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# Translation Semiotics: The Disciplinary Essence

**Abstract:** Translation semiotics studies the transformation of signs in translation, which generally involves semiosis, sign behavior, sign relations, semiotic hierarchy, intersemiosis, semiotic function, and semiotic conservation. This paper attempts to explore, from these seven dimensions, the disciplinary essence of TS and foresees the development of this burgeoning discipline as a branch of semiotics.

**Keywords:** intersemiosis; semiotic conservation; semiotic function; semiotic hierarchy; sign behavior; transformation of signs

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## 1 Introduction

Semiotics is recognized as one of the main theoretical foundations of translation studies. Semiotic translation studies in the past 30 years can be characterized as (1) an analysis and explanation of translation phenomena and translation as a process based on semiotics theories; (2) a survey of the origin and application of the social semiotic approach to translation; (3) a multilevel, ontological exploration of translation from the perspective of semiotics; (4) a specific examination of metaphors, idioms, non-referentiality of numerals, culture-specific expressions, etc.; (5) a semiotic approach to the translation of ethnic minority literature; (6) a general investigation of semiotic translation studies and practice in China.

Objectively speaking, semiotic translation studies are still in a stage of “footnote-like” theoretical exploration rather than systematically approaching translation with the methodology of semiotics so that the two disciplines are deeply integrated. In light of this, a new trend has emerged in the scholarship which examines the transformation of signs in translation by drawing on the theories and methodology of semiotics, thus establishing an autonomous branch of semiotics known as “translation semiotics.” As we all know, defining

its disciplinary essence is critical to the positioning and development of a certain discipline. To embrace the disciplinary essence of TS, we should take into consideration different aspects the transformation of signs in translation involves, which include, among others, semiosis, sign behavior, sign relations, semiotic hierarchy, intersemiosis, semiotic function and semiotic conservation.

## 2 Semiosis and translation

Boase-Beier (2011: 7) defines translation as a process: “we might say that any process of transferring one section of language into another, which says the same thing in different words, is a process of translation. This would leave open the possibility that any reformulation is a translation.” Translation activity is a sign process in which the translator as the semiotic subject deconstructs the message of the source language text (SLT) with another semiotic system and constructs a new semiotic text, a process that involves a dynamic interpretive relationship between the signifier and the signified. With the SLT as the starting point for interpretation, the translator accesses information with the source language, and taking into consideration such ontological elements of semiotics as signification, meaning construction, and text organization, as well as the pragmatic and cultural elements outside the semiotic system, constructs, in a semiotic form of the target language (TL), the target language text (TLT) and presents it to the TL readers. According to Kull (2014: 69), semiosis presupposes ambiguity, and semiosis is produced when two or more kinds of codes (or languages) incompatible or partially incompatible to each other interact.

Figure 1 indicates that the production of information is a process in which the source language (SL) message is produced by and sent out from the source of information and transformed, through encoding and modulating, into a semiotic form, that is, the SLT, which is then transmitted via the information channel and sent through demodulating and decoding conversion to the information sink, where signs in the SLT are replaced as TL message. For the information source, information from the internal world and the external world is unlimited, whereas for the information channel, semiotic media are limited. To convey unlimited information with limited signs will definitely lead to ambiguous and uncertain interpretation of the signs. Fiske (2008: 3) argues that “reading is the process of discovering meanings that occurs when the reader interacts or negotiates with the text. This negotiation takes place as the reader brings aspects of his or her cultural experience to bear upon the codes and signs which make up the text.” For the information sink, the human mind must get

away from the disturbance of “noise” and clarify the ambiguity of the SLT through effective measures, making the indefinite meaning of the text relatively definite and producing maximal positive feedback in the communication system.



