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Translation Everywhere

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1. Translation, modeling, communication, life

The expression “Translation Everywhere” translates a possible title for this essay had it been written in Italian—“La traduzione, prezzemolo di ogni minestra”. In fact, in our world—human, cultural and natural—which is a world of signs translation is omnipresent. This is the reason why I chose the title Un mondo di segni for a book in which I again discuss the problem of translation and signs (Petrilli 2012).

The question of translation cannot be limited to the question of the relation among different historical-natural languages (Fr. langue; It. lingua). Rather, it concerns the concept of the sign itself, of semiosis, sign process. Ultimately it concerns the conception itself of semiotics. Given that the sign is a translation process, to deal with the basics of semiotics, the general science of signs, requires that we also deal somehow with theoretical problems relating to translation (Ponzio 2005). As we now know thanks to Charles Peirce, there is no sign without an interpretant, that is, without another sign that translates it. The meaning of the sign is not inside the sign, but in another sign. In his own words, “…a ‘meaning’… is, in its primary acceptation, the translation of a sign into another system of signs” (CP 4.127). Meaning flourishes in relations of mutual translation and substitution among signs, in signifying processes where the original sign is never given autonomously and antecedently to the interpretant. If something is a sign this is because it can be translated. If one claims that X is a sign, he must say what it means, that is, he must give the translation in another sign. In Peirce’s terminology, the latter carries out the function of “interpretant”. But the interpretant is such on the condition that it too can be translated into another sign, and so forth. What
Peirce calls the infinite chain of interpretants is no more than an open translational process.

In addition to Peirce, another argument in support of the connection between sign theory and translation theory comes from Victoria Welby and her significs. Welby considers translation in terms of the practice itself of signifying.

In sum, in the general science of signs translation is the pivotal issue: to speak of semiotics is to speak of translation.

Semiotics today as the general science of signs cannot limit its gaze to the human world. After the important contribution that has come to us in this sense from Thomas A. Sebeok, semiotics now presents itself as “global semiotics” (Sebeok 2001). Global semiotics posits that semiosis converges with life: where there is life there is semiosis, there are sign processes, there is translation (Petrilli & Ponzio 2001, 2002a, b).

That signs and life—the latter being made of signs (life = semiosis)—are only possible in the condition of interrelation, interpretation, transposition or translation means that the being, the identity of something that signifies and is significant is irrevocably grounded in otherness and as such is always becoming other than what it was becoming. The same sign is always the same other, for in order to become this sign here, in order to be itself and continue being so, it must become other in intersign interpretation processes, or in translation (Petrilli, ed. 2001).

A focus on the prefixes inter, trans, dia is appropriate here. A sign is an intersign, a transsign, a diasign, otherwise it is not a sign. The sign flourishes on signs, through signs, in the relation among signs. A sign needs signs to subsist as a sign. The sign lives and flourishes because it shifts outside itself and relates to other signs, in a movement through which it develops and fulfills its conatus essendi (Petrilli 2014, pp. 230-233).

The sign not only flourishes on signs, but also among signs. The second situation, that of flourishing among signs, is the condition for the sign to subsist as a sign (a condition for life), for the sign to flourish on signs. But “between”, “among” do not only signify relation; they also signify separation. Relations among signs are not continuous but, on the contrary, they are discontinuous, discrete. In fact, between one sign and another there is also a gap, or a leap. Every sign is other. Even the sign’s identity develops and flourishes on signs; identity consists in the sign’s being other among. As much as it may try, identity cannot mask, reduce, or eliminate the other, given that otherness is the material from which it evolves as identity.

The identity of the sign consists in its being continuously other, in its saying itself in another sign. The identity of the sign is its alterity.

The sign’s continuous deferral among signs does not only imply difference in terms of identity and its confirmation in terms of identity, or translations that render identity. The interpreted sign does not converge with any one interpretant,
just as the translated sign is not exhausted in any one translatant sign (Petrilli 2010, pp. 234-242). Signs do not converge or identify perfectly with one another, but rather always leave a margin for evasion; the otherness of signs cannot be contained given that, as anticipated, to be this sign here, the sign must always be other, the same other.

Moreover, we must keep account of the fact that the question of translation understood as a semiotic issue goes well beyond the boundaries of human semiosis. The expression itself “biosemiotics”—which more than a discipline denominates a precise research perspective—now enables us to speak of translation in terms of “biotranslation”. It is indicative that in the trilogy (La traduzione, Tra segni, Lo stesso altro) dedicated to translation, published in the book series Athanor—Semiotica, filosofia, Arte, letteratura (edited by myself), a whole section is focused specifically on biotranslation, similarly to the volume Translation Translation, it too edited by my myself. In these books are presented contributions (among others) by the biosemioticians Kalevi Kull, co-author with Peeter Torop (2003) of the essay “Biotranslation: Translation between Umwelten”, and Jesper Hoffmeyer with “Origin of Species by Natural Translation”; as well as by semioticians like Thomas Sebeok with “Intersemiotic Transmutations”, Floyd Merrell with “Translation from within Semiosis”, and Dinda Gorlée with “Meaning Mouthfuls in Semiotranslation”. À propos the latter let us also point out that she is among the first to have most contributed to underlining the relation between sign theory and translation theory on various occasions (Gorlée 1994, 2004; see also Fontanille and Gorlée 2007). Hers is the expression “semio-translation”.

*Trans, inter, dia* are prepositions and prefixes that specify the modality of being a sign, of sign activity or semiosis. Semiosis is an intersign and a transign process. This is even more evident in the case of “semiotic processes” (semiotics) by contrast with “semiosic processes” (semiosis). And here it is important to point out that in addition to denimating the general science of signs the noun “semiotics” and correlate adjective “semiotic” are also used to indicate the human species-specific prerogative for “metasemiosis”, which has led us to define the human being as a “semiotic animal” (cf. Deely, Petrilli, Ponzio 2005). “Transign”, “intersign”: this is the condition for signs to flourish, for the life of signs (Hoffmeyer 1996, 2003, 2008; Kull & Torop 2003). The Umwelt, that is, the world as it is foreseen by each species, the species-specific world of each species—in which occurs communication related to the single specimen of a given species—is no more than a network of signs. In fact, Thomas Sebeok identifies Umwelt (Jakob von Uexküll) with modeling (vs. Tartu-Moscow School, see below).

Each species is endowed with a specific modeling device inherited by the individual of a given species. This modeling constructs the world relative to each species. Every living being has its own world and this world is relative to the modeling device of the species in question. Modeling in the human animal is *sui generis*. Differently from all other living species—each capable of constructing just
one world that remains unchanged for as long as a given species endures—, the
human animal, thanks to its *sui generis* modeling device is capable of constructing
multiple worlds. We will explain the reason later. So, for all living species except
the human: one modeling device, one world; for the human species: one modeling
device, multiple worlds.

