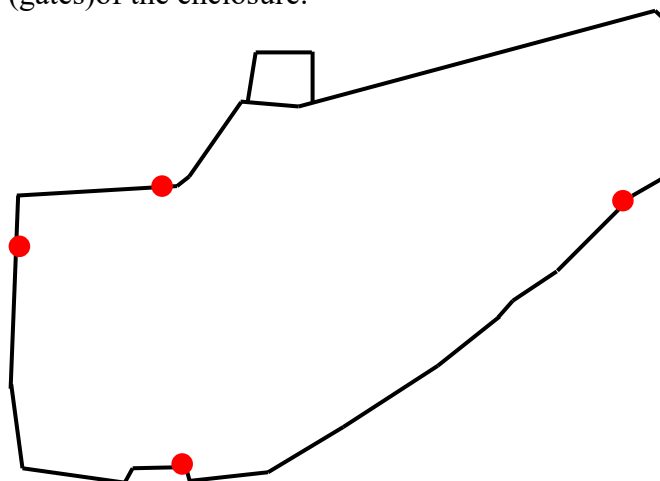


Figure 1. Continuity vs Discontinuity: Doors into the enclosure. © The author.

² The name *Bāb al-Ġallādīnes* goes back to the concentration of leather-making shops that were formerly in its vicinity, and it was also called “Door of Tanners” (*Bāb al-Dabbāgīnes*). This latter translation is in fact literal and without the slightest connection to floggers. The most accurate designation would be “Gate of the Tanners”.

We intend to produce a semiotic analysis of the concept of the boundary in the three-dimensional utterance, through the study of the way it is practiced in the medina of Qairouan in Tunisia. This corpus was chosen for two of its qualities. Firstly, it has been sheltered from massive tourism, which has made it possible to keep its spatial boundaries (enclosures, gates, streets, etc.) in a relatively well-preserved and visible state. Secondly, it has been selected for its historical and religious stratification, since it was the first Arab-Muslim city to be founded in North Africa, which opens a wide range for the inhabitants to poetize and (de)mystify their discourse on the city, or to interpret and signify it by means of metaphors, hyperboles, or even oxymorons.

We refer in this respect to the opinion of V. Guérin reported by Mohamed Kerrou, as quoted: “In his exploration of the Regency of Tunis, carried out in 1860, the archaeologist Guérin considered the city of Qairouan to be *one of the most important and the one which had most faithfully preserved its original type and its essential and exclusively Muslim physiognomy*”.³

Qairouan is recognized for its historical and religious signification – it is a holy city. Indeed, M. Kerrou recognizes this legacy, without however going so far as to reduce the city to it: “Certainly, the city founded by Uqba and the Muslim conquerors in the 7th century of our era remains an imposing historical and religious city, with its prestigious Great Mosque and the Zawiya of Sidi Sahib being the object of constant pilgrimages. Nevertheless, Qairouan cannot be reduced to its past alone, however sacred it may be”.⁴

This context will further be anchored in the thoughts of the inhabitant-users of the Qairouan medina, as well as their receptions and (re)productions of the boundaries in the architectural space.

The qualitative research is chosen to transpose the inhabitants’ experiences of the architectural space by recording interviews, urban itineraries or daily practices.

In addition, it is characterized by its flexibility and its focus on meanings and significations during the interpretation process.

During our research, we construct our materials in an incremental process. Thus, we built-up materials constituted of twenty-seven interviews with twelve participants on one first occasion (2019). A second material was requested to elucidate some points for our concept. During this latter, we recorded five interviews with three participants (February 2022). The recorded

³ Guérin, 1862 quoted by Mohamed Kerrou, *Mutations de l’espace et de la société dans la ville contemporaine de Kairouan. Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 51(1), 71–99, (1995) : 71, our translation.

⁴ Mohamed Kerrou, *Mutations de l’espace et de la société dans la ville contemporaine de Kairouan. Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 51(1), 71–99, (1995) : 71, author’s italics, our translation.

material serves to identify the rules that underlie the functioning of these extremely diverse forms according to a spatial division uttered through verbal enunciations.

A-Methodologies

In following with this syncretic study framework, we have crafted a multidisciplinary methodology by which to grasp the space in its different facets and its multiple and varied elements.

From francophone semiotics, mainly the School of Paris (or « *L'École de Paris* »), we especially rely on the theories of enunciation and of semiotic practices.

Based on a general semiotics, Manar Hammad invites us to stop considering architecture in isolation and to reintegrate it into a larger signifying whole. This is achieved by our syncretic corpus that includes spaces, objects, people, and discourse.