Figure 1: Semiosis of information

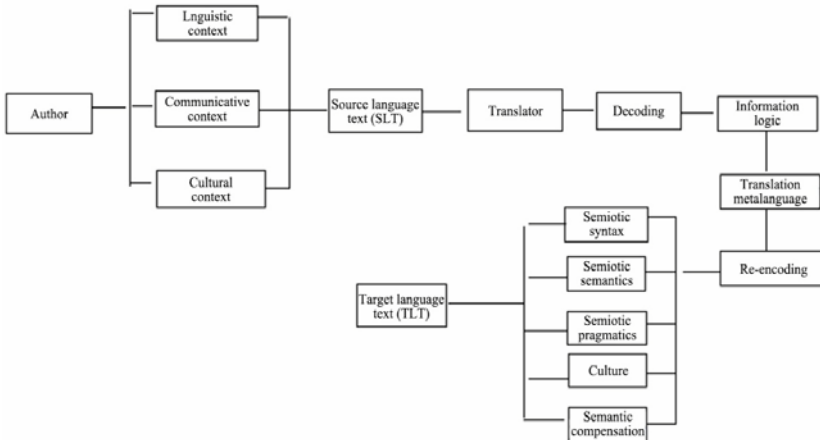


Figure 2: Encoding, decoding, and re-encoding in the translation process

As a social sign, code functions as an organized system of rules, based on which a speaker makes his/her choice of meaning and a listener understands what the speaker means. Every single person is a speaker who speaks in different styles with at least one territorial or social dialect, hence an act of social communication will involve a conversion of codes. Social structures control how language is used, and they are sustained by means of language. The system of linguistic signs provides an ontological basis for translation studies, where the change of language structures takes place with the SLT as the starting point for interpretation. “In essence [...] understanding is a process that on the one hand creates differences (word and the counterword), and, on the

other hand, similarities (word and its translation)” (Torop 2014: 31). Through the understanding of the SLT, the translation process presents itself as a linear semiotic process: decoding–encoding–re-encoding. Here decoding and encoding both mean acquiring and organizing information on the basis of the SLT, while re-encoding means textual construction on the basis of the TL.

### 3 Sign behavior and translation

“Process” connects a sign with a “behavior.” Peirce (2014), for instance, defines semiosis as a behavior of signs, which refers to tertiary interaction among media correlative, object correlative, and interpretative correlative. If we combine semiotics with translation studies, we may find that translation per se is an act of sign.

Firstly, translation is an act of sign interpretation. All thoughts are embedded in signs, which are there for users to interpret. And translation is no exception, as it involves not only operations between systems of linguistic signs but also equivalence and translatability of the cultural added value of two cultures; in fact, it is a cross-language and cross-cultural act of interpretation. Translation aims at communicating information; hence it is an act of communication by means of signs. Any translation would mirror the translator as the subject of translation and relate directly to the previous experience of the translator, as “what one sees is what is in one’s mind” (Weber 1998: 7). The translator tries to understand the lexical meaning, syntactic structure, theme and subject matter, communicative situation, modality, etc. of the SLT and then obtain a chain of information logic, which we call “Interpretant 1,” the formation of which includes operations on linguistic signs and non-linguistic signs (e.g. acts like intonation and pronunciation), and the context-dependent judgment of the meaning of the SLT is based on the translator’s previous experience. Moreover, semantic compensation the translator makes by means of different semiotic systems is also included. The sum of impacts of semantic potential the translated text produces on the TL readers is referred to as “Interpretant 2.” An interpretant is inextricably related to human subjectivity; hence the interpreter, while performing creativity as semiotic subject, is usually subject to doubts, which tells us that interpretation, a representation of semiotic life though, has its own limitations.

Secondly, translation is an act of sign adaptation. From the perspective of linguistic adaptation<sup>1</sup>, a linguistic sign behavior is a process in which linguistic signs function, with the “encoder” and “decoder” constantly choosing signs according to context so as to attain optimal communication. The “encoder” flexibly chooses between linguistic signs at different levels of consciousness by conforming to the communication demand (psychological motivation) and existing social conventions, so as to convey content and meaning and produce a text of semiotic significance; the “decoder,” on the other hand, starts from the semiotic text and interprets the semiotic content of the text by taking into consideration the external factors of linguistic signs, linguistic structures, and contextual factors of the SLT and then presents the content of the SLT by means of dynamic adaptation and based on the reality of language use and social conventions within the linguistic-semiotic domain of the TL so as to meet the communicative purpose of translation as a cross-linguistic-sign medium. Lotman’s ideas are very helpful in understanding the concept of “adaptation.” For him, a text contains different information for different readers, and “each successive portion of information may be assimilated with repeated reading. It behaves as a kind of living organism which has a feedback channel to the reader and thereby instructs him” (Lotman 1977: 23).

Thirdly, translation is a situational sign behavior. Halliday (2001: 110) assumes that the category of context is a semiotic structure which comprises three dimensions: field (ongoing social behavior); tenor (role relationship involved); and mode (semiotic model or rhetorical channel). It is these three categories that determine, through sign behavior, the functional components of language, corresponding respectively to ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual functional. In terms of TS, ideational function reveals the translator’s experience and memory, which is a reflection of inner activities; interpersonal function indicates the relationship between the author and the translator and that between the translator and the reader, which is a reflection of external correlation; textual function represents the combination and translation of linguistic codes, which is a reflection of the TL mechanism.