We know that biology speaks of translational processes with reference to
the genome. Neurology speaks of translation with reference to the transition
from chemical processes to electrical processes and vice versa and from electrical
processes to endocrine processes and vice versa. Once biology developed in the
direction of biosemiotics adopts semiotic paradigms it is inevitable for it to deal
with processual translational dynamics, with “trans” processes, “inter” processes,
that is, with translation: “signhood” is “intersignhood” and “transignhood”—or, if
we prefer, “semioticity” is “intersemioticity” and “transemioticity”.

We will now consider the relation between the sign and translation—which is
a vital relation in the twofold sense of being an indispensable characteristic both of
life and of the sign as such—at the two levels of “semiosis” and “semiotics” (in the
sense of the distinction as clarified above), that is, in the general lifeworld and in
the specifically human world (Petrilli & Ponzio 2005, pp. 3-6).

Every living being is such insofar as it communicates. But communication
is relative to its world, that is, to the world constructed by the modeling device
assigned to the species that a given living being belongs to. In other words, every
form of communication is relative to the world as produced by the modeling device
of the species the communicating individual is part of. There is no communication
without modeling, that is, without the *Umwelt* foreseen by the species-specific
modeling device.

Therefore, there exist two types of semiosis that necessarily overlap: semiosis
for modeling, in other words, semiosis that constructs the sign network forming
the *Umwelt*, and that models the world in which the sign flourishes; and semiosis
for communication as foreseen by a given *Umwelt*, according to the modalities
established by that *Umwelt* (Kull 2010a, b; Sebeok 1991, 1994). “Modeling” and
“communication” indicate two fundamental types of semiosis and both function
in terms of translation, and this is because in both cases it is always a question
of relations among signs. Translation here occurs in two senses, according to
circumstances: from modeling to communication and from communication
to modeling (Ponzio 2002a; Petrilli 2008). In other words, we could speak of
translational processes both at the phylogenetic level (relation between species and
individual) and at the ontogenetic level (all that which concerns the life of the
single individual in his relations with the environment and with other individuals
of the same or different species).

Following Sebeok we choose to use the term “language” (Fr. *langage*; It.
*linguaggio*) to designate the species-specific primary modeling device that
characterizes human beings. The choice of this denomination is intended to mark
drastically the distinction between the properly human world and the world of other living beings.

Only in relation to the properly human world can we speak of “languages” (langage/linguaggio) in another sense, that is, language-for-communication (by contrast to language-as-modeling as described above): gestural languages, verbal languages, and in advanced social systems artistic languages, religious languages, etc. And such languages exist because man is endowed with a species-specific modeling device which for this very reason, as we are about to explain more closely, is tagged “language”.

Nonhuman animals are not equipped with this type of modeling device so that it is fallacious and cause of confusion to speak of the “language of animals”, unless a question of fables as in the case of Aesop, Phaedrus, La Fontaine or Walt Disney’s cartoons, etc. In addition to being distinct from the forms of nonhuman semiosis, the term “language” as used by Sebeok marks yet another distinction: “language” as distinct from “speech” — a term he introduces for “verbal language”, “speaking”.

Thanks to its specific primary modeling device, also called “language”, human beings are capable of constructing infinite worlds. And such a capacity is possible because this particular modeling device is endowed with what following Charles Morris (1946) and again Sebeok, we may call “syntactics”, that is, the ability to create an infinite number not only of different meanings, but also different “registers”, with only a finite number of “pieces”, so to say. Thanks to syntactics, to this capacity for construction and deconstruction, man is in a position to modify his own Umwelt. Therefore, echoing Sebeok, the claim is that the human being is capable of constructing many worlds, that is, an indeterminate number of different worlds.

In close association with the syntactic capacity, the other capacity that most characterizes the human being is that of using “signs on signs”. In other words, humans are capable of reflection, therefore, not only of semiosis, but also of “metasemiosis”. We briefly mentioned this capacity above, distinguishing between “semiosis” proper to all living beings and “semiotics”. (Sebeok’s is the idea of using the term “semiotics” not only to name the discipline now renowned under this expression, but also to indicate a specific modality of using signs, one proper to humans).

Language as we are now describing it (language-as-modeling) is part of the human being’s endowment from its very first appearance as a hominid. It is thanks to language, to this mute form of modeling, that the human being has gradually evolved, organizing and modifying its patterns of behavior and contexts of life. Verbal language appears very late on the scene and the “novelty”—explained on the basis of primary modeling (in addition to physiological evolution, as is obvious, consider the “lowering of the larynx”) — consists in the fact that the human voice as well organizes itself syntactically—and not only interpersonal gestures and practices, or the different types of human surroundings. Appearance
of the “syntactic” organization of the voice not only concerns syntax, but first and foremost what the linguists call “phonology”. The human voice is no longer a mere cry, a shout, a grunt of approval or disapproval, a course means of familiarizing or scaring away, but rather it becomes an articulate voice (Fano 1992). Therefore, in this case too a finite number of “pieces”, what the linguists call “phonemes” and “monemes,” etc. are used to construct an indeterminate number of different meanings and registers. “Speech”, that is, verbal language, originally arises as an effective means of communication. This is the *homo sapiens* era.

To explain the transition from the *homo sapiens* phase of development in hominids to the *homo sapiens sapiens* phase we must refer to a particular process, it too of the translational order. We are now alluding to the process of “exaptation” (Gould & Vrba 1982). It is common knowledge that evolution of the species generally comes about through processes of “adaptation”. The various modeling devices of the different species all gradually formed in the same way, that is, through the evolutionary processes of adaptation. The species-specific human modeling device also formed in this way and thanks to the distinctive feature that characterizes it, *syntactics*, it enabled a whole series of further innovations through more adaptative processes of development. Such developments also concern the forms of human communication, including that which is specific to *homo sapiens* and is achieved through speech, verbal language.

But at a certain point in human evolution “speech” was used not only as an “external” means of communication, but also as an “internal” means that supported modeling, reinforcing and enhancing it, and this is a development that was achieved through processes of *exaptation*. The human capacity for innovation benefited enormously given that this process highly favored what with Peirce and Sebeok after him we have denominated as the “play of musement”,¹ that is, the capacity for imagination, planning, invention, simulation—the latter both in the positive sense of the term and in the negative sense of lying. Obviously, all this concerns translational processes specific to the human semiotic capacity. In other words, beginning from the evolutionary phase in the development of humans denominated *homo sapiens sapiens*, the interiorization of speech is used to support the original primary modeling device (language). This made interior discourse possible in human beings, that is, dialogue with oneself, therefore evaluation, reflection, deliberation, taking a standpoint, planning, and eventually the possibility to modify and perfect what one intends to communicate to others. It is clear therefore how all this presented an enormous advantage for human modeling procedure, with the consequent enhancement of that species-specific human capacity we have named “semiotics,” or “metasemiosis”.

