DYNAMICS OF BASIC TERMINOLOGY IN TRANSLATION SCIENCE BETWEEN "EAST" AND "WEST"

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ABSTRACT

In the science of translation, every notion is a consequence of the underlying view of meaning (and meaning-generating mechanisms). In other words, any view of translation takes for granted a semiotic metalevel. The three semiotic conceptions considered here are Peircean (American) semiotics, Lotmanian (Russian-Estonian) semiotics, and Saussurean (Swiss-Western European) *semiologie*. In Western Europe, the Saussurean concept of "signification" has been dominating: the signifiant-signifié view has been fuelling, in its turn, the "equivalence" view in translation, because it postulates a two-way correspondence between what is perceived (signifiant) and what is meant (signifié). Assuming equivalence as an a priori target, some Western-European schools of translation make every possible effort to show that equivalence is what translation is about, going as far as to conceive far-fetched – at least from a practical point of view – theories like the one about "functional equivalence" (Nida). By contrast, the Peircean, triadic view of semiosis (protosign-translatant-metasign), on one side, and the Lotmanian-Vygotskian view of self-communication (inner discourse, I-I communication), on the other side, consider the new meaning produced by the change in context that every communication act implies. In this framework, translation is viewed as a meaning-generating device (Lotman), and the aim of translation is not equivalence, but rather a shift of the meaning of the prototext that is consistent with the communication data given by the prototext and with the relationship existing between the transmitting culture and the receiving culture. Jakobson's 1959 article "On linguistic aspects of translation", an attempt to bridge the gaps among the different scientific environments, is still only partially understood. One problem is the word "linguistic" in its title. Jakobson suggested a scientific method to approach translation, but in Western Europe, with the semiological emphasis on the verbal component, "linguistic" is interpreted as referring to a text without extraverbal implications. Other words considered are "scientific", "literary", "impressionistic", "humanistic".

TRANSLATION SCIENCE: THREE DIFFERENT APPROACHES

When we discuss translation science, every notion has its roots in a semiotic (or semiological) approach to translation. Only accepting this – i.e. that at the basis of translation there is a meaning-generating mechanism and that translation science has its place within semiotics – can we conceive and develop a scientific approach to translation.

In other words, any translation theory we can think of takes for granted a semiotic metalevel. In order to better understand this matter, we should imagine semiotics as the

"engine" of translation science or we can compare it to a computer with its operative system. In the latter case, semiotics would be the operative system we choose to use on our computer, from which we obtain different possibilities of use, programs and applications. We are well aware that if we choose to use a semiotic "operating system", our view of translation and all implications to it will definitely change or – at least – be different from a view without a semiotic matrix.

Before going into the details we may notice that – as far as the debate about translation is concerned – there is an obvious gap between the Eastern and Western world. As a matter of fact, the political division between these two "worlds" established after World War II influenced scholars and their studies: there is still a huge difference between the Eastern and Western approach to translation science. We may say that the Berlin Wall was not just a political symbol, but had also serious consequences on the debate about translation and its connection with semiotics. This barrier was certainly strengthened by linguistic differences. English was the *lingua franca* in Western countries – together with French – whereas Russian was the vehicular language in the East. And this did all but facilitate the relations between these two "worlds".

This division obviously had some consequences: in Western Europe, in fact, a conception based on Saussurean *semiologie* became widespread – i.e. the dichotomy between *signifiant* and *signifié*. These concepts – and, therefore, the entire theory – approach the matter in general terms and do not take into consideration the individual bias of every single semiotic process. From the Saussurean point of view, translation is seen as mere (presumed) "equivalence" among words in different languages and the field of research is quite limited to lexical linguistics. Conversely, in Eastern Europe, circulated translation theories based on Vygotskian and Lotmanian semiotics take for granted concepts such as "inner speech" and "I-I communication". Here, the interpersonal dimension is quite central.

But there is one more point to consider: in the so-called Western world there was another main contribution that influenced translation science: American semiotics founded by Charles Sanders Peirce and based on the triad *sign*, *interpretant*, *object*. Unfortunately, his theories have not become widespread throughout Western Europe and are still not taken into account by scholars who follow the Saussurean dichotomy.