And lastly, translation is a restricted sign behavior. Sign behavior is a complex process which usually involves three main elements – sign user, sign

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<sup>1</sup> Adaptation, a concept of biological evolutionism, was introduced into pragmatics by J. Verschueren (2000), Belgian linguist and secretary-general of the International Pragmatics Association, in 1999. It proposes approaching linguistic phenomena from cognitive, social, and cultural perspectives and the four dimensions of contextual relevance, structural objects, dynamics, and conscious prominence, with optionality, variability, negotiability, and adaptability of language as its framework and premise.

situation (semiotic form in life), and social, historical, and cultural factors. As far as translation is concerned, the translator, as sign user, is both a producer and an interpreter of signs; however, either sign production or sign interpretation is related to language context and social, historical, and cultural factors in which signs are used. Translation is a restricted sign behavior in that the translator, stimulated by personal experience and psychological, social, and cultural factors in the process of decoding, will show some behavioral responses, resulting in a complex and inharmonious relationship between signs and their intrinsic signified; or a translator's translation may be oriented toward his or her race and ethnicity and language and culture due to the racial and ethnic, linguistic and cultural, and geographical and regional differences that distinguish him or her from other translators, producing variants of signs and their references, distinct sign relations, or behavior, and what is more, inharmonious noise that, to some extent, leads to inadequacy of meaning and information interference in code transformation, thus affecting the efficiency of the use of such signs as jargon, argot, and individualized signs in literary texts.

## 4 Sign relations and translation

No wonder the transformation of signs is related to sign relations, for instance, signs in duality such as signifier and signified, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, invariant and variant, word and object, and signs in trinity such as the intralingual–interlingual–intersemiotic dimensions of translation, textual signs of signification–denotation–referent, and the semiotic world of syntax–semantics–pragmatics.

According to Saussure (1980), the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, and the arbitrariness ensures the independence of the two, that is, a signifier cannot be reduced to a concept, while a signified does not attach itself to a specific signifier. An isolated signifier has different meanings, which is referred to as “polysemy,” whereas a concept can be expressed in different signifiers, which is known as “synonymity.” In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (1972) further interprets and develops Saussure's concept of signifier and signified, on the basis of which he naturally identifies different sign systems: the first system generally examines the most basic words, where the signifier and the signified are both humanly created; and the relation between the two is arbitrary, that is, a signifier can combine itself with any signified, so the signifier and the signified must be in one-to-one correspondence, for example, the word “tree” in English corresponds to the concept it represents.

Outside the first sign system, Barthes introduces “a bunch of roses” as a sign, of which rose as an object is the signifier, whereas love, passion, etc. are the signified, so the relation between the two makes the sign “roses.” As a sign, roses are substantial and meaningful and are thus different from roses as a concrete entity, for a signifier itself is inane and meaningless. Obviously in the second sign system, the correlation between the signifier and the signified witnesses some changes: where there is a signifier, there is not necessarily a corresponding signified, and one signifier may have different corresponding signifieds. Take the Chinese character 红 (*hong*, literally, red) as an example: in the first system, it means the color red (“the color at the end of the long wave of the visible spectrum of light, known as one of the three primary colors”); in the second system, however, it has different meanings such as passion, bloodiness, romance, auspiciousness, jubilation, fervency, ebullience, morale, and revolution. Hence, in terms of TS, the translator should be careful enough with the interpretation of the SLT, as when moving away from the first sign system, the relation between the signifier and the signified becomes quite perplexing and uncertain, and this is because it’s impossible that our semiotic world would always remain in the first system.

With reference to how signs are arranged and interact with one another, Saussure (1980) identifies two forms of relations between signs: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Syntagmatic relations, based on the linearity of language and the elements in the sequence of language use, feature spatial extension of linguistic signs, excluding the possibility of two elements emerging simultaneously and emphasizing that sign elements are arranged one after another under the principle of difference; paradigmatic relations are based on the relevance of the similarities of non-contextual signs in human memory, which are not connected in a linear sequence but by means of varying kinds of sign repertoires latent in the brain and formed after long-term accumulation.