Starting from this syncretic framework, we call the enunciation, the practices, and the interactions between them “semiotic interactions”. These semiotic and linguistic instruments make it possible to overcome the narrative and the discourse of space according to heuristic interactions, on the one hand. On the other hand, they make it possible to approach the highly syncretic discipline that is architecture. For this study, we refer to the Greimassian semiotics of the School of Paris, i.e. to contemporary French-speaking semiotics and its paradigms.

In this context, we call upon the theory of enunciation, semiotic practices, and upon interactional linguistics in view of the heuristic aim regarding the architectural statement under construction.

III- The theory of enunciation

Firstly, the theory of enunciation was founded by Émile Benveniste who promulgated its theoretical framework in his seminal article “L'appareil formel de l'énonciation”⁵ published in 1970 (French). Four years later, his book *Problèmes de linguistique générale 2* was published. The method it provided accounts for appropriation and subjectivity.

Enunciation is defined as “putting language into operation by an individual act of use”.⁶ Benveniste insists on the fact that enunciation presupposes “the individual conversion of language into discourse”.⁷

⁵ This article was reprinted in chapter II of the book *Problèmes de linguistique générale 2*.

⁶ Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale 2*. Gallimard, Paris, 1974, 288, 80, our translation.

⁷ Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale 2*. Gallimard, Paris, 1974, 288, 81, our translation.

More recently, M. G. Dondero, in her book *The Language of Images*⁸ first published in French, applied the theory to artefacts such as paintings and scientific images. This book is one of a few references published in English dealing with the theory of enunciation, it will be useful for our current paper.

She says: “Before detailing the actorial and spatio-temporal configurations of uttered enunciations, let’s look at enunciation as mediation between *langue* and *parole* and at the manner in which it may be understood within the visual framework[...]:

Emile Benveniste gave the first formulation of enunciation as process by which natural language (Saussure’s *langue*) is turned into discourse. In between language (conceived as a paradigmatic system) and speech – already interpreted by Hjelmslev as a syntagmatic system and now specified in its status as discourse – it is indeed necessary to supply mediating structures and to imagine how it is that language as social system can be assumed by the individual realm without as a result being scattered into an infinite number of examples of speech (Saussure’s *parole*), outside all scientific cognizance”.⁹

This theory highlights the deictics “I-here-now”, or the *hic and nunc*, corresponding to the parameters of “person-space-time”, we quote: “In verbal discourse, the enunciative marks of subjectivity and of intersubjectivity involve namely personal pronouns (*I, you, he/she/it, we*), verbal tenses (present and past), and adverbs in relation to the description or appropriation of a locus (here and there). Each act of enunciation thus involves a triple disengagement: actorial, temporal, and spatial. According to Benveniste, the *he/she/it* of the third person is associated with *another time and place* whereas the pronominal pair *I-you* is associated with a *here and now*. From this, Benveniste makes a distinction between *historical enunciation* and *discursive enunciation*”.¹⁰

Enunciation is also defined by the engagement-disengagement couple: “For example, if we take the domain of the enunciation as a syncretism of ‘I-here-now,’ disengagement [...] will consist in inaugurating the utterance [...]. Actorial disengagement, then, in its first steps, will consist in disjuncting a ‘not-I’ from the subject of the enunciation and projecting it into the utterance, temporal disengagement in postulating a ‘not-now’ distinct from the time of the enunciation, spatial disengagement in opposing a ‘not-here’ to the place of enunciation” (“Disengagement”

⁸ Maria Giulia Dondero, (2020). *Les langages de l’image. De la peinture aux Big Visual Data*. Éditions Hermann.

⁹ Algirdas Julien Greimas, Joseph Courtès, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage, t. 2 (compléments, débats, propositions)*. Hachette, 1986, 270, In, Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160, 17.

¹⁰ Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160, 24, author's italics.

entry, pp. 87–88). Engagement is defined in opposition and in complementarity to disengagement: Disengagement “is the effect of the expulsion from the domain of the enunciation of the category terms which serve as support for the utterance, whereas engagement designates the effect of a return to the enunciation” (“Engagement” entry, p. 100)”.¹¹

According to Dondero, enunciation has two instances. Regarding the first instance of enunciation, she explains: “The first conception of enunciation has to do with the mediation between system and process, between *langue* and *parole*”.¹²

Regarding the second, she says: “The second conception of enunciation concerns the act of appropriating a *langue* via an *individual selection* resulting in a bounded and accomplished linguistic output (*parole*) we call *utterance*. The utterance is the result of an enunciative act having been *objectified* onto a substrate”.¹³

We thus understand enunciation as the subjective dimension and the faculty of interpretation put into action by the inhabitant-user of the space.