I will analyze the main features of these three approaches in the following paragraphs, often quoting Jakobson's words, whose huge contribution to the evolution of translation science is often understated in the West.

THE SAUSSUREAN POINT OF VIEW: BETWEEN ARBITRARINESS AND EQUIVALENCE

As I have already stated in the previous paragraph, in Western Europe the Saussurean concept of "signification" has been dominating: the *signifiant-signifié* view has been fuelling, in its turn, the "equivalence" view in translation, because it postulates a two-way correspondence between what is perceived (*signifiant*) and what is meant (*signifié*).

In order to explain the unproductivity of a debate about translation based on such rigid dichotomy, I will resort to Jakobson's words. He was one of the first and few scholars to understand that semiotics is a propellant for interdisciplinarity because of its methodological and metascientific value. In each discipline, if a researcher wants to prevent metalinguistic confusion, semiotics helps in defining object level and metalevel. In this framework, Jakobson – who in the United States had the opportunity to study Peirce – stumbles upon Saussurean *semiologie* and tries to analyze it. He starts with the *signifiant/signifié* juxtaposition: according to Saussure himself, "the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts" (Saussure 1959: 67). Nevertheless, Jakobson tracks the origins of such a view in previous centuries, even millennia:

Some interpreters of Saussurian doctrine are prone to believe that his theory of the two-fold structure of linguistic entities is a novelty, but Saussure's approach to the sign both in concepts and in terms originates, in fact, from a tradition lasting over two thousand years. His definition of the total *signe* as a combination of *signifiant* and *signifié* literally corresponds both to the Stoic *semeion* consisting of two primordial aspects – *semainon* and *semainomenon* – and to St. Augustine's adaptation of the ancient Greek model: *signum = signans + signatum*. This conception was inherited by the Schoolmen and was, furthermore, revitalized by the semantic theories of the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, particularly by Bolzano and his followers. The *signans* is perceptible, the *signatum* intelligible (Jakobson 1959: 267–8).

As we can see, the historical framework in which Jakobson inserts the dichotomy makes Saussure's *signifiant-signifié* version sound like notes taken during a lecture without any bibliographical references – which probably is: the "book" "by" Saussure is actually a collection of his students' notes. In this way, the dichotomy is not a novelty at all, and surely not discovered by Saussure: it's simply a historical recollection during a lecture, as so often may happen to any lecturer. However, most West-European translation scholars tend to attribute significance to the supposedly Saussurean *signifiant-signifié* pair. Even the other key distinction that is generally attributed to Saussure, the one between *langue* and *parole*, seems to have been discovered some decades before by the Russian-Polish linguist – albeit with a French name – Baudouin de Courtenay, a prominent member of the Kazan School of linguistics.

Another concept deriving from Saussure's point of view is that of "arbitrariness", which, thanks to Jakobson's work, is now quite simple to understand. His words explain the presumed arbitrariness of the relationship between sign and object in much deeper and more precise details than Saussure in the whole of his work:

Saussure himself attenuated his "fundamental principle of arbitrariness" by making a distinction between the "radically" and "relatively" arbitrary elements of language. He assigned to the latter category those signs which may be dissociated on the syntagmatic axis into constituents identifiable on the paradigmatic axis. Yet also such forms as the French *berger* (from *berbicarius*) "shepherd", in Saussure's view "completely unmotivated", could undergo a similar analysis, since *-er* is

associated with the other specimens of this agentive suffix and occupies the same place in other words of the same paradigmatic series as *vacher* "cowboy", etc. (Jakobson 1965: 352–3).