Hjelmslev (1969) goes a step further so as to elucidate the psychologically oriented association relation as an extractive relation and the syntagmatic relation featuring linearity as a conjunctive relation, both latent between different units of a sequence of linguistic signs and together forming a logical relationship that features word collocation, both characterized by time and space, and both providing the logical relation principle for interpreting the transformation of signs within the structural sequence of linguistic signs. As far as translation is concerned, either translating or interpreting is a communication whose purpose and function are revealed by the TLT. To guarantee acceptability of a translation, we need to take into consideration all the component elements of the particular communicative context such as the time the communication occurs, the form of translation (spoken or written), the

receptor of the TLT, the translator, etc. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the meaning and form of a sign; instead, there can be different signs expressing the same meaning or a sign expressing different meanings, which triggers the choice between syntagmatic signs and paradigmatic signs. The translator is first of all a reader of the SLT and meanwhile translates as the second author of the SLT. The SLT and the TLT are related through transformation in such linguistic dimensions as lexical, syntactic, and textual, and transformation of such implicit factors as rhetorical, cultural and religious, and the semantic relation between the SLT and the TLT is realized through syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of signs.

The duality of signs tends to constitute a kind of “logical framework” of propositions, which implies that transformation of signs is virtually the system transplantation of the correlation between two signs, and this is also true to TS. Similarly, influenced by the triadic approach to signs, many studies shift their focus from the binary correlation to the mode of language game that blends cultural lifestyle with nonverbal components, highlighting the important role the interpreter and the triad play in a dynamic semiotic activity. In terms of TS, the semiotic triadic relation originates from Peirce’s division of the sign–object–interpretant relation and icon–index–symbol trichotomy of signs, from which derives a three-level hierarchy of sign, first-level sign, second-level sign, third-level sign, respectively corresponding to icon, index, symbol.

C. M. Morris (1989), American philosopher and logician, tries to establish a triadic world within the sign system by drawing on the research findings of Peirce (see Peirce 2014) and philosopher Rudolf Carnap (see Creswell 2016). Carnap argues that signs involve both linguistic and non-linguistic acts, and a sign is composed of three elements: sign–signified–interpretant. These correspondingly form three semiotic dimensions of meaning: form (between signs), existence (between a sign and its signified), and practice (between a sign and its interpretant). For the studies of meaning, they form three semantic text types: signification (between semantemes), denotation (between a sign and its signified), and referent (between a sign and its interpretant). For the relationship of linguistic signs, they form three categories of language structure: syntax (between signs), semantics (between a sign and its referent), and pragmatics (between a sign and its user). In the theory of triadic relations, what is most relevant to translation is translation typology as proposed by American semiotician Roman O. Jakobson (1960). Influenced and inspired by Peirce’s triadic approach to signs and focusing on poetic texts and artistic signs, Jakobson identifies three dimensions of translation – intralingual translation, interlingual translation, and intersemiotic translation – which respectively examine the transfer between signs in different genres or in different times



within one language, the transformation of signs between different languages, and the transformation of signs between different sign systems. Jakobson's claims provide a frame of reference for the classification and theoretical analysis of translation dimensions in sign transformation.

## 5 Semiotic hierarchy and translation

Hierarchy is a major attribute and characteristic of the real world, and it is also a basic means for understanding and examining things. Semiotic hierarchy refers to a structural form of level-based constitutive relations, in which the lower-level signs constitute, through similarity relations, upper-level signs with new features; for example, an icon (first-level sign) ascends to an index (second-level sign) and an index (or icon directly) ascends to a symbol (third-level sign). From the perspective of biological evolutionism, the process in which an icon, a first-level sign, evolves into an index, a second-level sign, and then into a symbol, a third-level sign, can be seen as a process of growth that is analogous to the use of signs. In other words, the transformation from first-level signs to second-level signs and then to third-level signs attributes itself to the constant evolution of semiosis during the growth of signs, and it is also a mechanism for sign transformation.

The growth of signs, on the one hand, forms an expressive continuum, and on the other, connects signs with the external real events, things, or conditions; yet “to connect signs with their content does not mean an end of the process of sign production; it also means comparing the signs with the real events and revealing the relationship between the sender and the receiver of the signs” (Wang et al. 2013: 84, our translation). For translation, the interpretation process is a process of growth of the sign system of the SLT, in which linguistic and cultural boundaries are transcended to interface with the target language culture and produce good impacts on and generate some interaction among the TL receptors. In terms of semiotics, communication is a sign process induced by a communicator onto those to be communicated with by using signs; means of communication are signs used in the process of communication; content of communication is the common signification constructed between the communicator and the communicated through means of communication. Peirce (2014: 258) argues that a common interpretant will bring about a certain connection between the sender and the interpreter of the signs, and such a connection does not exist before communication occurs. “The nature of communicating consists in reaching an at least temporary consensus, or we can

call it a similar understanding which gives rise to the commonness between the communicator and the communicated.” According to Morris (1989: 146), “language signs have a common core of signification to members of a given linguistic community.” And this is just the basis on which the regular communication between people as we understand can be realized.