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¹ The “play of musement” is an expression introduced by Charles Peirce and adopted by Thomas Sebeok as the title of his 1981 monograph. It alludes to the human propensity for contemplation, reverie, imagination, ultimately to the human capacity for the generation of an infinite number of different worlds, real or imaginary, in consonance with the human species-specific primary modeling device or “language” (Sebeok 1991, p. 97).
And obviously all this involves translation processes given that such a capacity, what we are are now calling “semiotics”, is a translational capacity. In both types of semiosis—modeling and communication—the relations developed among signs are relations developed among signs in translation. Insofar as it involves translation, the process we have designated as exaptation has allowed for expansion and enhancement of primary modeling both in qualitative and quantitative terms.

2. Translation and otherness

Ensuing from the “invention” of speech, different linguistic systems (verbal languages) gradually formed, that is, many languages. Why many? Why not just one language? Yet again the explanation is in the primary modeling device, in its capacity for innovation and invention, for the construction of manifold possible worlds. For that which concerns translation, it is at this point that it diversifies itself in the terms described by Roman Jakobson (1959), that is, as “intralingual”, “interlingual” and “intersemiotic” translation (see below).

But what is particularly important to evidence here is that with the formation of linguistic systems there arises a second modeling device, constituted by each of these systems, precisely. Therefore, while the primary modeling device capable of producing multiple worlds, as observed above, is one only for all the human race, instead the secondary modeling device consists in diversity due to the multiplicity of different languages ensuing from the inventive capacity inherent in primary modeling. Secondary modeling devices are as numerous as are languages, the different verbal languages (langue/lingua). Under this aspect Edward Sapir (1949, 1952) and Benjamin L. Whorf (1956) with their theory of linguistic relativity are right. They claim that every language (verbal language) influences our vision of the world differently, conditions perception even, the organization of individual and social life, cultural organization overall, with its customs, habits, traditions, etc. But Sapir and Whorf exaggerate when they insist on such conditioning to the point of advancing the thesis of untranslatability among languages (verbal languages). This capacity for influencing and conditioning that characterizes (verbal) language led the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics to identify (verbal) language with the principal (primary) modeling device specific to human beings. From this point of view, what Sebeok did (translating the biologist Jakob von Uexküll’s concept of Umwelt into the concept of model offered by the Tartu-Moscow school) was to shift this idea of modeling from verbal language to primary modeling, what as we know he also called “language”.

But there is a third modeling device. This depends on the influence that is exerted, in turn, on the life of human individuals by each culture with its different forms of organization, with its different traditions, customs, habits, systems of family relations and forms of conviviality, such as those studied by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1948, 1958, 1968), etc.
Obviously, all this complicates translational processes on the linguistic level when a question of interlingual translation. But independently from interlingual translation understood in the strict sense, the complication today also arises from the fact that encounter and coexistence among different cultures occurs internally to national states, in one way or another, leading to the need for different types of translational processes, for example, from one juridical system to another (which often are very different from each other), in order to be able to live together. This problem is strongly felt in the legal sphere and is an inevitable aspect of multiculturalism and interculturalism ensuing from what goes under the name of “global communication” (see Petrilli 2016; Ponzio 2009a).

At this point it is well to dwell a bit more on the three types of modeling described above, as a further homage as well to the researcher who has the merit of having elaborated this triple distinction. The reference here is in particular to modeling systems theory or systems analysis as formulated by Sebeok also in collaboration with Marcel Danesi (Sebeok & Danesi 2000, pp. 1-43). We know that in this research at the interface between semiotics and biology, Sebeok analyzes semiotic phenomena in terms of modeling processes. And with his distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary modeling, he offers a powerful instrument for a better understanding of how modeling differs from communication in a relation where the former is foundational for the latter.

By availing ourselves of modeling systems theory, we can also summarize and further specify what we have said so far. Primary modeling is the innate capacity of organisms for simulative modeling in species-specific ways, it arises through the evolutionary processes of adaptation. With reference to the species *Homo*, we have observed that insofar as this primary modeling device is characterized by syntactics it is also called “language” (which should not be confused with “verbal language” as occurred in the Tartu-Moscow school). “Language” understood as “verbal language” indicates a communication system distinct from “language” understood as a species-specific modeling device. Secondary and tertiary modeling systems presuppose primary modeling, therefore they too indicate uniquely human capacities. According to Sebeok’s schema, the secondary modeling system is verbal language or speech, while tertiary modeling systems indicate all human cultural systems, modeling processes based above all on the symbol as understood by Peirce, that is, on signs that are predominantly conventional, grounded in language understood as modeling and in speech (Sebeok 1986, 1994, 2001). Speech is an evolutionary adaptation which arises for communication and which through processes of exaptation develops a modeling function as well.

Let us now add to what we have already said that speech, verbal language, is articulated through *discourse genres* (or *speech genres*) which, in turn, also model the way interlocutors relate to the world, to others, the way they formulate discourse and communicate. No language (*langue/lingua*) is a compact and homogeneous system. On the contrary, each language is made of different languages (*langage/*}
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linguaggio). To external plurilingualism is added plurilingualism internal to each language, internal plurilingualism. Each language (langue/lingua) is made of diverse discourse genres: each language is made of ordinary languages, technical languages, the language of different sports, scientific languages, the discourse genre chat, the discourse genre lesson, the discourse genre essay, the discourse genre novel, the discourse genre lyrical poetry, etc. Differently to what Saussure claimed, it is not only a question of the langue and parole dualism. Not only do we speak necessarily and always in a language (langue/lingua), but we also necessarily and always speak in a certain discourse genre, in a certain language (langage/linguaggio) among the many that go to form a language (langue/lingua). Needless to say that all this is relevant to translation theory and to the “complications” involved in translating.

At this point, the prefixes “trans” and “inter” understood as across signs, between signs, among signs, also call for further consideration. The prefixes “trans” in “transign” and “inter” in “intersign” indicate the condition of becoming among signs, of becoming in the relation between signs. These terms indicate that the sign is not exhausted in identity, according to the principle A = A, but rather that it flourishes in the relation among signs, a relation that is open and unfinalizable. So that we ought to speak of a sign process, a process in which meaning is explicated and understood according to a formulae like the following: A is B, therefore C, therefore D, etc. The meaning of a sign is given, in fact, in an interpretive pathway in which a sign to be such must be said by another sign: an interpretive pathway that is in effect a translative pathway (Ponzio 1990, pp. 15-60).