To contend with Saussure's statements and disband them, Jakobson chooses the comparatively difficult, for him, ground of French philology. He attacks the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign both on the psychological front and on the historical one, like in the following example:

In French *ennemi*, as stated by Saussure, "ne se motive par rien", yet in the expression *ami et ennemi* a Frenchman can hardly overlook the affinity of both juxtaposed rhyme words. *Father*, *mother*, and *brother* are indivisible into root and suffix, but the second syllable of these kinship terms is felt as a kind of phonemic allusion to their semantic proximity. There are no synchronic rules which would govern the etymological connection between *ten*, *-teen*, and *-ty*, as well as between *three*, *thirty*, and *third*, or *two*, *twelve*, *twenty*, *twi-* and *twin*, but nevertheless an obvious paradigmatic relationship continues to bind these forms into serried families (Jakobson 1965: 354).

But this is not all: the key concept that is lacking in Saussure, from Jakobson's point of view, is the one of translation. To fully understand what he means, we must consider the part of the translation process that occurs in the translator's brain, transforming the verbal input of the prototext into inner speech, and then the transformation of the result of the inner working-through into a verbal output (metatext). In this case, Jakobson is obviously influenced by Peirce's work and by the Vygotskian notion of "inner speech", but I will explore the details of such theories in the next paragraph.

Now, before putting aside the Saussurean dichotomy, we should discuss one last point. Assuming equivalence as an *a priori* target, some Western-European schools of translation make every possible effort to show that equivalence is what translation is about, going as far as to conceive far-fetched theories like the one about "functional or dynamic equivalence" by Eugene Nida, which does not regard the form of a message, but its purpose:

… a translation which attempts to produce a dynamic rather than a formal equivalence is based upon "the principle of equivalent effect" (Rieu and Phillips, 1954). In such translation one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message, but with the dynamic relationship […], that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message" (Nida 1964: 159).

Nida explains the features of its dynamic equivalence in further details, offering a quite clear example – taken from two of the many translations of the Bible – of how far equivalence may bring us and which its practical consequences may be:

A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message. Of course, there are varying degrees of such dynamic equivalence translations. One of the modern English translations which, perhaps more than any others, seeks for equivalent effect is J.B. Phillips' rendering of the New Testament. In Romans 16:16, he quite naturally translates "greet one another with a holy kiss" as "give one another a hearty handshake all around" (Nida, 1964: 159–60).

THE PEIRCEAN TRIAD AND LOTMANIAN AUTOCOMMUNICATION: TRANSLATION AS A MEANING-GENERATING DEVICE

If we go back to the metaphor used in the first paragraph, semiotics as the "engine" of translation science, first of all we should introduce the contribution made by Lev Vygotsky (widespread in the East, and partially unknown in the West). During the 1930s, he theorized and demonstrated in children the existence of *inner speech*, which is at the basis of the current "Eastern" approach to translation, both in theory and in practice. Vygotsky stated that everyone uses inner language, the first language we learn, prior to verbal language. Even after we have learned how to use verbal language, we still use inner language in self-communication, i.e. when thinking. Therefore, it is not made up of verbal, but of mental signs, a notion close to Peirce's interpretants, and it is used to communicate within oneself, for example, when we translate.

Since inner language has a multimedia character, it is not made of words, but of percepts – smells, images, feelings, and sometimes even words. Hence, when we want to communicate something, we necessarily need some kind of translation between two different sign systems. So the notion of *translation* should be considered as a fundamental basis of every semiotic act, because when speaking we translate our non-verbal inner language into the language we need to use to communicate – into outer discourse; and vice versa, we translate everything we hear or read into our inner language. These are the processes of volatilization of words and concretization of thoughts that take place every time we speak, listen, write or read. Every semiotic process is, therefore, the constant fluctuation between these two processes.

Though these concepts may now be taken for granted, we should keep in mind that – for the historical and political reasons quoted above – Vygotsky's thought has been spreading throughout the Western world only for a few years and researchers did not show much interest.

