SOCIO-SEMIOTIC THEORY OF LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

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Abstract

The paper intends to explore and discuss the necessity for a sociosemiotic approach in the translation. The theoretical basis for this approach is Halliday's socio-semiotic theory of language in which he stresses the unity of the text (language), context (linguistic or non-linguistic), social structure, and in which he sees language as a unique system of signs with a social function, capable of expressing the meanings which all other sign systems can make (Halliday, 1978). We will, in short, be attempting to cast some light on the relationship between translation and semiotics. The relevance of the sociosemiotic approach to the translation is that it helps the translator to better understand the meanings (associative and designative) of words, sentences, and the fact that everything about the message has a meaning.

Keywords: extra-linguistic, language, paralinguistic, socio-semiotic, translation

Introduction

Words never occur alone. Paralinguistic or extralinguistic features always exist. When people, for example, listen to a speaker delivering a speech, they not only take in the verbal message, but they also make judgments about the speaker on the basis of background information and various extralinguistic codes. These kinds of codes are present in both, written and oral discourse.

Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs. It is concerned with the ways we represent our world to ourselves and to others. It is a human endeavor. Humans can communicate verbally or non-verbally. They use signs, symbols, sound or paralinguistic means to communicate a message. Semiotics is concerned with the production and interpretation of meaning. Its main principle is that meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which function as signs in relation to other signs. The complex meaning relations that can exist between one sign and another constitutes the system of signs. Those relations such as meronyms, co-

meronyms, antonyms, and superordination/suberordination are deployed in space and time in the process of text production.

The current theories of semiotics may be traced back to two main sources. The first is Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a Swiss linguist for whom 'semiology' was the study of the role of signs as part of social life. The second is Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), an American philosopher whose field of study was the 'formal doctrine of signs' (Chandler, 2002).

We will start with Saussure who is considered the founding father of semiotics. He used the term 'semiology' to refer to the science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. Saussure's interest was in language. He defined the linguistic sign as being dyadic. He invented the linguistic term 'sign' that unifies 'signifier' (sound-image or word) and 'signified' (concept). In his work, he focused on the linguistic aspects signs and semiosis.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1983: 15-16) defines semiotics as a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek sēmeĭon, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge.

Saussaure considered language as a system of signs which have meaning by virtue of their relationships to each other. Similarly to peirce (1983: 66), he says that every sign consists of a 'signifier' and the 'signified'. The relationship between them, for him, is called 'signification'.

On his part, Peirce defines signs as follows: Signs in general [are] a class which includes pictures, symptoms, words, sentences, books, libraries, signals, orders of command, microscopes, legislative representatives, musical concertos, performances of these… . (cited in Gorleé, 1994: 50).

Peirce extended the scope of semiotics beyond the linguistics signs used in communication between humans. According to Peirce semiotics involved the systematic study of signs, sign systems or structures and sign functions. Peirce proposed a triadic model which consists of:

• The representamen: the form which the sign takes.
• An interpretant: the sense made of the sign.
• An object: to which the sign refers.

More precisely, Peirce (1985: 5) says that a sign or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first

sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen.

From his side, Morris (1946) expanded the theory of signs laid down by Peirce. Peirce conceived of semiotics as a science of man, whereas Morris' theory of signs includes sign processing by animals, or organisms. Morris (1946: 15) refers to semiosis as the sign process in which very sign-process involves a disposition to respond, the sign itself may be any feature of a stimulus-object which acts… as a preparatory-stimulus; such stimuli are not limited to responses, and only when a response is itself a stimulus of this sort is it a sign.

Moreover, Morris' contribution was to derive the following three dimensions of semiotics:
• Syntactic which studies the relations between a given sign vehicle and other sign vehicles.
• Semantic which studies the relations between sign vehicles and their designate.
• Pragmatic which studies the relation between sign vehicles and their interpreters (cited in Nöth, 1995: 89).

Semiotics and Translation
In his famous article of 1959 'On linguistic aspects of translation', Jakobson (1959: 232) distinguishes three ways of interpreting a verbal sign:
• Intralingual translation (a verbal sign may be translated into other signs of the same language which can involve rewording or paraphrase).
• Interlingual translation (the translation of sign into another language).
• Intersemiotic translation (translation between sign systems).