The sign flourishes in the condition of being this sign here insofar as it is other, as claimed above. The prefixes “trans” and “inter” announce the otherness of signs as a condition that is no less than fundamental for their identity as signs, whether a question of single fleeting utterances or persistent texts and their interpretations and translations.

All this considered with reference to the identification of semiosis with life opens to considerations like those made by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In fact, with Levinas we can state that otherness thus described is not absence of being, but time, objective time, time that cannot be retained in presence. This is what Levinas in the third section of his important 1948 essay “La réalité et son ombre” (in Levinas 1994, pp. 123-148) calls “entretemps”, the “meanwhile”, the unending interval and the time of dying which marks an abyss among beings that cannot be bridged and at once favours their effective multiplicity. The sign lives in its own time: in a chronotope that renders it other with respect to other signs—untranslatable as much as it flourishes through translatability, uninterpretable as much as it flourishes through interpretants, untransposable as much as it flourishes through transposition, undeferrable as much as it flourishes through deferral. The question of the translatability of texts must keep account of the fact that translation extends over a void—the time of dying; that it attempts to transgress an objective discretion that is not decided on the basis of respect, or of some initiative taken
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by the subject; that it brings to presence that which is characterized by absence: absence as it is determined in non-relative otherness and in the objective diachrony of time.

As much as we reach high levels of consciousness, lucidity, awareness, the fact remains that it is always and in any case a question of translation among discontinuous signs, discrete signs. Nor does consciousness succeed in making these discontinuous signs coexist in the synchrony of presentification. So consciousness, despite the high levels that it may reach in terms of awareness, shrewdness, caution, wideness of vision, can never be monological. Insofar as it is a translative process, consciousness is always connected with forms of dialogism, with relations of otherness, with situations of necessary listening and responsive understanding. It always has to do with the word that precedes it, whose priority, preexistence it must keep account of. This is why elsewhere we have discussed translation with reference to the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise (Petrilli 2009b). Translation is a sort of “race” where that which is translated resembles the other, the rival, the competitor who has an advantage: like the tortoise it began first, and this precedence, this priority can never be eliminated.

But in relation to verbal sign systems, what linguistic usage is not translation as we are describing it? With respect to the distinction between literal and metaphorical and the fictitious boundaries it establishes, is not the sign transversal? Is not interlingual translation itself hardly at all translation the more it is literal? Is not the interpretant less an interpretant the less it is capable of establishing a relation to the sign it interprets in terms of responsive understanding?

3. The translational nature of meaning and the different meanings of translation

We have stated that semiosis, the situation in which something functions as a sign, cannot subsist without translation, since semiosis is a translation-interpretation process. The role of translation is fundamental in the very constitution of the sign, verbal and nonverbal, in the very development of its meaning. Consequently, meaning subsists in the mutual relation of translation among signs (see Petrilli 2007b, and 2010, pp. 49-89).

The close connection between signs and translation emerges with the category of replaceability set as a necessary condition for signhood, that is, when the sign is considered not only as something that replaces something else, but that can be replaced in turn by something else. According to this approach, meaning is defined as an interpretive route made of verbal and nonverbal signs which can each carry out among themselves the function of interpretant.

Let us now shift our attention to translation in the sphere of the verbal. As already specified above, translation in verbal languages is not only interlingual, that is, it does not simply occur between two different languages. Translation in verbal
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languages is also endolingual, that is, it takes place in the same language and as such is the essential condition for communication and mutual understanding. Not only: thought itself functions through endolingual translation. Thought is “translative thinking”, the expression is Victoria Welby’s (in Petrilli 2009a, pp. 560-573).

In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding John Locke (1690) develops his analysis of understanding with the addition of a chapter explicitly dedicated to semiotics. Thinking is made of signs. But we can go a step further to add that thinking is translating.

Under this aspect Welby describes the human signifying capacity in terms of “translative thinking”, an automatic process “in which everything suggests or reminds us of something else” (Welby 1983 [1903], p. 34; see also Petrilli 2007a). Translative thinking converges with semiosic processes where something stands for something else, where different sign systems relate to each other, defer to each other in meaning-making processes: in these processes one sign is more fully developed in terms of another sign, whether it is enriched, criticized, put at a distance, deconstructed or reconstructed, placed between inverted commas, parodied or simply imitated and, in any case, one sign is always interpreted in terms of another sign.

Moreover, in Welby’s view, translation is a method of investigation and discovery, of verification, a method for the acquisition of knowledge and development of critical consciousness. As she claims in the following passage from her topical monograph on signs, language and meaning, What Is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significance, originally published in 1903, with intuitions that can be developed in the light of recent studies in language theory and the general science of signs:

As language involves both unity and distinction (the one actually and the other implicitly), language must itself be recognized as a means of discovering contrasts together with the links which constitute these elements of unity, or at least completely exclude the idea of final disparateness … For a thing is significant, both in the lower and in the higher sense, in proportion as it is expressible through bare sign or pictorial symbol or representative action. In the higher sense (that of vital or moral or rational import) it is significant in proportion as it is capable of expressing itself in, or being translated into more and more phases of thought or branches of science. The more varied and rich our employment of signs …, the greater our power of inter-relating, inter-translating, various phases of thought and thus of coming closer and closer to the nature of things in the sense of starting-points for the acquisition of fresh knowledge, new truth. (Welby, 1983 [1903], p. 150)

Considering the pervasiveness of translational processes, interlingual translation, that is, translation among languages, among verbal texts, whether oral or written, is not at all something exceptional. On the contrary, interlingual translation is representative of a common practice that involves signs generally and not only verbal signs.
The question of translatability from one language to another already finds a positive response in the fact that we are continuously accomplishing translational processes of the “intralingual” and “intersemiotic” orders certainly in the same language, but also in nonverbal communication. Continuous translational processes are the condition for understanding and for making ourselves understood (for a more detailed discussion of the relation between translatability and untranslatability, see Petrilli 2014, pp. 200-206, 240-248). This also implies that “meaning” cannot be confined internally to a single linguistic system. To understand meaning of the verbal order means to develop sign processes which necessarily include the nonverbal. Similarly, to understand meaning internally to one of the sectorial languages that forms a language implies to cross the frontier of another sectorial language or ordinary common language.

In his paper “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, Roman Jakobson (1959 [1971], pp. 260-266), as briefly anticipated above, describes three main types of translative processes:

1. intralingual translation or rewording which refers to the interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language;
2. interlingual translation or translation proper which refers to the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language;
3. intersemiotic translation or transmutation which refers to the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems, of one sign system in terms of another.