Despite this above-mentioned split between the Eastern and Western world, we can easily notice how Vygotsky's considerations can be related to Peirce's fundamental triad:
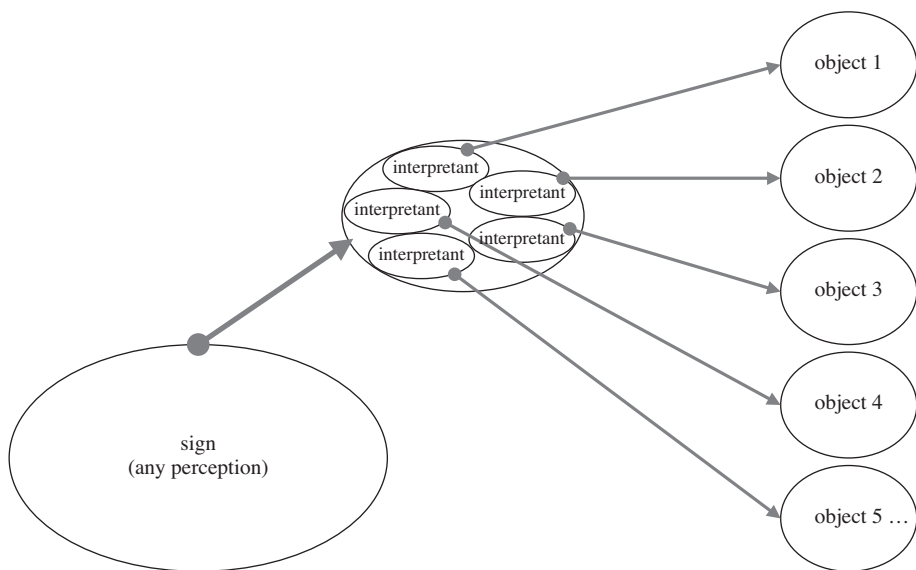
In Peirce's model, meaning is produced through a triad: someone perceives something – a *sign* – and interprets it; the record of the sign is a memory or thought – an *interpretant* – that induces the individual to think of something else – an *object*. Since one sign may produce many interpretants that may vary in different individuals and in different times, every semiotic process creates a great variety of ever changing interpretations. This is a quite revolutionary idea compared to the Saussurean dichotomy based on *signifiant* and *signifié*. In the light of the Peircean interpretant and of the Vygotskian inner speech, we may assume that our perceptions are nothing but translations into our inner speech through decoding elements that we may call *translatants*.

The mechanism of signification is based on the translation of a sign into an interpretant into an object. Like any communication, obviously it is characterized by a partial loss and a partial invariance. And, as all translation processes, it implies also that the result will have new meanings, will add potential meanings to the process. So every passage of information, every logical passage, implies a change of information. It may be useful to quote again Jakobson:

> The *Metalogicus* by John of Salisbury supplied Peirce with his favourite quotation: "Nominantur singularia, sed universalia significantur." How many futile and trivial polemics could have been avoided among students of language if they had mastered Peirce's *Speculative Grammar*, and particularly its thesis that "a genuine symbol is a symbol that has a general meaning" and that this meaning in turn "can only be a symbol", since "omne symbolum de symbolo". A symbol is not only incapable of indicating any particular thing and necessarily "denotes a kind of thing", but "it is itself a kind and not a single thing" (Jakobson 1965: 358).

Jakobson refers to Peirce's referring to John of Salisbury: every single sign refers to many objects; every one of these objects, in its turn, can be seen as a sign referring to many objects. Signification (and decoding) is a multiple-choice process that, as Jiří Levý (1967) used to say about translation, has a single input and several possible outputs. Every interpretant is a diamond dissecting light into many different rays and colours and directions. The logical line of the speaker's (writer's) mind chooses given signs having in mind a given meaning, but the logical line of the listener's (reader's) mind chooses given meanings having in mind a given interpretation. In this way – through what can be named a continuous "misunderstanding" – **meanings translate, meanings evolve**.

The Saussurean dichotomy – and, therefore, equivalence – should appear totally obsolete and out of place. They surely are not the starting point of Lotman's considerations, who – unlike Saussure – takes into consideration culture as a fundamental element in the semiotic process. As a matter of fact, in everyday practice we must admit that the pursuit of equivalence is nothing but pointless and almost impossible – it can be as scientific as the pursuit of, say, happiness. Lotman clearly explains that the contact between two cultures is essential for communication, and necessarily determines evolution, not equivalence:

> In individual and collective conscience two types of text generators are hidden: one based on the mechanism of discreteness, the other one continuous. […] between them a constant exchange of texts and messages occurs. Such exchange happens in the form of **semantic translation**. However, any exact translation presupposes that between the units of the two systems two-way interrelations occur that the representation of a system in the other one is possible. Which allows to adequately express the text in one language through the means of the other one" (Lotman 1990: 178, emphasis added).