Dondero explains the results of the extension of enunciation to other languages, in particular to that of visual semiotics: “The utterance, be it verbal, pictorial, photographic, or filmic, is understood as a *signifying totality*: The different types of utterances share the feature of having been produced by an enunciative act, and, more specifically, by an act of *disengagement*. An utterance is characterized by the fact that it was produced by an act having provided it with limits and boundaries (a frame in the case of paintings, a front and back cover in the case of novels, opening and ending credits in the case of films...)”.¹⁴

She adds: “In the terms of A. J. Greimas’ theory, enunciation concerns the appropriation of semio-narrative structures (deep structures of semiotic *competence*) by an individual who selects, from a particular standpoint, the linguistic virtualities and realizes them through discourse (discursive structures of semiotic *performance*). This act of individual appropriation enables a conception of enunciation not only as a theory of mediation between *langue* and *parole*, but also as a theory of the insertion of the subject and his or her perspective into language. We will address, firstly, the conception of enunciation as mediation between *langue* and *parole* and, following that, the conception giving precedence to matters of point of view and of intersubjectivity”.¹⁵

¹¹ Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160, 21.

¹² Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160, 17, author's italics

¹³ Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160, 21.

¹⁴ Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160, 21.

¹⁵ Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160, 17.

Operating by means of boundaries puts two main operations into perspective: first, establishing the scope of the architectural enunciation, its influence, its framework, and its exceedances; then, defining the ability to (re)construct the space and to access its interpretation, its meaning, and its rhetoric.

However, the boundary designates the partition, the wall or the enclosure as much as it does the passage or the transition. In fact, the opening of the boundary above all consecrates its discontinuity and its rupture. We conceive of the boundary in its double ontology: continuity and discontinuity, separation, and joining.

In fact, the architectural space forms a particular corpus. Greimas explains that the semiotics of space is syncretic: “This denomination, inherited from the use of research which, starting from architecture, has been led to broaden the definition of the object-expression so as to include the organized expanse in which people and objects move, designates an object-semiotics in the process of being constructed, belonging to the non-scientific type of semiotics, as defined by Hjelmslev. Characterized by one of the elements of its expression, the semiotics of space turns out to be a syncretic semiotics, one which is ‘natural’ insofar as it is informed by a culture”.¹⁶ He adds, regarding what is a distinction between forms and users: “This is how the semiotics of architecture (and sometimes even that of town planning) voluntarily delimits its object with sole consideration given to forms, volumes, and their interrelationships. However, since human subjects who are the users of spaces must be taken into account, their programmed behaviors are examined and related to their use of the space. This inscription of **narrative** programs in segmented spaces constitutes spatial programming, of a functional order, which appears today to be the component of the semiotics of space having acquired a certain operational efficiency”.¹⁷

Specifically, M. Hammad recognizes the semiotics of space as a syncretic one: “The construction of a semiotics of architecture could only be undertaken scientifically from the moment when researchers gave up considering the signifier ‘architecture’ in isolation and reinserted it into a larger signifying whole including space, objects, and people”.¹⁸ He outlines his project for the semiotics of everyday space by proceeding by extension and catalysis: “The procedure of catalysis, therefore, leads us to extend the plane of expression, and there, we find everyday space, architecture, the human involved in different describable dynamic procedures,

¹⁶ Algirdas Julien Greimas, Joseph Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, t. 2 (compléments, débats, propositions). Hachette, 1986, 270, 78, our translation.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, author’s bold, our translation.

¹⁸ Manar Hammad, *Lire l’espace, comprendre l’architecture: Essais sémiotiques*. Presses de l’Université de Limoges Pulim, 2006, 370, 9, our translation.

in terms of action, operations, and relationships”. At this stage, it will be constrained, in the face of this dynamism, to include objects which circulate between the subjects: “these are objects that circulate between the subjects in a way that is fully comparable to the circulation of the subjects between places”. Then, catalysis “also imposes the introduction of natural language in its oral and written forms, as well as the addition of codes of color and shape when it comes to industrial spaces or even urban space, and the list of additions is not exhaustive”.¹⁹ Conversely, it is between the heterogeneity of the expression plane and the homogeneity of the content plane that the syncretism of the architecture finds its explanation: “Consequently, the cognitive program of understanding that we have identified develops preferentially at the semiotic level of content – which turns out to be remarkably homogeneous – and leads to the construction of an expression level which appears, concerning traditional disciplines, to be heterogeneous. This is the very definition of syncretic semiotics”.²⁰

For architecture, several authors, such as Michel de Certeau and Manar Hammad, are experimenting with the semio-linguistic approach. The former, in his work on the city of New York, uses the concepts of “pedestrian enunciation” and of “enunciative walking”. He considers the act of walking to be to the urban system what the speech act is to language.

