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Translation, Encounter among Peoples and Global Semiotics

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Round Table nos. 27
Translation, Encounter and Global Semiotics

Premise

By way of introduction we shall begin by asking ourselves a few questions:

1. The first, why a round table on translation in a Congress on Semiotics? The oversimplifying answer would be: given that semiotics as the general science of signs deals with anything relating to signs, just as we can speak of literature, music, cinema, fashion,....., we can also speak of translation. On this account translation is one of the possible objects of semiotics. But there is more to the story.

To deal with translation also means to deal with methodological issues in semiotics, issues that are preliminary and essential for semiotics. We can even claim that to deal with translation means to study the conditions of possibility of semiotics itself. And this is the case because to speak of translation means to speak of the sign itself, to say what the sign is. Our claim is that the sign is a translation process. A thing is not a sign if this something cannot be translated into another sign. In Charles Peirce's terminology, this other sign that translates is called an interpretant. And following Peirce the sign does not subsist without an interpretant.

A similar conception of the sign can be traced in Victoria Welby's writings. She considers translation as the practice itself of signifying.

Considered in this framework therefore, the claim is that this Round Table dedicated to translation is not just one of the many RTs that can be organized at a Congress on Semiotics, but that it is the one RT that leads the others.

In other words, translation is *the* pivotal issue in semiotics. To speak of translation is to speak of semiotics and to speak of semiotics is to speak of translation.

2. The second question concerns the different ways according to which we can understand the sense of translation.

The first is the one we have just formulated. That is, the fact that making signs (whether verbal or nonverbal) presupposes the work of translation for the emitter as much as for the receiver. Our reference here is to the relation between the sign and the interpretant which, as anticipated, cannot be avoided. This first type of translation is preliminary and essential. We propose to tag it “semiotic translation”.

Another three types of translation can now be added with reference to Roman Jakobson’s typology. In our own scheme the second type of translation (Jakobson’s first) corresponds to so-called “endolingual translation” and focuses on verbal expression. We are all involved in the processes of endolingual translation as we speak a given language, we are all enacting endolingual translation processes as one person speaks and another listens.

The third type of translation in our typology (Jakobson’s second) corresponds to so-called “interlingual translation”. This is the type of translation involved when someone who knows English as a foreign language must resort to his or her own mother tongue to understand what that someone is saying. This the type of translative process is typically involved in the work of the professional translator.

The fourth type of translation (Jakobson’s third) is so-called “intersemiotic translation,” or transposition. This too is recurrent. Verbal signs cannot ignore intersemiotic translation. This is because the meaning of the verbal sign is not engendered inside the boundaries of the system of language. Instead, meaning necessarily develops in interpretive trajectories that transcend the limits of the verbal sign system and connect the verbal to the nonverbal. This is what Peirce indicates as the object. The verbal sign has its interpretant and its object. Even if the interpretant is in the verbal and in the same language as the interpreted sign, the object is generally outside the verbal. In this sense meaning develops outside the verbal and beyond.

3. The third question concerns translation in the strict sense of the term. Between whom does the relation of translation occur?, that is, what are the terms between which translation evolves? We often speak of translation in terms of negotiation, that is, in contractual terms. But between whom does such negotiation occur?. The reductive answer would be between author and translator. Instead, our own answer is that the relation is between the translator and the text. The simple reason being that there is no such thing as an author owner of the text, and this is because the text is endowed with its own autonomy and consistency with respect to eventual claims to authority on the part of the author.

4. The fourth question concerns the specificity of this Congress, a congress that is dedicated to semiotics, but according to a special perspective as expressed in the title, “Global Semiotics” and in the subtitle, “Bridging different Civilizations”.

Moreover, it is no incident that our own Round Table is entitled, “Translation, Encounter and Global Semiotics”.

In fact, translation, whether intralingual, interlingual or intersemiotic, presupposes a relation of hospitality and listening towards the other. That is, translation involves the condition of opening without limits, a propensity for encounter with the other, which is also encounter with the foreigner.

This last aspect is connected with dialogue where “dialogue” is understood not simply as discourse genre and form, but as involvement, participation, commitment and non-indifference towards the other. Thus understood dialogue implies responsibility in the sense of accounting not only for the self but also for the other. In other words, dialogic implies what we consider as the topic of “semioethics” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003, 2010).

1. Sign and Translation

Before being the object of *semiotics*, translation is a *sign operation*. In other words, translation occurs among signs, and cannot be reduced to the linguistic-verbal order alone. Translation invests the sign sphere in its entirety. Where there are signs and semiotic processes, there is translation. A semiotic approach to the problem of translation – if we must identify fields and boundaries – does not limit its focus to verbal language, but rather extends its gaze to all human expression, verbal and nonverbal, therefore to the anthroposemiotic sphere in its totality.