This analysis of translation is based on Peirce’s tripartition of signs into symbols, indexes and icons which, in fact, can be used to specify the relation between translation and signs more closely, for a more precise and at once broader characterization of the interpretive-translative processes constituting our semiosphere and proliferating in it. Any given sign (only identifiable as such by abstracting from real semiosic processes, for the sake of analysis) is the product of dialectic interaction among conventionality, indexicality and iconicity in sign situations where at any given instance one of these aspects prevails over the other.

These translative modalities are translative-interpretive modalities which are always co-present to varying degrees. Human signifying processes are dominated either by conventionality, indexicality or iconicity in any given instance. Conventionality is regulated by the logic of codes. Relations of contiguity and causality also regulate the dynamics between signs and their interpretants. These relations specify indexical signs, as understood by Peirce, and are exemplified by words and their definitions in a monolingual dictionary. Both indexicality and conventionality play an important part in interlingual translational processes.

However, iconicity is the determining factor—for without it the sense of discourse, Bakhtin’s “theme” or “actual sense” cannot be rendered (cf. Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014; Ponzio 2008a, b). Iconicity in the interaction between interpretant
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signs and interpreted signs in translational processes always involves dialogism, alterity and creativity to a major or minor degree. It is the type of relation described by Welby when she claims that “while language itself is a symbolic system its method is mainly pictorial” (1983 [1903], p. 38). When iconicity prevails, the relation among signs is neither conventional, nor necessary and contiguous, but rather hypothetical and creative, a relation of hypothetical similarity. This is something that the interpreter/translator must inevitably take into account given that the task is to render the original interpretant with a similar interpretant from another language.

In theory there are no limits on the interpretants of the sign, neither of the typological order nor of the systemic. Each time something has meaning, potentially all types of signs and sign systems can provide interpretants. Consequently, meaning and translation are semiotic phenomena whether interpretation/translation takes place within the verbal, among the special or sectorial languages (Fr. langage; It. linguaggio) constituting the same historical-natural language (Fr. langue; It. lingua) (intralingual translation), or among different historical-natural languages (interlingual translation).

Obviously, as we have tried to demonstrate with this essay, there are different senses in which to understand translation, different meanings of translation.

Beyond Jakobson’s typology, we propose to add a primary form that recalls the nature of the sign as we have been describing it. In fact, we have observed how to make signs, to engender signs (whether verbal or nonverbal) presupposes the work of translation, for the emitter as much as for the receiver. We are alluding here to the relation between the sign and the interpretant which is a necessary relation, as such an inevitable relation.

This first type of translation is preliminary and essential. In 2012 Augusto Ponzio and myself delivered a paper entitled, “Translation, encounter among peoples, and global semiotics”, at the 11th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (held in Nanjing, China, 5–9 October 2012), precisely in a Round Table dedicated to translation theory, “Global Semiotics, Translation and Encounter among Peoples”, organized and coordinated in collaboration with our Finnish colleague Pirjo Kukkonen who kindly invited us to participate. In this paper, Ponzio and I attempted to identify this preliminary, basic translation thanks to which a sign exists as such. After taking a series of possible denominations into consideration and setting aside the first which had come to mind, “semiotic translation”, because it is too vague, we now propose to denominate this first type of translation “sign vital translation” or simply “vital translation”. We propose to add this first type of translation, “sign vital translation” to the three types of translation identified by Jakobson. The expression “sign vital translation” underlines the fact that translation is inherent in the sign, vital to its existence as a sign. Without translation semiosis is not possible; and insofar as life converges with semiosis it also converges with translation, so that where there is
life, there is semiosis, there is translation. This means to say that vital translation
thus described is the necessary condition for the realization of any other type of
translation made possible by our species-specific modeling systems, primary,
secondary and tertiary.

In the schema we are now proposing the second type of translation (Jakobson’s
first) corresponds to so-called “intralingual translation” and focuses on verbal
expression. We are all involved in the processes of intralingual translation as we
speak a given language, we are all enacting intralingual 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 type of
translational 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, transmutation. This too is recurrent. Verbal signs
cannot ignore intersemiotic translation. This is because, as observed above, 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 implies 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 and as such is a semiotic
phenomenon.

Another question leads us back to translation understood in the strict sense
of the term, that is, interlingual translation, Jakobson’s second type of translation.
Between whom does the relation of translation occur? In other words, what are
the terms between which translation properly understood 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 the
translator and the author. 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 by the
author.

It is not true that the author of a text has a right to the last word, in other
words, that the author has the last say. Sigmund Freud claimed that “the ego is not
master in its own house” (1953-1974 [1918], Vol. 17, p. 143), and that “house” is
marked by time, thus is an effect of time. But it is not necessary to appeal to Freud
to demonstrate that mastery and control over one’s own words is illusory, that to
one’s own interpretation not only is it always possible to add the interpretation
of others, but also that the latter may result, if not as the truer interpretation and certainly not the last, probably the most likely, the most convincing. So, in a psychoanalytical session that text that each one of us is offers itself as needy of a reading by another, this other who insofar as he is alien, extraneous, a stranger can interpret the text even better than the very person who identifies with it.

We could also refer to Maurice Blanchot (1969) who with special reference to the literary text speaks of the “essential solitude” of the author: the author is destined to being abandoned by his work which lends itself to all the interpretations that the readings of others can formulate. And Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, p. 5) would have us observe that distance, temporal, epochal remoteness, enhances understanding of a text when it is capable, as occurs with a text endowed with artistic value, of living in the “great time”; so that we can make the claim that neither Shakespeare, nor his contemporaries knew the great Shakespeare we know today; and this is because we are in a position to know not only the close contexts of the meanings of his work, but also the remote contexts. This is also true à propos the relationship between the author and the original text and between the translator and the translated text. That the text object of translation is endowed with otherness with respect to the text-interpreter/interpretant tells of the “absolute otherness” of the sign, its shadow, its secret which eludes total comprehension, total control by any single interpretation whether this is formulated by the translator or even by the very author.

However, this is true not only of a complex sign like the text, but of all signs. No sign is ever fully exhausted by another sign, that is to say, no interpreted sign is fully explained by an interpretant sign, no sign is fully explicated by another sign not even when the former is a mere signal, that is a sign at the lowest degree possible of otherness and dialogism. With respect to the interpretive work of the interpretant sign, the interpreted sign always maintains a margin of otherness, a sign residue which allows for further interpretive work in the relation with the same interpreted sign by yet other interpretant signs. All this goes to say that the relation among signs is always dialectical, or better dialogical insofar as signs, whether interpreted signs or interpretant signs, are endowed with varying degrees of otherness. Signs are in becoming in the interpretive/translational processes of semiosis. At one and the same time, however, the interpreted sign resists the interpretive will of any one interpretant sign that wants to translate it.