Moreover, if we bear in mind Vygotsky, Peirce and Lotman's viewpoints, we simply have to acknowledge that "translation" implies a passage through a mental code and is, therefore, an intersemiotic transmutation. According to Lotman, this process takes place also in the case of self-communication – i.e. when the sign-maker is the same as the receiver – because there is always a change of context and, consequently, of code. In other words, the message always needs to be translated:

> In the I-I channel information is transmitted along this mechanism: a natural-language message is introduced, then a different code that is a purely formal organization built in a syntagmatic way, completely free from semantic meanings or tending to such freedom. Between original message and secondary code there is a tension determining the tendency to interpret semantic elements of the text as inserted in a different syntagmatic construct; from the new interrelation new relational meanings are obtained (Lotman 1990: 165).

Due to this seminal passage, translation can also be described as an operation of meaning increase and as a meaning-generating device. The aim of the metatext is not

equivalence, but rather a shift of the meaning of the prototext that is consistent with the communication data given by the prototext and with the relationship existing between the transmitting culture and the receiving culture. From a single prototext, we will never be able to obtain one metatext: we will have different metatexts depending on the code and the ever-changing context in which communication (and also translation) takes place:
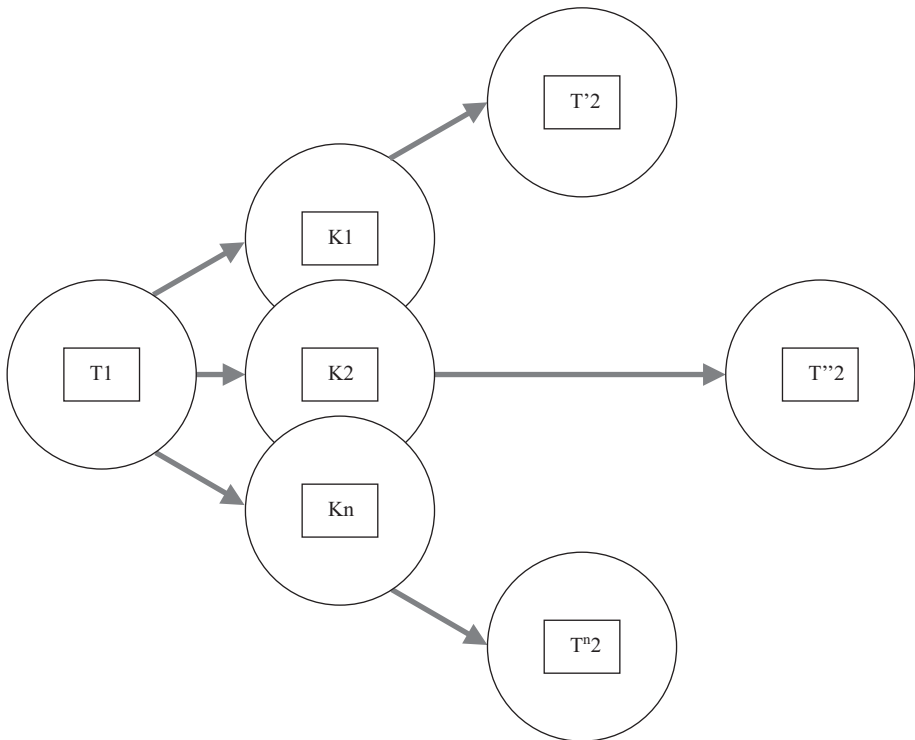
This translation scheme shows that sender and receiver use the different codes K1 and K2 that overlap but are not identical. In the case of back translation, we cannot obtain the prototext, but a third different text (T3).