According to Jakobson, translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes (1959: 233).

Thus, the translator has to recode the source text and then s/he has to transmit this message into an equivalent message for the target culture.

One of the scholars who has been inspired by the ideas of Jakobson (1959) is Popovic. He (1975: 16) points out that the literary text is not just a combination of verbal signs, but it is a culturally-loaded linguistic system, and it needs a thorough examination before the process of translation is carried out. Furthermore, he argues that the semiotic aspect in translation is concerned with the differences met within the process of translation, which are a consequence of a different temporal and spatial realization of the translated   text (Popovic, 1975: 16).

So, semiotic has an important role to play in translation. Translation studies are known for bringing together a wide variety of fields. Indeed, Gorlée (1994: 133) points out that translation studies is an interdiscipline or rather transdiscipline combining an approach from (general and applied) linguistics with an approach from (general and comparative) literary studies, in addition to contributions from such disciplines as information theory, logic, and mathematics on the scientific

side, and social anthropology, sociology, and theology, on the more humanistic side.

In its different stages, translation moves from the firstness of mood-scape (image) through the secondness of worldscape (diagram) to the thirdness of mindscape (metaphor). In this process, translation creates for itself more and more referential freedom and space for (creative and/or doctrinaire) maneuvering of meanings.

Elsewhere, Gorlée remarks that translation "can be assimilated to semiosis, or sign activity" (1994: 10) in the sense that semiotics studies the transmission, and the interpretation of the meanings consisting one or more signs, which is rather similar to the issues translation studies addresses.

Similarly, Gorlée (2004: 129) states that semiotranslation is a complex metadisciplinary concept, which also influences the definition of the translator's competence. Harking back to Jakobson's categories, he defines the requisite knowledge of the translator as follows:

Recently, some of Hatim and Mason's works has had to do with semiotics. They (1990: 105) point out that translation can now be considered as the process which transforms one semiotic entity into another, under certain equivalence conditions to do with semiotic codes, pragmatic action and general communicative requirements. Furthermore, they (1990: 105-106) mention four steps that a translator should undertake in a semiotic translation, mainly, 1) identification, 2) information, 3) explication, and 4) transformation of signs.

On his part, Toury (1986: 1112) considers translation as a cross-systemic transference within the framework of cultural semiotics. Hence, he defines translation as a series of operations, or procedures, whereby one semiotic entity, which is a (functional) constituent (element) of a certain cultural (sub)-system, is transformed into another semiotic entity, which forms at least a potential element of another cultural (sub)-system, providing that some informational core is retained 'invariant under transformation', and on its basis a relationship known as 'equivalence' is established between the resultant and initial entities.

Social Semiotics

The term 'social semiotics' was introduced by Halliday (1978). Halliday proposes that language cannot be separated from society. He views language as a 'social semiotic' in which language, the means by which people interact, must be considered in a social context. Language and society is a unified concept and need to be investigated as a whole.

Halliday (1978: 14) points out that individual human beings become part of a group through language. Halliday adds that a society does not consist of participants but of relations, and these relations define a social role. The link between social roles and language is explained by Halliday (1978: 15) as one in which social roles are combinable, and the individual, as a member of a society, occupies not just one role but many at a time, always through the medium of language. Language is again a necessary condition for this final element in the

process of the development of the individual, from human being to person to what we may call 'personality', a personality being interpreted as a role complex. Here the individual is seen as the configuration of a number of roles defined by the social relationships in which he enters; from these roles he synthesizes a personality.

Halliday (1978: 23) also states that our environment is shaped by the culture, and the conditions under which we learn language are culturally determined. This point is significant at two interconnected levels:

1.A matter of linguistic environment, which is itself part of the culture, which
2.shapes our behavior patterns and a great deal of our behavior is then mediated through language.