Such dynamics between the translator-interpretant and the text-interpreted in translation occurs at the crossroads between different cultures and contexts, thanks to which the signifying potential of the text is further amplified and enhanced. Every translation is inserted in a “new” cultural context, in a new intertext such that the task of the translator is one of mediation among languages, cultures and contexts.
We have distinguished between various types of translation: the type indicated as vital for the very existence of the sign, sign vital translation, and with Jakobson followed by intralingual translation, interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation. We will now add that translation in the human cultural world 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, the stranger. This last aspect is connected with dialogue where “dialogue” is understood not simply as a discourse genre and form, but as involvement, participation, commitment and unindifference towards the other. According to this approach a synonym for dialogue, or better “dialogism” to evoke Bakhtin’s (1981) terminology, is “intercorporeity”, which means to say that dialogism involves the situation of interconnectedness, of participative interaction with the other.

Some of Bakhtin’s most important interpreters misunderstood his concept of dialogue, erroneously associating it to the work of such authors as Plato (1961), Buber (1947), Mukařovsky (1977) (see Bakhtin 2002; Ponzio 2008). Instead, for Bakhtin (1968) dialogue is embodied, intercorporeal expression, and as such it is associated with the “grotesque body”. This metaphor portrays the idea of vital and indissoluble interconnectedness between one’s own body (which is never a separate and autonomous body, if not as a delusory mystification) and the world, between one’s own body and the body of others.

The shift in focus from identity (whether individual, as in the case of the self’s consciousness, or collective, that of a community, of a historical language, or of a general cultural system) to alterity represents a sort of Copernican revolution involving all living beings and not just the human. Moreover, Bakhtin conducted research in the field of biology and, in fact, developed his conception of dialogism keeping account of recent developments in the life sciences. He was particularly interested in Vladimir Vernadsky and his conception of the biosphere. As Bakhtin says:

> When consciousness appeared in the world (in existence) and, perhaps, when biological life appeared (perhaps not only animals, but trees and grass also witness and judge), the world (existence) changed radically. A stone is still stony and the sun still sunny, but the event of existence as a whole (unfinalized) becomes completely different because a new and major character in this event appears for the first time on the scene of earthly existence—the witness and the judge. And the sun, while remaining physically the same, has changed because it has begun to be cognized by the witness and the judge. It has stopped simply being and has started being in itself and for itself […], as well as for the other, because it has been reflected in the consciousness of the other. (Bakhtin 1986, p. 137)

Dialogism in biosemiotic terms according to Bakhtin means that the living being cannot be cut off from the environment, cannot be indifferent to its
surroundings, but rather constitutes a system with the latter. Using a Kantian term, Bakhtin calls this system *architectonics*. Both Bakhtin and Jakob von Uexküll were influenced by Kant, but not passively. In line with the spirit of Kantian critique, their attitude was critical.

Understood in such terms dialogism implies responsibility in the sense of accounting not only for self, but also for the other. Read in this light, dialogism contributes to the development of that bend in semiotics that with Augusto Ponzio we have designated as “semioethics” (Petrilli & Ponzio 2003, 2010).

Sign theory and translation theory come together in what we propose to designate as the “semiotic turn” in translation and which, with a view to the relation between translation and the question of values and responsibility which the relation with the other necessarily involves, we now propose to develop in terms of the “semioethic turn” in translation.

With reference to semiosis in the human world—and specifically with reference to verbality—once we recognize that meanings subsist and flourish in translation processes, the importance of the relation between identity and alterity emerges more clearly. Transposition, translation, transferral, intersemiosis, intertextuality, interverbal, interlinguistic, interlingual, intersemiotic, transcultural, translingual, transhumanizing, transcommunication, dialectic, dialogue: these expressions all tell us that the sign can only subsist in the relation among signs, which is the relation among others, and that the modality of this relation is translation.

In the framework of *interpretation semiotics*—and as Bakhtin’s work in particular has revealed—, it is now obvious that communication is a primary function of human language. However, it is important to clarify that in this statement “communication” is not understood in the limited sense of message transmission, the intentional exchange of information. But far more than this, communication as we understand it here also involves ambiguity, inscrutability, reticence, the unsaid, allusion, simulation, vagueness. Such characteristics are connected with the capacity of historical-natural language for polysemy, polylogism and plurilingualism—plurilingualism in general, both internal and external to a single language—, all manifestations of the logic of alterity. Ultimately this is the type of logic that orients communication and provides the condition for interaction and understanding. And, obviously, this approach is in complete contrast with a monolingual and monological view of human communication.

Concrete live speech is possible thanks to continuous translational operations on the side of both production and interpretation in the transition between different codes, registers, sectorial languages, discourse genres, communicative contexts. Responsive understanding, participation, and listening are not possible without these necessary forms of transition, in one word, without translation.

Communication-translation involves the speaker’s ability, the translator’s ability to reformulate and adapt one’s own language to that of the interlocutor in relations of dialogic listening and participative understanding. This involves
the ability to reflect metalinguistically upon one’s own language as much as upon the language of the other, which implies the ability to specify meaning through recourse to interpretants from one’s own language as much as from the language of others. “Active” or “answering comprehension” (“responsive understanding”) concerns the theme or actual sense of an utterance. It is achieved in relations among different languages and codes, among the different sign systems, verbal and nonverbal, that verbal language involves, relations that are inevitably oriented by dialogism, by logic that is dialogic. Thanks to such logic, or better, “dialogic”, operations of rewording, transposition and transmutation among interpretants are possible as these replace each other, without ever perfectly converging, in open-ended processes of deferral among interpretants.

Far from being a compact, unitary and monolithic phenomenon, live human language is dynamical and processual. It involves constant renewal, the ongoing introduction of new idioms, different discourses, different logics and points of view. Moreover, plurilingualism and polylogism, both internal and external to a single language, derive from the possibility in language of constructing different worldviews: human language develops in its plurality and multiplicity as a function of this very possibility (Deleuze & Guattari 1976).

Recalling George Steiner (1975), language thus described is the main instrument that human beings have at their disposal for critical awareness, even if only to refuse the world-as-it-is, the world understood as a static and monologic block. Though each language presents its own special interpretation of reality to a greater or lesser degree, it is thanks to its inherent alterity and to the possibility of translating across different languages and cultures, that humans discover the almost disconcerting pleasure of freedom. From this perspective, as observed by Sebeok (1981), language not only concerns the real world, but also infinite possible worlds, as foreseen by the human capacity for the “play of musement” (see Petrilli 2014, pp. 312-319).