THE PARTIAL MISUNDERSTANDING OF JAKOBSON'S PAPER: A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO TRANSLATION WITHIN SEMIOTICS

If we consider translation as evolution and increasing of meaning, we can easily assume that Jakobson's 1959 article "On linguistic aspects of translation" – an attempt to bridge the gaps among the different scientific environments – is still only partially understood. Most Western-European scholars, in fact, have read the famous article

and often quote it without completely understanding its content, above all the notion of "intersemiotic translation". The great American-Russian linguist had clearly in mind Peirce's interpretants and their subjective character when he stated that any understanding is translation:

> For us, both as linguists and as ordinary word-users, **the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign**, especially a sign "in which it is more fully developed", as Peirce, the deepest inquirer into the essence of signs, insistently stated. (Jakobson 1959: 261, emphasis added)

One could even think that the famous article about translation is not at all about interlingual translation. In it, the word "translation" could have been used to mean "understanding". If we want to understand this article in terms of interlingual translation, we, therefore, need to make of its general meaning a particular application. We can, then, re-read the most famous quotation from Jakobson in this new light: "… intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (1959: 261).

Every interlingual translation is, therefore, an intersemiotic translation process, too. Seen in this way, the notion of "intersemiotic translation" is no longer only an exotic, futuristic concept applicable only to cinema, visual arts, theatre, and music. Much more simply stated, it is the main passage of any understanding process of a verbal text.

In his studies, Jakobson also analyzed processes such as speaking, reading and writing from a semiotic point of view and considered them as intersemiotic translations:

> The most important transposition into another medium is writing, which guarantees a greater stability and accessibility to receivers far in space and/or time, "[…] the graphemic aspect of language shows significant levels of relative autonomy […] the history of the two main linguistic varieties, discourse and letters, is rich in dialectic tensions and alternating reciprocal attractions and repulsions (Jakobson 1968: 706).

Such a possibility – and practice – of back-and-forth translation from oral to written speech and from written to oral speech – as all sorts of translation – results in a constant transformation of the text, which provides for the evolution of meaning. If translation studies, fifty years after Jakobson's paper, can recognize such a development – i.e. interlingual translation is made up of several intersemiotic transmutations – it will be an advantage for the new discipline.

Another problem that led many scholars to misunderstand Jakobson's paper is the word "linguistic" in its title. Jakobson suggested a scientific method to approach translation, but in Western Europe, with the semiological emphasis on the verbal component, "linguistic" is interpreted as referring to a text without extraverbal implications. He simply started from different premises as compared to Western European scholars, considering linguistics as a science. Unlike in Eastern Europe,

in Western Europe the study of language is placed among the so-called "humanities" and there is no scientific approach to it. Therefore, all forms of translation are studied through totally arbitrary parameters, which are expressed in terms of "fidelity" of a translation to the original text.

Moreover, many Western Europeans make a distinction between "literary" and "technical" translation, which surely is not the starting point of Jakobson's considerations. With the adjective "linguistic" in his title, he had in mind a completely different conception of translation and language, in close connection with science and mathematics. He was well aware of the terrible pains that many scholars in humanities would take in using mathematical parameters, as we can see in this quotation:

> When they define the selective information of a message as the minimum number of binary decision which enable the receiver to reconstruct what he needs to elicit from the message on the basis of the data already available to him, this realistic formula is perfectly applicable to the role of distinctive features in verbal communication (Jakobson 1961: 571).

According to Jakobson, a scientific approach to natural language should not pose particular theoretical or practical problems, since linguistics is the most precise science among humanities:

> Linguistics is recognized both by anthropologists and psychologists as the most progressive and precise among the sciences of man and, hence, as a methodological model for the remainder of those disciplines (Jakobson 1967: 656).

However, semiotics, that encompasses linguistics, deals with non-verbal signs, too. A scientific attitude implies that, once set that semiotics is the science of signs, there is no relationship between sign and interpretant that can be excluded from its inquiry. In this way, I hope I have shown that the meaning of the word "linguistic" was not fully understood by many scholars in Western Europe, who still quote Jakobson's most famous article about translation without knowing that he implied a scientific approach to it.

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