For the latter, an architect and semiotician, develops a semio-narrative analysis of the tea ceremony. He notifies that the marks of the utterance can be specified by the deictic “I-here-now” categories and, more generally, by those of actorialization-spatialization-temporalization. For M. Hammad, the marks of the utterance can be specified by the “I-here-now” deictic categories and more generally by those of actorialization-spatialization-temporalization.

M. de Certeau shows the correlation between walking, space, and enunciation. He recognizes a similarity between {walking-space} and {enunciation-language}: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the enunciation (the *speech act*) is to language, or to the spoken utterances. At the most elementary level, it has a triple ‘enunciative’ function: it is a process of *appropriation* of the topographic system by the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and assumes the language); it is a spatial *realization* of the place (just as the act of speech is a realization of language in sound); finally, it implies *relations* between differentiated positions, that is, pragmatic contracts in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is ‘speech’, ‘institutes the other before’ the speaker and puts into play contracts between co-locutors)”.²¹

¹⁹ Manar Hammad, *Lire l'espace, comprendre l'architecture: Essais sémiotiques*. Presses de l'Université de Limoges Pulim, 2006, 370, 4, our translation.

²⁰ Manar Hammad, *Lire l'espace, comprendre l'architecture: Essais sémiotiques*. Presses de l'Université de Limoges Pulim, 2006, 370, 5, our translation.

²¹ Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*. Union générale d'éditions UGE, 1980, 349, 148, our translation.

On one hand, Manar Hammad insists on the adoption of general semiotics²² not restricted to natural languages, where the “utterance-enunciation” duplet is posed according to criteria pertaining to content, in addition to the deictics of enunciation: “The marks of enunciation in the expression can be specified case by case, this work being carried out from the recognition of the subject of the enunciation by the categories I-here-now or, more generally, by those of actorialization-spatialization-temporalization, which pertain to the content”.²³

On the other hand, He resorts to non-verbal enunciation: “The present work is attached to a syncretic non-verbal material, which constitutes a paradox, insofar as one ordinarily speaks of enunciation only in verbal terms”.²⁴ Moreover, he correlates non-verbal enunciation on the level of content: “What is at stake is a problem of general semiotics: it is a question of the possibility of constructing the concept of enunciation on criteria about content alone. The consequence is access to the analysis of the enunciation in any significant corpus, which constitutes a significant generalization of current tools. Moreover, one could then describe enunciative acts in terms of semio-narrative programs, and finally, grasp the mechanisms of the interaction between utterative and enunciative programs”.²⁵ This is what motivates our choice for the narrative research.

By adding the verbal discourse of the users of the space, we will satisfy the extension as recommended by Hammad, and so on explain the expression plane, as well as the content plane.

Following the example of Hammad’s approach, we find the same hypothesis as the one advanced by our work in the proposals of Félix Thürelmann: “The performance of the journey in the topical configuration can be considered – such is our hypothesis – as an operation which has the value of an implicit semiotic analysis of the topical configuration traversed. The enunciation of a path comes down, first and necessarily, to an articulation (usually non-exhaustive) of the level of expression by the fact that it endows the topical configuration with a form through the division into units and a first syntagmatic articulation of these units (successively, the seizure of places and their serialization). But the journey also provides an

²² The general semiotic theory was confirmed around the end of the 1960s. Its contributions as well as its applications are numerous and diverse. It is in this context that the semiotics of architecture has developed.

²³ Manar Hammad, *Lire l’espace, comprendre l’architecture: Essais sémiotiques*. Presses de l’Université de Limoges Pulim, 2006, 370, 339, our translation.

²⁴ Manar Hammad, *Lire l’espace, comprendre l’architecture: Essais sémiotiques*. Presses de l’Université de Limoges Pulim, 2006, 370, 75, our translation.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

analysis of the content plane of the topical configuration insofar as it is overdetermined by all sorts of modalizations (describing speed, the difficulty of movement, etc.)”.²⁶

Another example comes us from Alain Rénier²⁷, architect and semiotician of architecture, he explains: “the relevant segments will, on the one hand, be of the order of the constructed and, on the other hand, will be of the order of flow phenomena (people, vehicles, noises, smells, air movements, etc.) – these can never emerge from contemporary architectural typomorphological studies. The virtual meanings of the urban planner-cartographer cannot meet the occurrent meanings, nor the canonical representations of the city, of which the discovery is delivered through the perceptual journey”.²⁸

Let’s refocus on the following question: Why discourses? Why the narrative approach? The discourse arranges and constructs the framework of a description and the closure of a statement presupposing an enunciation. All of the above underpins the importance of language in the making and meaning of the world, and this is how our interest in the discourses uttered by the inhabitants of Qairouan finds its foundation.

