Identity and Altery of the Text in Translation
A Semiothic Approach

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ABSTRACT

The translated text is identical to the original text and at once altogether different from it, whether they are dealing with a verbal or nonverbal text. With respect to the globality of semiosis, the authors main focus in this essay is on interlingual translation, the relation among verbal texts translated, interpreted, transferred, transvaluated, transaccentuated, transintonated, transposed and readapted into the sign systems of other verbal languages. In the processes of interlingual translation, a central concern is the nature of the relation between the original text and the translated text and the reverse. Moreover, given that they are dealing with questions concerning the exchange among values and not simply meanings, the authors’ perspective is more appropriately described as pertaining to semioethics.

KEYWORDS

Dialogism, Modelling, Otherness, Reported Discourse, Translatability

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Where there is semiosis, sign activity, there is interpretation, translation, adaptation as in the case of a novel and its translation into the signs of filmic discourse, or of a joke narrated through the images of a comic strip, music interpreted through the signs of dance, a painting transposed into voice, and again as in the case of the signs of nature and its spectacles translated, interpreted and adapted into the infinite array of the different human expressive mediums at our disposal, wherewith nature is translated into the sign systems of human culture and most often enhanced by them. From this point of view consider, for instance, scientific progress in the realm of cybersemiosis, the body empowered through technology, its signifying potential and capacity for action magnified through processes of adaptation into the verbal and nonverbal languages of other sign systems whether relating to the sciences, robotics and human life in outer space, to the practices of everyday life, to politics, medicine, sports, war, or to the artistic sphere with the production of novels, filmic discourse, music, the now classic film Matrix, to cite just a few examples among the infinite.

With respect to the globality of semiosis, our main focus in this paper is interlingual translation as it takes place among different verbal languages, the relation among verbal texts translated, interpreted, transferred, transvaluated, transaccentuated, transposed and readapted into the sign systems of other verbal languages. In the processes of interlingual translation a question of central importance concerns the nature of the relation between the original text and the translated text.

Doubtlessly these two texts are similar to each other, but what is the nature of such similarity? The paradox of translation consists in the fact that the text must remain the same whilst becoming
other simply because it has been reorganized into the expressive modalities of another language. This consideration has led to our formulation of the expression “Lo stesso altro” / “The same other,” which Umberto Eco deemed most appropriate: the translated text is identical to the original text and at once altogether different from it. And this is so whether we are dealing with a verbal or a nonverbal text and its adaptation into the signs of another sign system, of another text whether verbal or nonverbal.

All this reflects on another aspect of the problem of translation, the question of the status of the translator. In the relation to the author of the original text the translator is often reduced to the function of spokesman, mouthpiece, transmitter. And author function (Foucault) as well is problematic in the translation relation.

With the expression Dire quasi la stessa cosa (Saying almost the same thing), Umberto Eco (2003) tells us that translation is not limited to the impersonal transfer of content from one linguistic recipient to another, that the relationship between the original and translated text is “rélevant,” as Jacques Derrida (1999) would say. Eco’s “almost” translated into our terminology tells of the translator’s “singularity,” “otherness,” “unreplaceability,” of “responsibility” as implicated in the work of translation. Our allusion here is not to responsibility reduced to “technical responsibility,” but rather responsibility as it emerges in terms of “responsive understanding” and “moral responsibility,” as Mikhail M. Bakhtin says.

As the same Bakhtin has amply demonstrated, “secondary” or “complex” genres, that is, the genres of literary writing, shed light on “primary” or “simple” genres, that is, those of everyday discourse, and not vice versa. This also means to say that problems of literary translation that concern secondary, complex texts can contribute to a better understanding of problems of non-literary translation involving primary, simple texts.

A pivotal issue in our own approach to the question of translation is that translation of a text concerns the relation of that text to “language” understood as a “modelling device” (Sebeok), as the “play of musement” (Peirce), where the allusion is to the characteristic capacity of “language as modelling” to produce “an infinite number of possible worlds” (Leibniz). Translatability concerns this relation between the text and language understood as “language as modelling”. Insofar as it is a text, the text in fact calls for translation.

Eco’s “almost” also indicates that the relationship between the original text and its translation is a dialogic relationship. This is the relationship between the reporting word and the reported word. Translation presents the same characteristics and problems of all forms of reported discourse, whether direct, indirect or free indirect. As Eco says (2003, p. 20, note): “The metalinguistic formula implied at the beginning of all translated texts is effectively ‘The author says the following in his own language’. But this metalinguistic notice implies an ethics of the translator”.

These are some of the issues we will focus upon in what follows where we view the intertextual relation, with special reference to interlingual translation and the literary text, from a semiotic perspective. However, on this account given that, as we will see, we are dealing with questions concerning an exchange among values and not simply among meanings – interlingual translation effectively involves processes of transvaluation, transaccentuation, transintonation across verbal languages – our perspective is more appropriately described as “semioethical,” from the expression “semioethics,” as we have proposed on various occasions (see Petrilli & Ponzio, 2003a, 2010; Petrilli, 2014).

2. THE SAME OTHER IN TRANSLATION

Dire quasi la stessa cosa / Saying almost the same thing (2003) is the title chosen by Umberto Eco for his book on translation. In this book he speaks about his experiences in translation both as translator and as author translated into various languages. Eco draws particularly on his experience as translator of Gérard de Nerval’s Sylvie (1853, Sylvie. Ricordi del Valois, trans. by U. Eco, bilingual edition, see Eco, 1999) from French into Italian, which, as he states in the introduction, is one of the texts
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