Thus, language is interdependent with cultural context and cannot be represented by a single discreet system. Instead, it has to be investigated within a socio-semiotic framework, or as Halliday (1978: 2) puts it

A social reality (or a 'culture') is itself an edifice of meanings – a semiotic construct. In this perspective, language is one of the semiotic systems that constitute a culture; one that is distinctive in that it also serves as encoding system of many (though not all) of the others. This in summary terms is what is intended by the formulation 'language as social semiotic'. It means interpreting language within a sociocultural context, in which the culture itself is interpreted in semiotic terms – as an information system, if that terminology is preferred.

Hodge and Kress (1988) develop this theory of social semiotic further. They focus on the uses of semiotic systems in social practice, and built a notion of semiosis as a dynamic process, where meaning is not determined by rigid structures, or predefined cultural codes. The major impetus of Hodge and Kress' work can be summarized as following:

• They consider semiotics as the general study of semiosis. That is to say the process and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all kinds of agent of communication".

• They also state that social semiotics is an inherently social phenomenon in its sources, functions, contexts and effects: social meanings constructed through the full range of semiotic forms, semiotic texts and semiotic practices.
• They add that social semiotics studies all kind of human semiotic systems, since they are social in their conditions and content (1988: 261).

Hodge and Kress (1988: 4) link the language and communication as semiotic through the concept of a 'logonomic system[3]'. Each producer of a message relies on its recipients for it to function as intended. This requires recipients to have a knowledge of a set of messages on another level, messages that provide specific information about how to read the message. They go on to state that the recipient of a message may not have such knowledge on that level of message in which case

s/he will not be able to derive a context in which to place the message and thereby give it meaning.

In Halliday (1978: 108), there are certain essential concepts inherent to the sociosemiotic theory of language. These are the text, the situation, the text variety or register, the code (in Bernstein's sense), the linguistic system (including the semantic system), and the social structure". We will now address the concepts of text and that of register, which necessarily comprise a consideration of the semantic and linguistic levels of language.

Sociosemiotics and Translation

The sociosemiotic approach was first developed, as said, by Halliday. Halliday puts forward the idea that language is a unique system of signs with some social functions which are able to express meanings made in other systems signs. The orientation of the sociosemiotic approach is on function and thus on the meaning of language in use.

The sociosemiotic approach has been considered recently as a solution to the problem of untranslatability. It views language as a social process, and all texts are dependent on their contexts. Thus, in order to understand a text, the context of the text must be able to be reconstructed, if only intuitively.

Sociosemiotic approach considers translation as a social cultural phenomenon in the sense that social and cultural information is expressed in different systems of signs (languages). Thus, sociosemiotics studies the meaning of language signs through the process of communication. Regarding the nature of the sociosemiotic approach, Nida argues that one may study the nature of translating from four different and valid orientations: philological, linguistic, communicative, and sociosemiotic…. These four approaches are essentially complementary one to the other, but as will be readily seen, there are certain implications for the sociosemiotic approach, primarily because of its greater inclusiveness (Nida, 1982:13).

Thus, in his opinion, a translation theory grounded on sociosemiotics would be more valuable and helpful. Elsewhere, Nida (1993: 164) points out that perhaps the most pervasive and crucial contribution to understanding translation process is to be found in sociosemiotics, the discipline that treats all systems of signs used by human societies. The great advantage of sociosemiotics over other interlingual communication is that it deals with all type of signs and codes, especially with language as the most comprehensive and complex of all systems of signs employed by humans. No holistic approach to translating can exclude semiotics as a fundamental discipline in encoding and decoding sign.

According to Nida, a sociosemiotic model of translation "seems to be more advantageous" (1993: 164), and he believes that semiotics is the most comprehensive system with which to approach the analysis of the significance of signs.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the sociosemiotic approach is widely considered to be one of the most useful approaches to studying translation, and in particular to assessing their quality. As Nida notes, it is inclusive, as it takes into consideration different aspects of the linguistic, communicative, and various other approaches of translation. It also extends the base for recognizing the meaningfulness of lexical content, rhetorical form and socio-cultural value. In addition, it is clear that a social semiotic perspective can be crucial to the process of translating as well as to the production of quality translation.

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