To justify once again our recourse to discourse and its combination with the journey or any spatial experience endowed with an enunciation, we refer to this passage from F. Thürelmann: “The analytical value of the discourse-journey is all the greater because – unlike other types of reading of topical configurations – it allows in principle a grasp of the form of the expression which is independent of the description of the content”.²⁹

Like the textual, pictorial, or visual utterance³⁰, we postulate that the enunciations of space, in other words, “the architectural utterances”, or the three-dimensional ones, are analyzable as systems of meaning. Moreover, Groupe µ, in their seminal book *Treatise on the Visual Sign*, establishes architecture as a three-dimensional utterance. The fundamental binomial of “language-speech”, where language is realized by speech (Saussure) and the system by the process (Hjelmslev), can be transposed to architecture. Indeed, the topological space, configured by the physical boundaries, is realized by walking within it and by inhabiting it: these are the “enunciative boundaries”.

The architectural utterance is the space as formulated and experienced according to its enframing boundaries. It is manipulated and reorganized by delimitations and divisions. We

²⁶ Alain Rénier, et al., *Espace & représentation*. Éditions de la Villette, 1982, 352, 39, our translation.

²⁷ A tribute is addressed to Pr. Alain Rénier, founder of the semiotics research unit at the National School of Architecture and Urbanism of Tunis.

²⁸ Alain Rénier, et al., *Espace & représentation*. Éditions de la Villette, 1982, 352, 21, our translation.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*, Springer, 2020, 160.

would need the individual enunciation in order to identify these dividing planes, junctions, and/or injunctions of space. By examining the relevant discourses, we will thus be able to:

- (i) distinguish the actualized boundaries from others
- (ii) follow the operation of assembling actualized boundaries
- (iii) understand the process of signification and formulation of meaning based on a selection from the state of the architecture

Thus, the boundary is an essential element of the theory of enunciation based on cutting and framing.

IV- Semiotic practices

Later, in the 1970s, semiotics extended its scope beyond the text. Since that period, it has expanded to describe any system of signs. This is the project that was undertaken by Jacques Fontanille through his semiotic of practices. His theory is based on six planes of immanence: signs, text-utterances, objects, practical scenes, strategies, and forms of life. According to this author, “[...]a plane of experience can only be converted into a plane of immanence if, and only if, it gives rise to the constitution of a semiotic object, in other words if it reveals the possibility of a semiotic function between a plane of expression and a plane of content.”,³¹ i.e. if a semiotic function is possible between an expression plane and a content plane. This theory, which was formulated mainly by Jacques Fontanille, has two benefits for our research. Firstly, the boundary is manipulated according to different planes of immanence, that is to say, according to different narrative, phenomenological and semiotic experiences. Secondly, it allows experimenting with a boundary as a double-faced interface which matches well with the ontological essence of the opposite (limited/unlimited; open/close; interior/exterior; connection/separation, etc.).

According to a more dynamic and heuristic approach, Fontanille assimilates practices to enunciation in action, we specify: “The semiotic experience on which the level of relevance of practices is based is that summarized by the expression ‘in action’. Having been widespread in the discourse of semiotics in the last ten years, ‘enunciation in action’, ‘semiosis in action’, ‘meaning in action’ generally refer to a conception of meaning which is intended to be dynamic (...), and which is more interested in the processes of construction and emergence of meaning than in their results”.³²

³¹ Jacques Fontanille, *Pratiques sémiotiques*. Presses universitaires de France, 2008, 320, 18, our translation.

³² Jacques Fontanille, *Pratiques sémiotiques*. Presses universitaires de France, 2008, 320, 26, our translation.

Type of experience	Formal instances	Interfaces
Figurativity	Signs ↓	Recurrent formants
Interpretative coherence and cohesion	Text-utterances ↓	Figurative isotopies of expression Speaking/writing device
Corporeity	Objects ↓	Formal substrate of the inscription Praxeological morphology
Praxis	Practical scenes ↓	Predicative scene Accommodation process
Conjuncture	Strategies ↓	Strategic practice management Iconization of strategic behaviors
Ethos and behavior	Forms of life	Strategic styles

Table 1: The hierarchy of planes of immanence, our translation.
© Original table by Jacques Fontanille, 2008, 320, 34.