Signs serve as a bridge for mankind as subject to understand the real world; it is not only a result of but a way how mankind understands the world, and more importantly a condition depending on which human culture develops. “Semiosis is the capacity of a species to produce and comprehend the specific types of models it requires for processing and codifying perceptual input in its own way” (Kull 2013: 51). The system of signs is a presentation of reality by mankind and a mode through which mankind represents the world, expressing mankind’s perception and understanding of the real world, and is thus referred to as a modeling system (Wang et al. 2013: 120).

According to the modeling system proposed by Lotman (1977), “language” as the core of human signs is divided into natural language (human sign system of original nature such as English, Chinese, etc.) and artificial language (a conventional signal-language mankind creates such as scientific speech and road signs, etc. that shares the nature of behavioral signs). Natural languages are languages formed by different peoples during their process of understanding the world. A natural language is the earliest and most powerful communication system for mankind, and a language picture of the world that mankind depicts.

Lotman (1977) classifies natural languages into primary modeling systems based on which the sign systems constructed in imitation of the structure of linguistic signs (syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations) are referred to as secondary modeling systems, such as the nonverbal cultural systems based on linguistic structures in such domains as customs and habits, moralities and laws, religious beliefs, ritual conventions, literature and art, movie, TV and music, and sculpture and painting, thus bearing the cultural significance more than the semantic information of natural linguistic structures. Cultural signs (secondary modeling systems) and natural linguistic signs are isostructural in conveying semantic information, which enables the transformation of signs between the two. Traditional translation activities take place mostly within the primary modeling systems; however, when they are viewed in terms of transformation of signs, both modeling systems should be taken into consideration, while priorities should be given to the secondary modeling system.

Secondary modeling systems are characterized with national cultures, which aim at highlighting the effect of cultural images with natural linguistic

signs to attract the attention and interpretation of the interpreters to convey the deep meaning, and this process is thus known as the foregrounding<sup>2</sup> of signs. Foregrounding is to highlight, with natural linguistic signs as a backdrop, the deviation at the levels of natural linguistic signs (morpheme, phoneme, lexeme, syntax, discourse) and emphasize, with special structural and expressive patterns, the literary and artistic value of the textual signs and the textual meaning (signification, denotation, referent). Despite the fact that it highlights the deviation of natural linguistic signs, foregrounding still takes the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of natural linguistic signs as its backdrop and therefore falls into two categories: syntagmatic foregrounding (parallelism) and paradigmatic foregrounding (variation). Syntagmatic foregrounding focuses on parallelism or isomorphism at the levels of lexis, semantics, syntax, morphology, phoneme, writing, etc., presenting similar or different external relations between different hierarchical levels so as to highlight specific cultural effects. Paradigmatic foregrounding, which focuses on the variations at the levels of lexis, syntax, phonetics, writing, semantics, dialect, register, time, etc., breaks the norms and conventions of natural linguistic signs, presenting the forms of variations at different hierarchical levels so as to highlight specific cultural effects and deliver specific information.

The notion of foregrounding of signs provides to sign transformation parallel and variant semiotic text types as references, thus providing indispensable modeling samples and frames of reference for sign transformation and translation, and plays an important part in the studies of extra meaning, i.e., cultural value, besides the information of natural linguistic structure. Generally speaking, in translation activities, the cultural added value and historical context the SL carries are the focus of communication, and that is also where the value of translation lies, as value lies in difference. From the perspective of semiotic modeling systems, the process of translation is a comprehensive examination of the primary and secondary modeling systems, and the prerequisite for translatability lies in the similarity between the semantic nature shared by all languages and the link model of specific physical

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<sup>2</sup> Foregrounding, originally a term in painting, means that a painter highlights a specific image with other figures as the background to achieve a certain artistic effect. The term was introduced into linguistics and literary studies by Jan Mukarovsky (1964), a Czech literary and linguistic theorist well known for his development of the ideas of Russian formalism, later explicated by Jakobson (1960) and other Prague functionalist linguists, and finally developed by British linguists Geoffrey Leech (2008) and Michael Halliday (1969) into a theory that comprises syntagmatic foregrounding and paradigmatic foregrounding focusing respectively on syntagmatic relations and paradigmatic relations.

culture contexts. The additional cultural information and values in the secondary modeling systems, such as ideology, philosophy, religion, rite, and lifestyle, are just a main focus of translation studies as intercultural interpretation.