Victoria Welby (1837-1912) describes mankind’s capacity for signification in terms of ‘translative thinking,’ an automatic process ‘in which everything suggests or reminds us of something else’ (Welby 1983: 34). Translated into semiotic terms we could say that translative thinking is a semiotic process in which something stands for something else, in which different sign systems are related, in which one sign is more fully developed, enriched, criticized, put at a distance, placed between inverted commas, parodied or simply imitated, and, in any case, interpreted in terms of another sign. Translation is a method of investigation and discovery, says Welby, a method for the verification and acquisition of knowledge and for the development of critical consciousness (cf. Petrilli 2009).

We could develop such intuitions in the light of more recent results of studies in language theory and the science of signs generally and state that semiosis, that is, the situation in which something functions as a sign, cannot subsist without translation, for semiosis is a translation-interpretation process. The role of translation is fundamental in the constitution itself of the sign, both verbal and non verbal, in the determination itself of meaning. The intimate connection between signs and translation is particularly evident when we place the category of replaceability as a necessary condition for signhood, that is, when the sign is considered not only as something that replaces something else, but that may also in turn be replaced by something else (Ponzio 2005). Meaning may be defined as a class of verbal and nonverbal signs which replace each other in semiotic processes where an interpretant sign replaces a previous interpreted sign which it somehow develops. As Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) teaches us, a sign subsists thanks to another sign acting as its interpretant, so that its meaning is its translation into another sign. The sign flourishes in relations of reciprocal translation and substitution among signs with respect to which the original sign is never given autonomously and antecedently.

2. The Paradox of Interlingual Translation

The problem of the interconnection between interpretation, translation, and alterity cannot be ignored by translation semiotics. The journal *Athanos* (University of Bari, Italy) dedicated a trilogy to translation of which the third issue was entitled *Lo stesso altro* (The same other; Petrilli 2001). *The paradox of translation is determined by the fact that the text must remain the same while becoming other* simply because it has been reorganized into the expressive modalities of another sign complex. The translation (target) text is at once identical and different to the translated (source) text.

From this perspective, translation is a form of reported discourse, of discourse reporting the discourse of the other. Similarly to direct discourse, authorial discourse, reporting discourse, that is, translator discourse, is not at all evidenced, but on the contrary is erased – or, better, this is the claim. The aim is to allow the person whose discourse is reported to speak directly. Under this aspect, translation resembles direct discourse, however, differently from direct discourse translation aims to completely erase any traces of reporting discourse, the translator's own voice. It ensues that the translator is not expected to comment or resort to expedients that trace boundaries between his/her own word and the word of the other (such as citation marks or dashes). From this point of view, translation is a form of

dramatization. Just as the author of a theatrical text makes his characters speak directly, while his own word as author does not emerge (if not in some prescription for the *mise en scène*), in translation the translator's word, the word that reports the other's discourse, that is, the author's, in another language, is silenced: the translator's word is made to converge with the direct word of the person whose discourse is translated. Translator discourse is no more than the discourse of the other, the author, reported discourse in the most direct form possible – at least, this is the claim. The translator aims to completely eliminate any traces of his own voice as author in his own right. Abnegation of the author's word, that is, the translator's, to the point of elision, subtends the popular image of the translator as a mere mouthpiece. If the translator deserves to be mentioned anywhere in the translation-text, his role in that text will be acknowledged as marginal, extrinsic to the text, for the translator must deny him/herself as author to the advantage of a single author, the original author, that is, the author of the text object of translation, the source text. Of two voices, one only must remain: this is in the tradition of what is generally considered as a good translation.

To translate is inevitably to interpret, and the translator is no more than one of the many masks that the author of a text can wear. This mask is that of a faithful mouthpiece that neither critically interprets, nor analyzes, nor discusses, nor takes a standpoint, but simply reports, and does so faithfully. In other words, as reported discourse, translation is *sui generis* indirect discourse, which presents itself in the 'masked' form of direct discourse.

The modalities (with internal differences) of reported discourse foreseen by historical-natural languages include: direct discourse, indirect discourse and free indirect discourse. In line with our discussion, a fourth modality may now be added: reported discourse in the form of translation from the source to the target language.

Translation is indirect discourse if by indirect discourse is understood discourse that analyzes, interprets, explicates, clarifies, solves ambiguities, decides on senses, establishes the intonation, orientation, intent according to which something is pronounced. No doubt the translator does all this. Reporting discourse is pervasive, omniscient to the point that all syntactical and punctuation indicators which distinguish the translator's word from the word that is translated are eliminated. Consequently, if free indirect discourse is direct discourse masked as indirect discourse, translation is *indirect discourse masked as direct discourse*.

3. Translation as the relation between the translator and the text

The materiality of the text is not only achieved with respect to the interpreter. Similar to all communicative processes, the text emerges as semiotic materiality not only in the sense that it resists the interpreter. It is autonomous from the interpreter; it has its own signification that does not depend on the interpreter and may even escape him. The text has its own materiality, objectivity, independence and capacity for resistance and self-signification *with respect to the author as well*. The language that the author uses—including the language of literary genres—resists the author, takes the author by the hand so to say, and even says things that the author had not consciously decided to say.