A static study can place the boundary at the objects level. During our analysis, we demonstrate that the boundary moves from one level to another, depending on the semiotic experience of the inhabitants and the levels of relevance they seek. Boundaries change, it is not a static object, but more of a dynamic system. The boundaries are clearly situated at the object level. However by exceeding them, be it by authorization or by transgression, one activates the other levels: (i) the level of practices, if in an everyday setting; (ii) the strategic level, if in a context of adjustment and negotiation, and (iii) the forms of life level, if it is a matter of the iconization of behavior.

J. Fontanille and M. G. Dondero both explain the bidirectional movements between objects and practical scenes (from objects to practical scenes and vice versa).

In reference to middle eastern clay tablets³³, Fontanille mentions the imprint and the patina at the level of the object: “Furthermore, as a material body, this object is intended for practices and the uses of these practices which are themselves ‘enunciations’ of the object; in this respect, the object itself can only bear traces of these uses (inscriptions, wear, patina, etc.), that is to say, ‘enunciative imprints’, their ‘enunciation-use’ remaining essentially, and globally, virtual and presupposed: it will therefore here also be necessary to move a level higher, to that of the semiotic structure of practices, in order to find observable manifestations of these enunciations”.³⁴

Similarly, Dondero explains the two movements between levels according to the couple {simulacrum-trace}. She considers that: “In the movement going from the level of the object to that of the practical scene, for example, the attention is focused on the possible action simulations offered to the user/reader; while the opposite movement concerns the study of traces

³³ See in this respect Isabelle Klock-Fontanille, *Les écritures, entre support et surface*, Paris, L’Harmattan, (2005),

³⁴ Jacques Fontanille, *Pratiques sémiotiques*. Presses universitaires de France, 2008, 320, 24, our translation.

of action, the latter constituting the ‘patina’ produced by the uses of objects (from the practice to the object). In the conversion between one level of relevance and the other, we always have a confrontation between models of action offered to users (simulacrum of action: anticipated traces) and effective uses (attested traces of the practice, corresponding more or less to discursive simulacra)”.³⁵

The passage from one level to another is ensured by enunciative phenomena. Thus, the theory of practices links to that of enunciation, which provides an important theoretical coherence.

According to Fontanille: “on one side (face 1), a local syntagmatic form (the surface or the volume of inscription), capable of receiving significant inscriptions (as a support for ‘text-utterances’), and on the other (face 2) a material substance, which allows them to play an actorial or modal role in practices, at the higher level of relevance”.³⁶ We recognize in this double-faced artefact the meaning of the boundary. The interface is, on the one hand, a simulacrum of the activity³⁷, while on the other hand, it is the trace of this same activity: its patina.

V- Interactionist linguistics

Finally, we call upon the linguistics of interaction, specifically as pertains to the city. *Décrire la ville*, a seminal work by L. Mondada, deals with the description of spaces as “interacting knowledge” uttered through discourse. The boundary, not mentioned directly in the textual accounts, is implied by verbs and by simple or compound gestures; these elements are identified during transcription.

Moreover, Greimas recognizes the multimodal dimension of cognitive interactions taking place in space: “In addition to the concepts of spatialization and spatial localization, narrative and discursive semiotics also uses that of cognitive space which makes it possible to account for the inscription in space of cognitive relations between subjects (such as seeing, hearing, touching, drawing close to listen, etc.)”.³⁸

Thus, with the ambition to certify, non-exhaustively, the syncretic elements present, we will detect the interactions which emerge on the spot and that are part of the construction of the unfolded scene. It is a concomitance of several interacting semiotic elements as noted by Goodwin. We quote: “Within face-to-face interaction the intrinsic dialogic organization of

³⁵ Maria Giulia Dondero, Énonciation et modes d’existence. *Actes Sémiotiques*, 120, 2017, 2, our translation.

³⁶ Jacques Fontanille, *Pratiques sémiotiques*. Presses universitaires de France, 2008, 320, 23, our translation.

³⁷ The activity of “entering”, for example.

³⁸ Algirdas Julien Greimas, Joseph Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*. Hachette Éducation, 1979, 270, 134, “space” entry, bold by the authors.

language is constituted as an emerging, multi-party process as participants assemble action and units by operating on a range of different kinds of semiotic materials that each is producing with an orientation toward the other”.³⁹

The linguistics of interaction, which concerns the systematic analysis of conversational exchanges, is presented as a tool for analyzing the interviews and the discourses of the journeys within the Medina of Qairouan. The transcription was made according to the current scientific standards of the analysis charter of the ICOR Convention of the Interactions, Corpus, Learning and Representation (ICAR) laboratory.