## 6 Intersemiosis and translation

According to Zhao (2010: 2), any semiotic text carries a number of social norms and connections, and these social norms and connections are usually not revealed in the text, but instead, they are “conveniently” carried by the text. Any semiotic text, so to speak, is a combination of an explicit text and an accompanying text, and such a combination makes the text a formal combination of signs and a dynamic construction imbued with sociocultural factors. Such a combination of sign texts is by its very nature a result of growth and extension of the meaning of signs in a text, and it is represented by a formal transfer from Sign A to Sign B, that is, Sign B absorbs a certain part of the meaning components of signs, and this growth of meaning of signs is called intersemiosis (Lv and Shan 2014: 76). In other words, all texts are in a network of text modes characterized by interaction, transformation, and overlapping, exerting influence on reading, interpretation, and the transformation of signs between different systems.

As far as the process of sign transformation is concerned, the intersemiosis between semiotic text A and semiotic text B in the translation process attributes itself to the fact that these two semiotic texts are “a space for the production, activity and development of the cultural sign systems of a nation, a carrier of culture, and a mode and means of manifesting the ideology and way of thinking of a nation” (Wang et al. 2013: 122), and hence the delivering of cultural information between two textual semiotic domains is characterized by constant displacement, erosion, and absorption of ordered structures and disordered structures. The transition between the two textual semiotic domains definitely involves the cultures of two nations, which accordingly concerns such questions as intersubjectivity, interculturality, and intersemiosis, and above all, the question of intertextuality.

At the textual level, intertextuality addresses the relations between semiotic text A and its constituting text, i.e., the relations between semiotic text A and the cited, adapted, absorbed, expanded, and transformed semiotic text ( $A_{1-n}$ ), and semiotic text A can only be understood according to the intertextual information that occurs at such levels as phrasing, rhetoric, subject matter, and

style. From the perspective of sign transformation, the process from conception to writing of Text A by the author and the translating from Text A to Text B by the translator are both acts of intertextuality, the former concerning the transformation from intangible signs into tangible signs, and the latter, from tangible signs into tangible signs. Whereas Text  $A_{1-n}$  (comprising Text A), Text B (converted from Text A) and Text  $B_{1-n}$  (a semiotic variant of Text  $A_{1-n}$ ) find themselves in an intricate network of text modes, translation semiotics should not simply examine, within the textual network, the continuation of and the variation between texts, but rather, it should go deep into the semiotic world that influences texts and studies by taking into consideration the text producer and the translator and reader as textual objects and how the SLT and the TLT are historically produced.

The relation and dialogue between Subject 1 (author) and Subject 2 (translator), between Subject 2 and Object 1 (SLT), and between Subject 3 (reader) and Object 2 (TLT) remain a central concern of translation studies. Intertextuality concerns itself with sign transformation in that it manifests the relations between the author and the translator and between the translator and the TLT reader, highlights the “conflict, confrontation and dialogue” between the subjects, and asserts that sign transformation is interaction between the subjects while jointly participating in the production and interpretation of signs.

The theory of intertextuality, which concerns intersubjectivity, is based on poststructuralism. It argues that signs give rise to the pre-existing interpretation structures of literature. How the subject understands and interprets signs is a major indication of the historical significance of literature. How much the subject recognizes the pre-existing interpretation structures of signs reveals the historical choices the subject makes about different cultural traditions, which gives prominence to the role of intersubjectivity in the transformation of a text's signs: a text's signs at the surface level (first-level signs of iconicity) embodies the impact signs and cultural traditions have on the author while the mapping and dialogue between texts is the interaction of the dialogue at the deep level. The sum of meanings at the surface and deep levels makes the object of sign transformation, which creates a new text within the sign system of the TL by means of comprehension, interpretation, and recreation. In terms of intersubjectivity, intertextuality reflects the reception and inheritance between subjects, and more importantly, the rebellion effect the subject of creation brings onto the pre-existing impacts, which underlies the limitless possibilities of sign interpretation and implies Peirce's model of trichotomy for symbolic meaning and sign transformation: the text is seen as overtly existing signs, the subject as a cognitively existing interpretant, and culture as a covertly existing object.

