

Intersemiotic translation: The Peircean basis

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Introduction

See the movie and read the book. This apparently innocuous sentence has got many of us into fierce discussions about how the written text compares with its filmic version. More often than not, the argument tipped toward the literary piece, considered a helpless victim in the hands of screenplay writers, directors, and producers.

Such a situation arises from the age-old tradition of evaluating a translation according to its faithfulness to the original, which stands as a superior model to be duplicated. The old saying—*traduttore traditore*, ‘translator traitor’—still holds true to many more than would acknowledge it. Some translation theorists have, however, updated the saying, now recast as “translators have to be traitors”, which applies particularly to intersemiotic translation. Those who insist on comparing the book to the movie fail to perceive that book and film belong to different semiotic systems, and, as such, demand an evaluation based on criteria specific to their media.

The appropriate parameter to assess an intersemiotic translation would be the carrying through of meaning from the source system to the new representation. To say that one liked the movie but thought the book was better amounts to little more than stating one’s preference of apples to apple pie. They are not supposed to be compared, for one is what the other has become. It is better to compare how the meaning of a text was rendered into two or more movies. Or, if one wishes, to judge what recipe makes the best pie. The logical way of doing this, I propose, is examining the interpretant of the different signs.

This paper provides a theoretical framework, based on Peirce, to analyze differences (to the detriment of specularity) in intersemiotic translation. For this purpose it discusses the importance of the interpretant in intersemiotic translation, mainly from literature to cinema, beginning with Peirce’s definition of the interpretant and proceeding to compare it with the notion of objective worlds.

Meaning, modeling systems, and interpretants

When Peirce introduced his concept of meaning, he unwittingly defined the phrase, and established the foundations for, “intersemiotic translation”. For him, meaning is the “translation of a sign into another system of signs” (*CP* 4.127), which renders every sign translatable into an endless series of other signs (*CP* 2.293 note). Since the meaning of the sign “is the interpretant as

it is revealed in the right understanding of the Sign itself” (CP 4.536), the interpretant takes pride of place in any theoretical discussion of intersemiotic translation.

Peirce’s notion of meaning can also be employed to explain how we experience the environment. If we consider that experience is far from passive, that it is rather an act of reconstruction, we will notice the interpretant at work (Jeha 1994). Every sentient being apprehends the environment according to two main reconstructions or, in semiotic parlance, modeling systems. The first is dictated by the species-specific DNA—a biological model. The individual organism’s interests, which determine its cognitive map, constitute the second. Specifically human, a third modeling system arises with the introduction of language—the world of culture. These modeling systems, or more simply, models, are the interpretants human and nonhuman beings develop to interact with the world, transforming it and being transformed by it. For humans, this interaction involves more than is present in the physical surroundings: emotions, illusions, abstractions.

Suppose that two individuals from different cultures want to communicate about a certain object. The interpretants they develop about that object are not wholly commensurate; therefore, communication will be deficient. Some communication always occurs, though, since their objective worlds superimpose in certain common points that make possible the exchange of messages. The common points we call code; the private ones, ideas.

Emitter and receiver must share the code for communication to occur. Peirce (1977: 196-197) calls this common ground the “communicational interpretant”: “It consists of all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfill its function.” The communicational interpretant is more than the linguistic code: it is all that universe of experience to which reference is made. Thus, real and reality, good and evil, true and false are interpretants developed by a culture and by an individual, and are historically dated. The interpretant substitutes for the pre-semiotic notion of natural given: reality, truth, and most of the concepts underlying our civilization are collective interpretants constructed by human beings in the world of culture.

Communicational interpretants, or cultural models, make it possible for members of diverse societies, in different times, to understand each other. Because human experience coincides in some points—what I have been calling the code—ideas, or individual interpretants, can be transmitted. Consequently, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* can be made into English, French, Russian, and even Japanese films; Lilian Hellman’s *Little foxes* can be transposed from the theater to the screen. Similarly, the communicational interpretant enables Durrell’s 600-page *Alexandria quartet*

to be condensed into a 115-minute film. This interpretant, and only this, allows for the existence of intersemiotic translation at the cultural level.

Intersemiotic translation and the fallacy of referentiality

What is transposed from one semiotic system to another, or in the present case, from literature to cinema, is the meaning of a sign. The sign, as it stands for an object and as it conveys a meaning, will produce an idea—the interpretant (Peirce *CP* 1.339). Every process of translation—as an act of semiosis—follows that pattern: an individual experiences a sign (a text) that stands for, or refers to, a phenomenon in the world and that creates some sense (the interpretant) in his mind. That sense is a sign equivalent to that first sign and is further developed into another sign, perhaps another text or maybe a film.

Because the object of a representation can be nothing but a representation, its meaning can be nothing but a representation, too (Peirce *CP* 1.339). Filmic versions of books, in Peircean semiotics, make part of an endless series of representations, of which the written text is the object. As the text itself is a representation of another representation, the first object proves to be infinitely removed from the sign at any point in the semiosis chain. Intersemiotic translation illustrates perfectly the action of signs: cultural artifacts, or symbolic signs, according to Peircean categories, grow away from the initial object that started the semiotic process.

This infinite regress on the three points of the sign triangle does not imply that Peirce eliminates the referent from his semiotic. Quite the contrary. He would hardly authorize some ideas that use the concept of meaning as intersemiotic translation for support. Greimas & Courtès (1979: 260), for example, explain away the referent by claiming that between language and semiotized world occurs not the mediation of the extra-linguistic world but an intersemiotic translation: “The problem of the referent is then reduced to the question of the correlation between two semiotic systems (for example, natural languages and natural semiotics, pictorial semiotics and natural semiotics). This is a problem of inter-semioticity.” Such a removal of the referent from the discussion of meaning characterizes the theories that consider “only one semiotic dimension, reference, sense, or use” (Nöth 1990: 96). Saussure and Hjelmslev inaugurated this approach that was later taken again by Greimas and Eco.

Eco attacks, with reason, what he considers the fallacy of referentiality. Under the theories that consider only one semiotic dimension, it becomes extremely difficult—if not downright impossible—to explain that referents of fictional objects exist and how it is possible to refer to them. Peircean theory, on the contrary, explains meaning by considering both sense (the interpretant) and reference (the object). Moreover, because Peirce included the concept of experience

in his speculations, he could theorize that the sign relates to an object regardless whether it is a purely mental creation or something in the physical world (Jeha 1993: 349), and thus avoid the fallacy of referentiality.

The Interpretant as interface

Peircean theory postulates generation of meaning whenever intersemiotic translation occurs. If one considers meaning production as a process grounded on sense and reference, then the idea of translation as the rendering of a text in a different language has to give way to a notion that includes the whole modeling of experience. Modeling presupposes laws that correlate the experiencing individual to the environment, and since where there is correlation or law, there is an interpretant, models can be seen as interpretants. Therefore, the interpretant operates as an interface that allows meaning to permeate between sign systems.

The organism occupies the center of a web of relations through which it knows both itself and the environment. The fabric of this semiotic web is intrinsically open to change, for each experience implies another thread, another relation, another design. This possibility of continual alterations prevents us from drawing a permanent and rigid division between sign systems. Not only do signs grow but they permeate from one system to another, in a continuous generation of new meaning. This fundamental fact invalidates any comparison between a sign and its development. To evaluate a translation according to its fidelity to the source is a Byzantine question better left alone. Every cultural artifact is the result of a transformation of a previous artifact, a sign that preceded it but also succeeded another. In the endless chain of ever-growing symbolic signs, intersemiotic translation equals meaning production.

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