Mondada considers that: “The meaning of the interview changes considerably depending on whether it is considered as a means of collecting, explaining and stabilizing objectified content through the control of the investigation situation, or whether it is considered as an event during which the informant and the investigator negotiate together, for all intents and purposes, positions, points of view, contingent propositions on the world”.⁴⁰

The field investigation tools, especially the interview, in turn, become elements that participate in the production of the recorded scenes. Relations are built between the subject and the space, the subject and us, etc.

The absence of the explicitly uttered boundary enunciation is quite noticeable in the recordings and transcribed texts forming our material. We may wonder as to why the inhabitants do not explicitly speak of the boundaries.

At the level of the delimitation operation of the neighborhood, Mondada, in turn, notes the absence of explicit boundaries: “In the recording collected during T’s journey, the boundaries do not seem to pre-exist the activity of description or location, but on the contrary emerge from the activity itself”.⁴¹ The boundary can prohibit the passage to places, or the accomplishment of actions, as he recognizes: “It is the observation of the boundary which in a way prohibits going to the places, T only indicating the sign of the bar at a distance: beyond the boundary, a visual conjunction with the places is enough (this is the meaning of ‘just’) as opposed to a bodily conjunction”.⁴²

³⁹ Charles Goodwin, The co-operative, transformative organization of human action and knowledge. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 46(1), 2013, 8.

⁴⁰ Lorenza Mondada, *Décrire la ville: La construction des savoirs urbains dans l’interaction et dans le texte*. *Anthropos*, 2000, 284, 91.

⁴¹ Lorenza Mondada, *Décrire la ville: La construction des savoirs urbains dans l’interaction et dans le texte*. *Anthropos*, 2000, 284, 145.

⁴² *Ibid.*

B- Analysis

To explain these methods, we will extract three examples from our corpus and construct materials. The methods are not separated, and each example carries a demonstration for the other two approaches, each time. For purposes of readability, we restrict ourselves to one approach for each example.

For a demonstration of the interpenetration of the methods, see Combinations 2 (for practical scenes), and 3 (for interactionist linguistics); indicated by (C2) and (C3) given in example 1.

1- Example 1

The first example is about the cognitive construction of the space by means of the substrate formed by the utterance for the inhabitant 1 (RYA).

We present translated utterances mentioning the two itineraries, one inside and the other outside the medina of Qairouan, and we will see how they were constructed by interactions that were inversed comparatively to one another. The boundary, which is the enclosure in this case, produces two opposite units of speech and consequently two opposite spaces, or universes.

When the participant describes Itinerary 1 (Medina *intramuros*), he mentions several times Itinerary 2:

- 1 i walk alone in this route (C2: I walk, Modality)
- 2 when i'm with a group for example
- 3 i walk in the outside
- 4 ((shows with his hand the outside)) (C3: Showing)

Excerpt 1. Inhabitant 1 (RYA).

Contrarily, regarding Itinerary 2 (Medina *extramuros*), he uttered it by creating referrals and oppositions to Itinerary 1:

- 5 there is no maze-like in the old town
- 6 ((Does a dynamic gesture for maze)) (C3: Composed gesture)
- 7 here there isn't\
- 8 here it's clear/
- 9 there are not many articulations
- 10 i walk straight (C2 : I walk, Modality)

Excerpt 2. Inhabitant 1 (RYA).

We conclude that the inhabitant built his itineraries according to the enclosure's oppositions: interior/exterior, maze-like/clear, etc.

His experience of space forms his situated cognition which is anchored in his speech.

2- Example 2

Within the limited scope of this article, for the six levels of immanence, we will focus on the interface between the two levels of objects and practical scenes. We present below our own

semiotic experience where we stay in the stronghold for a while (object level) before entering (practical scenes) in the inside of the house.



STOP_Duration 13s.



ENTERING

Figure 2. STOP-ENTER. © The author.

We also present a boundary as activated at the texts-utterances level. Even its surface is not flat, inhabitants use it for making inscriptions in henna:



Figure 3. BOUNDARY WALL: text-utterances level. © The author.

3- Example 3

The boundary, which is often not directly uttered by the participant-inhabitant using a word; is explicit through gestures, postures, and action verbs.

a- Gestures

The gestures below show different configurations of utterances of boundaries:

The inhabitant 1 (RYA) said:

35 i see it as a frame of the painting

Excerpt 3. Frame in the discourse as in gestures. @ Author.