As far as translation semiotics is concerned, the following points should be addressed.

a) Translation is an activity featuring vertical intertextuality in that it has to not only process the dialogicality and intertextuality between an utterance and other utterances but also deal with how a text cites and responds to other texts.

b) Translation is an activity that concerns intertextuality in a broad sense. It analyzes, within a rigid range of criticism for linguistic forms, the arguable mutual relations between a text and other texts and, taking intertextuality in a broad sense (also known as a deconstructivist approach to intertextuality) as the starting point, considers all knowledge domains and ideographical practice for mankind and even society, history, culture, etc. as references for translation.

c) Translation as an activity should follow the principle of manifest intertextuality. Intertextuality can be categorized into two types: manifest intertextuality and constitutive intertextuality. The former implies that other texts are officially used in one text, for instance, with quotation marks or with signs of explicature or implicature; the latter signifies the construction of a text according to different genres or text types. And obviously, what translation addresses is sign transformation rather than genre or stylistic variation.

d) Translation as an activity involves both passive intertextuality and active intertextuality. Passive intertextuality constitutes the coherence and cohesion in a text and generates the continuity of meaning, while active intertextuality activates the knowledge and belief systems outside a text so that cultural implications and knowledge structures are both incorporated.

e) Translation as an activity allows the existence of positive intertextuality. Positive intertextuality means that the elements of intertextuality, when coming into the present text, bring about “creative treason” (Escarpit 1958: 112) and create new meanings compared with those in the original text, forming a dialogical relationship with the present text. In contrast with positive intertextuality, negative intertextuality means that when coming into a new text, the elements of intertextuality have no change of meaning compared with those in the original text. Generally speaking, for scientific and academic translation, the translator is required to convey as accurately and adequately as possible what the author intends to convey with the least addition, deletion, or alteration – a situation where negative intertextuality predominates. For the translation of literature and other genres, however, “creative treason” – or “translation as recreation” – is allowed – a situation where, compared with the SLT, the TLT acquires new meanings and forms a certain dialogical relationship with the SLT.

## 7 Semiotic function and translation

One of the pioneer scholars who approach semiotic functions from a linguistic perspective, German linguist Karl Bühler (1990) identifies three major functions of language: descriptive function (presenting facts); expressive function (expressing the speaker); and appellative function (influencing the recipient). According to Roman Jakobson (1960), verbal communication cannot do without the addresser and the addressee. The addresser delivers to the addressee the information, which only takes effect when combined with the relevant context, and the addressee must go deep into the context by means of the common or partially common signs and rules for sign use that he/she shares with the addresser while ensuring an unobstructed channel of communication between the two.

Jakobson (1960) proposes six functions of linguistic signs: 1) emotive function, which focuses on the addresser's message, demonstrating the addresser's attitudes and feelings toward the content of message; 2) conative function, which focuses on the message the addressee receives, exerting emotional and attitudinal influence to persuade and appeal to the addressee; 3) referential function, which focuses on the context where information is created, concerning the participating object, what the information signifies, and the cognitive content, with emphasis on what the contextual information signifies, hence also called cognitive function or denotative function; 4) metalingual function, which focuses on the codes used for information, addressing the use of linguistic signs per se, and defining how linguistic codes are used, for example, explaining linguistic phenomena with note, definition, terminology, etc.; 5) phatic function, which focuses on the way of contact, giving particular emphasis to the contact behavior of the addresser and the addressee to start, maintain, prolong, and end the communicative behavior, which includes a large amount of utterances of courtesy or ritual signs; and 6) poetic function (aesthetic function), which focuses on the message per se, foregrounding, with natural linguistic signs as the backdrop, the aesthetic function of individualized linguistic signs and the perceivable level of information content, i.e. what the words express.

In his book *Language and translation* (1975), Russian scholar Leonid S. Barkhudarov proposes the semantic-semiotic model of translation and claims that meaning is the function of signs and is also the primary problem translation deals with, thus framing the question of meaning in translation into a semiotic perspective. As far as translation semiotics is concerned, the expressive, descriptive, appellative, social, emotive, conative, referential,

metalingual, phatic, and poetic functions of signs, all with natural linguistic signs as the backdrop, constitute the basis of typology for sign transformation of a text. The translator interprets, the information content of a particular text according to the features of different text categories, decodes it into an infomediary text, and then restructures a highly proximate text based on the rules or conventions of coding, as well as the text types and functions, thus accomplishing sign transformation of the text. The metalingual function of signs, in addition to being the basis of a typology for sign transformation, also serves the theoretical interpretation of the nature, process, performance, and regularities of sign transformation. Knowing the corresponding text types of the different functions of signs will help the translator define, from a macro perspective, the text type, layout pattern, information focus, information transfer orientation, and subject matter of a particular text so that he/she will present, on the basis of interpretation and decoding, a text of the same type in another language with the highest possible proximity.