5. Translating values, ideologies and worldviews

Language—so-called “historical-natural language”—as much as the great plurality of different special languages that constitute the latter are never given once and for all. On the contrary, insofar as they are made of sign material, their vocation is translation and transformation. “Language and languages” (Il linguaggio e le lingue is an expression that corresponds to the title of a book by Augusto Ponzio originally published in 2002b, 4th ed. 2013) are in becoming in the semiosic processes of linguistic production. And considering that linguistic production is part of social reproduction overall, language production processes are inevitably oriented according to the values and ideologies characteristic of a given socio-linguistic community.
The verbal sign is the ideological sign *par excellence*, as Voloshinov claims (1929, Eng. trans. p. 9). As an ideological phenomenon it refracts historical-social reality. The verbal sign has an ideological function, it is invested with ideological materiality. It refracts ideologically the social reality in which it is produced and used. Insofar as it is ideological, the verbal sign is characterized as a historical-social event. Though nonverbal signs contribute toward shaping reality, the modeling influence of verbal signs is far greater. Reality, as we experience it, is organized verbally—a conviction which subtends extreme forms of linguistic relativity.

Exponents of this theory, like Whorf (mentioned above), maintain that our very perception of the physical world is programmed by the historical-natural language we speak, in other words, the structure of language determines the speaker’s thoughts, worldview and nonverbal behavior. Echoing Wittgenstein (1953), we could say that our world is the language we speak. But on his part the Italian philosopher of language and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi described this approach as “a case of exasperated glottocentrism in which it is not difficult to recognize an idealistic deviation” (1975, p. 25). By contrast with the idealism of linguistic relativity and opposing neopositivist stances which thematize verbal language, thought and reality as separate though variously interacting entities, Rossi-Landi, instead, evidences the inseparable relationship interconnecting them. That is, he evidences the relation between verbal language, thought and the context in its global complexity whether economic, social, cultural, etc. and the role that such interconnection plays in the formation of ideologies and worldviews:

> Language is immediately present, but certainly not in the form of a constant linguistic capital, capable of being isolated from everything else and made to determine nothing less than thought. If we want to study the way in which thought is determined in all its developments up to the point of including spontaneous and sophisticated worldviews, we shall have to turn our attention to the sum total of economic, social and cultural conditions. We shall find that what we describe as linguistic is, if anything, a part of their phenomenology. (Rossi-Landi 1973, p. 70)

The theory of linguistic relativity recognizes the plurality of languages and worldviews, the condition of plurilingualism and polylogism, but, as seen above, it also formulates at once the thesis of incommunicability, incommensurability and untranslatability. According to this approach linguistic universes cannot relate to each other dialogically. At the opposite extreme, such trends as mental innatism, biologism and linguistic universalism reduce multiplicity to unity. Instead, critiquing both extremes, Rossi-Landi highlights the dialectic-dialogic nature of the relation between verbal language, thought and objective reality. In other words, language shapes our worldview and is at the same time the product of relations among human beings and between human beings and the “natural” environment. Language not only determines social praxis but is also determined by it (Ponzio 1988, 2008c).
However, semantic correspondences between verbal signs and object reality, our view of the world, are never direct or immediate. As Welby claims (1893, in Petrilli 2009a, p. 424), there are no such things as “hard dry facts”. She too evidences the sign-mediated nature of consciousness, language and reality and of the relations interconnecting them. The objective world takes shape and is perceived in its various parts thanks to the mediation of language which, in turn, is the product of social practice. Awareness of reality is awareness mediated by previous experience, both individual and collective, by specific values, ideologies and orientations of a given community, which find their most resonant expression in the verbal sign. Needless to say that all this is amplified in translational processes among different (verbal) languages.

“Semantic-ideological pliancy” tells of the capacity for translation into different ideological spheres, a characteristic of the verbal sign which, thus endowed, easily acquires new meanings and functions. The plurivocality, ambivalence, ambiguity and semantic-ideological pliancy of the verbal sign is given in its translatability into other verbal interpretant signs belonging to different semantic classes with different shades of meaning. As observed above, in contrast with signals, which in comparison with verbal signs are endowed with a low level of signhood or semioticity (Voloshinov 1927), verbal signs may be translated/interpreted by interpretants not only from different sign systems, as in the case of signals, but also from different classes of meaning.

Ideological multiaccentuality, projectual pluridirectionality, valuational heterogeneity and polylogism are all implied by the condition of plurilingualism, polyphony and plurivocality. Semantic alterity involves ideological alterity, which concerns the valuational accentuation, practical orientation and operative intentionality assumed by the word in concrete communicative contexts. Consequently, answering comprehension (responsive understanding) involves interpretive choices and participation not only at the semantic level, but also at the ideological. It involves a point of view that is other with respect to identity, an ideological stance and is associated with the development of a critical linguistico-ideological consciousness.

All this is connected with what Bakhtin and Voloshinov call “theme” or “actual sense” as it develops in semantico-ideological translation processes and with what Welby describes as “significance” (1983 [1903], pp. 50-52; Petrilli 2009a, pp. 272-284) in the framework of her own special approach to signs and meaning, or “significs”.

For Welby the term “significance” indicates the maximum expression value of a sign, enhanced through ongoing translative-interpretive processes: the sign viewed in its axiological dimension, in its relation to values. The more a sign is subject to transference, transformation, transmutation, transfiguration and above all to transvaluation, the more its significance and ultimate value is augmented. Even the simple rewording—“intralingual translation” to paraphrase Jakobson (1959)—of
an expression in different linguistic registers is possible thanks to the development of metalinguistic semantic-ideological consciousness.

Ongoing translative-interpretive processes sharpen our perception of links and connections, enhance progress in knowledge and reveal aspects of truth previously unknown: the more the sign translates consciously and dialectically into different fields of thought and practical experience, the more its significance, import and value is enhanced. In the framework of Welby’s significs, “transvaluation” (Welby 1983 [1903], p. 26) is the term that best captures this aspect of the connection between translation and meaning: “transvaluation” is an expression that underlines the link between translative processes in the “significial” sense, in our terminology the “semioethical” sense, and Welby’s triadic analysis of signifying processes into “sense”, “meaning” and “significance”. These terms indicate a progressive advance from lower to higher degrees of semantic-ideological expression value in concrete communicative interaction (Ibid. pp. 5-6; Petrilli 2009a, Ch. 5). Steiner (1975) speaks of freedom as achieved with the possibility of transiting across languages and worldviews, let us add in the situation of translingualism and transculturalism.

Working along similar lines and keeping account of studies on the relation among signs, meaning and value—in addition to Welby and Bakhtin, we are also alluding to studies by Peirce, Morris and Levinas—the fundamental relation, as mentioned above, between translation and the concept of responsibility, unlimited, absolute responsibility, is also important to signal and underline (Petrilli 2004, 2010, pp. 3-48).