Texts that break through the boundaries of their own time and flourish beyond contemporaneity, in the “great time,” as understood by Bakhtin, develop new meanings and senses.

We can say that neither Shakespeare himself nor his contemporaries knew that “great Shakespeare” whom we know now.... But do we then attribute to Shakespeare’s works something that was not there, do we modernize and distort them? Modernization and distortion, of course, have existed and will continue to exist. But that is not the reason why Shakespeare has grown. He has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his works, but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch. Semantic phenomena can exist in concealed form, potentially, and be revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs that are favorable for such disclosure (Bakhtin 1986: 4).

Translation necessarily consists in negotiation and contract, which concerns the relationship between *translator* and *text* and not the relationship between *translator* and *author*. Negotiation and listening, negotiation and answering comprehension are inseparable. Their dialogic nature is given by the alterity, autonomy, resistance, objectivity, in a word, *materiality* of the text to be translated.

From a semiotic perspective the text is made of sign material. This means to say that the text, any text whatsoever, is already a translation in itself, is already an interpretation. Translation across languages is a specific case of translation across sign systems, internally and externally to the same historical-natural language. But translation across languages is possible on the basis of language understood as a modeling device, an a priori and condition for verbal language, speech which, instead, arises originally for communication and thanks to the predominance of iconicity in the relation among signs.

With reference to literary translation, if we understand ‘fidelity’ in terms of creativity and interpretation and not just as imitation, repetition, reproduction of the same, of the ‘original’ text, as a literal copy in another language, the translantant text must establish a

relation of alterity with the text object of translation, the translated text (Petrilli 2012: Ch. 8). The greater the distancing in terms of dialogic alterity between two texts, the greater is the possibility of creating an artistic reinterpretation through another sign interpretant in the potentially infinite semiotic chain of deferrals from one sign to the next, to which belongs the so-called 'original.' With reference to Charles S. Peirce's general theory of signs, in particular his triad 'Icon,' 'Index,' and 'Symbol,' if a translation is to be successful in terms of creativity and interpretation, the relation between the text object of translation and the translant text must be dominated by iconicity.

A translated text is at once similar and dissimilar, the same other (Petrilli 2001). This is the characteristic of the icon. Iconic similarity is precisely this type of similarity. To give an example this similarity: it is like that between two banknotes that must be similar in everything, but within certain limits – the serial number must be different, otherwise one of the two banknotes is false. In the case of translation, this would be the situation of the translation of Cervantes by Menard as recounted by Borges.

4. Translation as encounter

Translation always implies encounter among different languages and verbal texts as well as among different cultures. Translation can be oriented in the sense of "listening" or of "wanting to hear". The difference is in the attitude implied towards the other with implications of the ideological and political orders. This clearly emerges with migration processes in today's globalization world. Listening is understood as opening to the other and is connected with hospitality. Conversely, wanting to hear tends to englobe the other, to distinguish, classify and reduce the other to identity, to define and judge the other. This generally occurs on the basis of categories intended to defend one's own rights to the disadvantage of the rights of the other.

Translation understood in terms of listening is associated with the ethical dimension of semiosis. It evidences the translator's responsibility which is first of all responsibility for the other. The translator must account to the other and for the other. Therefore, the translator carries out a role of fundamental importance in the encounter among languages, signs and cultures, as it takes place through processes of migration and globalization.

Such responsibility is neither special nor technical, but ethical and global. In fact, whether we like it or not even the person most distant from us is our neighbour in one way or another. This can also be called 'semioethical responsibility' given that it concerns signs, signs

understood not as a means through which to assert one's own identity and one's own rights, but rather signs that are finalized to acknowledging the rights of others and not as a means for asserting one's own identity and one's own rights over others.

5. For a semioethic turn in translation

Semioethics of translation may be considered as working towards a new form of humanism which cannot be separated from the question of otherness. The new form of humanism we wish to propose is the humanism of otherness (perspected by Levinas in all his writings, see *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 1972). Human rights as they have so far been claimed tend to be centred on identity, leaving aside the rights of the other. Traditionally, the expression 'human rights' refers to one's own rights, the rights of one's identity, of self, and tends to forget the rights of the other. On the contrary, from the perspective of our concern for life (human and nonhuman) over the planet, for the health of semiosis generally, for the development of communication not only in strictly cultural terms but also in broader biosemiosical terms, this tendency must be quickly counteracted by the humanism of otherness, where the rights of the other are the first to be recognized, not only the rights of the other *beyond self*, but also the self's own other, the other *of self*. The self characteristically removes, suffocates, and segregates the other which tends to be sacrificed to the cause of identity. But developed in such terms identity is fictitious and all efforts to maintain or recover it are destined to fail.

From the perspective of what we have designated as "semioethics" (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003, 2010), the translator is an interlocutor who does not expel but rather welcomes the other with its singularity, cultural difference, values and specific idiom. The semioethic translator is a listening device and favours the practices of hospitality towards the word of the other (Ponzio 2012a)

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