## 8 Semiotic conservation and translation

Semiotic conservation means that the meaning and information of signs remain unchanged before and after the transformation of signs. All information is “carried” by signs, including the information on space, time, properties, and conditions attached to and accompanying carriers of signs. The amount of information collected depends on the demand for it; hence there is a limit for the amount of information, and this is also true of the information attached to and accompanying the carrier, whose sum of parameter values, when remaining unchanged, will lead to semiotic conservation.

Semiotic conservation should rid itself of “code parallax.” When information carried by the signs of one language is delivered to the signs of another language, the interpreter, coming from a different system of linguistic signs, may examine, present and interpret the signs and their referents, resulting in “semiotic parallax,” which refers to the differences between the interpretation of signs by the brain and their referents. “Semiotic parallax” attributes itself to the fact that the sign user, due to a lack of cognition, fails to deal with the relationship between signs and their referents and takes the description and expression of signs as a phenomenon of absolute correspondence. So the sign user tends to accept the phenomenon entirely, neglecting the errors and differences between the information interpreted through the linguistic signs and what they mean in reality. It is a fact that



linguistic signs, while presenting facts, may also distort facts due to incorrect interpretation, which may inevitably result in non-correspondence between signs and their referents. From the perspective of sign transformation, the translator should be aware that, firstly, at the level of signification, the syntagmatic relations of words are not absolutely one-way, explicit relations; rather, sometimes they turn out to be multilayered and three-dimensional due to contextual constraints. Secondly, at the level of denotation, the required connection and contextual randomness between the signifier and the signified co-exist. Polysemy has unclear boundaries among denotations and is constrained by contexts at the same time. In addition, the corresponding words in different systems of linguistic signs are not identified with the referents in reality; thirdly, at the level of referent, denotative meaning becomes the background against which pragmatic meaning of the information constitutes the dynamic core of communication. It is thus clear that in the process of sign transformation, i.e. translation, particular attention should be paid to the appropriate correspondence between the signifier and the signified at the levels of signification, denotation, and referent to guarantee information equivalence in the process of information transfer.

Information deficiency and exhaustion is a concern when it comes to semiotic conservation. Information is generated in the movement of things, which involves two major phases. The first phase is one of information processing, i.e. encoding and decoding. Encoding and decoding are carried out based on the knowledge of objective reality; yet, the subject engaged is a human, whose subjectivity will inevitably intervene, bringing certain variables to the production and comprehension of information. The second phase is one of information transfer, where there are three major nodes – information source, information channel, and information sink – which are remarkably different from one another in terms of capacity and expression of information. As a source of information, the external world offers unlimited information, whereas as an information channel, the mediums of signs are just limited. To transfer unlimited information with limited signs induces ambiguity and uncertainty of meanings of signs. However, it is just this uncertainty of meaning that makes information valuable and the communication of information necessary. As an information sink, the human brain needs to rid itself of the disturbance of “noise” and eliminate the ambiguity of meaning through effective means to gradually make the uncertain meaning relatively certain, thus producing maximal positive feedback in the communication system (Wang 2004: 220).

## 9 Conclusion

Just as what Saussure (1980) predicted about semiotics, translation semiotics should be viewed as a field of study in its own right. So far no monographs have been published at home or abroad which address translation semiotics as an independent discipline, and published articles, still in a very small number, have already approached translation studies from a semiotic point of view, the partial insights of which are yet to be integrated and systematically expounded. Translation semiotics is fascinating and deserves in-depth studies. While shedding new light on translation studies, translation semiotics will enrich and expand the domains of semiotics and raise semiotics as a whole to a new height. At the frontier of cultural interaction and communication between China and the world, the study of translation semiotics, based on sign transformation in cultural interaction, contributes to sign transformation via Chinese cultural development and international exchange. It will inspire translation and semiotic research not only in China, but in the wider world as well. The anticipated establishment of a unique position with a Chinese flair will inevitably take Chinese semiotic studies to the forefront of world semiotic research.

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## Bionotes

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