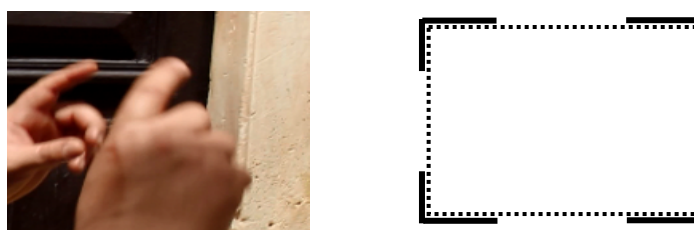


Figure 4. The FRAME. © The author.

Inhabitant 2 (MHA) said:

97 throughout as we walk the enclosure protects us

98 ((he makes a barrier gesture with his hand))

99 this one considers it as an enclosure

Excerpt 4. The ENCLOSURE-WALL, Inhabitant 2 (MHA)



Figure 5. The WALL. © The author.

b- Verbs

The following example deals with action verbs, “to enter” being the major modality of the boundary.

Inhabitant 7 (RAI), before accessing the *Bāb al-Ġalādīne*, the Gate of the Floggers or Tanners, the starting point of her route, said “Let’s enter!”

5 the circuit i ride the most
6 is the one from *bāb al-ġalādīne* floggers’ gate
7 because i want to go to the association
8 <((in English)) we love qairouan>
9 that i collaborate with them
10 <((in French)) then in general> i go there often
11 because my father's pharmacy
12 is found at *sūr al-qwāsim* as it is called here
13 in the part where the enclosure was demolished
14 it was the germans who demolished it
15 so we are going to do this route together
16 let’s enter/

Excerpt 5. Announcement of the plan of the course at the start. Inhabitant 5 (RAI)

C- Conclusion

According to our work, it may be concluded that the theory of enunciation informs us about the characteristics of the boundary as a framing device and in particular as a paradigm of the delimitation of architectural space.

Interactions show the construction of meaning and/or action in progress. the boundary is grasped according to a gradient, as a datum in the process of being built and adjusted until its fixation (value of opening or closing).

The results of the research justify our use of the above-mentioned multidisciplinary methodologies, in addition to the tools for exploring the terrain, which mutually construct one another and thus participate in the analysis of the formulated architectural utterance. Indeed, these methods take shape in the image of the urban inhabitant's experience of space, where the tools are not hermetic: on the contrary, they are in communication with each other according to the terms of mutual co-construction. We abandon the diagram of a linear succession of methods for a dynamic and praxeological diagram.

We thus build a combination of semiotic tools to analyze discourse, a non-neutral vehicle of knowledge. It was the main medium in this study by which inhabitants engage in space-framing operations.

We have opted for enunciation (intersubjectivity and appropriation) and practical scenes (level of observation – expression) which are articulated according to enunciative operations. The observed interactions influence the lived description or recorded testimony and contribute to the formulation of the uttered experiences (plane of expression). This transposition is intended as a methodological and epistemological expansion of the semio-linguistic tool towards the field of architecture. On the other hand, having recourse to the three-dimensional utterance takes advantage of the theory of enunciation, while semiotic practices and interactions make it possible to approach the latter according to a syncretic approach.

We have identified an interface between two different planes of immanence where the passage from one level to another is made by enunciative movements: by a boundary according to its substantial face (upper level) or to its formal one (lower level).

The boundary, which is rarely spoken in discourse, aroused our doubts at the beginning of the work. It is thanks to the methodological combination that we were able to demonstrate that it was induced by disengagement operations and by the modalities “cannot-can”, as well as by the gestures of the participants.

We have identified another aspect which consists of the verbs of movement (modalities) such as to “enter”, “exit”, “wait”, “stop”, and many others that have connoted the boundary according to gradients. We underline the frequency of these indicators or markers compared to the precise word “boundary”, or to its paradigmatic equivalents “enclosure”, “wall”, etc.

At the end of our work, we have combined discursive material with the different paths in space by an enunciation in action and practices according to the different interactions that we identified at the (inter)subjective levels, to reach the architectural utterance and its construction by the boundary.

Transcription

1- Consonants

Arabic characters	Transcription characters (lower case)	Transcription characters (capitals)
ث	t	T
ط	ṭ	Ṭ
ج	ǧ	Ǧ
ح	ḥ	Ḥ
خ	ḫ	Ḫ
غ	ġ	Ġ
ع	ʿ	
ء	‘	
ش	š	Š
ص	ṣ	Ṣ
ق	q	Q

2- Short vowels

ُ	u
َ	a
ِ	i

3- Long vowels

ā	ā
ū	ū
ī	ī