In the light of the connection not only between “meaning” and “ideology”, but first and foremost between “sense” and “ideology”, a semiotic approach to translation theory must clearly deal with the question of ideology. The task of translation is properly accomplished only if the translating text interprets and expresses the “sense” of the translated text: to remain at the mere level of “meaning” is not sufficient. And given that it expresses valuational orientation, point of view and social planning to varying degrees, sense is connected with ideology. It follows that the problem of sense and ideology are closely related to the problem of translation.

In this framework, the limitations of linguistic relativity are clearly connected with the limitations of a specific ideological orientation, whether this is conscious or not, as in the case of Sapir and Whorf and their conception of language. The latter thematize the influence exerted by language on thought, experience and perception, underlining the difference among languages and respective worldviews. They contend that differences can be so great, that languages can be so distant that interlingual translation is not only difficult, but even impossible. The problem of translatability and untranslatability is clearly connected here with ideological issues. Sapir and Whorf’s theory of linguistic relativity implies a specific ideological orientation in relation to studies on Amerindian languages. The theory of linguistic relativity hides an ideology of the ethnic-cultural order, one that tends
to justify forms of separation and segregation with respect to peoples that speak languages different from one's own (Solimini 1991, pp. 30-33).

À propos the ideological implications present in translation, significant insights are afforded by a rereading of the debate from the early 1970s on Karl Marx’s VI\textsuperscript{th} thesis in *Theses on Feuerbach* (written in 1845 and published for the first time in 1888, now in Engels 1976) and its correct translation. I am referring here specifically to the debate which took place between Adam Schaff and Lucien Sève in 1971 and 1972, published in the French journal *L’Homme et la société* (the various interventions are collected in a single volume in Italian translation under the title *Marxismo e umanesimo*, see Ponzio 1975). But given its role in the overall interpretation of Marxian theory and of the relation between Marxism and humanism, the question of the VI\textsuperscript{th} thesis and its translations attracted the attention of many other intellectuals as well. These included Louis Althusser, Auguste Cornu and Roger Garaudy to name only those who expressed themselves in the French language (given that it was the French translation that was directly under fire). The VI\textsuperscript{th} thesis reads as follows: “Feuerbach löst das religiose Wesen in das menschliche Wesen auf. Aber das menschliche Wesen ist kein dem einzelnen Individuum innewohnendes Abstraktum. In seiner Wirklichkeit ist es das Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse”.

The discussion was sparked off by Adam Schaff and his 1965 monograph, *Marksizm a jednostka ludzka*. Schaff maintains that what results from social relations is man understood as an individual, the human individual. This was in net contrast with the sense of the official Polish translation which translated *menschliche wesen* as “man’s essence”. According to this official interpretation/translation of Marx’s conception, what results from social relations is the essence of man and not the individual man. But in Polish, *menschliche wesen* corresponds to “istota ludzka” and not “istota człowieka”. In French “istota ludzka” corresponds to the expression “l’être humain” and in English to “human being”; whereas “istota człowieka” in French is “l’essence humaine” and in English “human essence”. The Italian and Russian translations are just as mistaken (for the continuation of this discussion see Petrilli 2014, pp. 213-217).

Schaff supported the Marxist approach rather than the existentialist, but he shared a common interest with the latter in problems relating to the human individual. Though mostly neglected by Marxism, these problems were not alien to it on a theoretical level. Problems concerning the human individual contributed to generating Marxism and to rendering Marxian analysis of the social relations of production even more significant. Marxism involves a struggle against the different historical forms of social alienation, where the condition of social alienation prevents the individual from becoming a conscious protagonist of his own history. In Schaff’s opinion, Marxism is *radical, positive and materialist humanism*, which means to say humanism committed to historical-social reality where the history of humanity is human. Marxism is concerned with the human individual, where that
human individual is historically specified in terms of the relations of production peculiar to a given country. And, of course, Marxism is inevitably opposed to the interpretation of social alienation in the abstract terms of “human essence” and “human nature”.

Discussion of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* emphasizes how the problem of translation is at once the problem of the correct interpretation of a text’s sense, of its ideological orientation as well as of the interpreter-translator’s ideological orientation toward that text. Such issues evidence the close relationship between signs, ideology and translation. And given that the relationship between “signification” and “significance”, “semantics” and “pragmatics”, “meaning” and “ideological sense” is central to an adequate understanding of the task of translation, a focus is clearly required on the relationship between theory of translation, theory of ideology and theory of sign.

At this point, let us make just a few more considerations à propos the relation between the question of translation and the “theory of linguistic relativity” as formulated by Sapir and Whorf (see Petrilli 2014, pp. 200-208, pp. 213-217), and integrate with some further observations. Difficulties and obstacles connected with translation are not absolute to the point itself of justifying the thesis of “untranslatability”.

No doubt, there is no such thing as a final translation. It is always possible to return to a translated text and propose yet another translation, one that is considered more “adequate”, more “in keeping”, more “likely”, more “convincing”, that “responds” better to the original text.

In this connection, the difference between “simple” and “complex” is only relevant to a point as the criterion for deciding on the possibility of translational “fidelity”. In certain cases, there is nothing simpler and yet more difficult, more complex to render in another language than a poem.

Untranslatability is an alibi for closure within the boundaries of some totality. In the case of Sapir and Whorf, the totality is verbal language and its “distance” from another language. But it could also be a question—and examples are not lacking in this sense—of the untranslatability of a literary genre. For example, “Poetry” where the capital “P” is intended to highlight the idealizing and hypostatizing emphasis that generally compensates the lack of explanation (see the critique of Benedetto Croce’s concept of “Poesia” in Leone de Castris 2012, pp. 86-124). Another example is the totality constituted by the self, the monadic nature of its “singularity”, its “uniqueness”. This involves that type of “untranslatability” which found expression, for example, in the aftermath of the second World War, in terms of “incommunicability”. This type of untranslatability/incommunicability emerged and was thematized precisely at a time when it was becoming ever more obvious that “encounter” is inevitable—whether linguistic, ethnic, cultural, social, economic, professional or scientific. In other words, the structural impossibility of avoiding “encounter” with the other, exposition to the other through the expedient
of incommunicability slowly became ever more obvious, to the point of becoming manifest in today’s “global communication” world.

Alibis and expedients: as regards what? As regards our responsibility toward the other. Linguistic untranslatability is but one among numerous alibis, no doubt the most effective and peremptory against the other who does not belong, who is different, who is not a member of the community, who transforms the uniqueness/alterity relationship into a relation of opposition, contrast and mutual exclusion. Uniqueness, singularity—like identity, whether individual or collective—is constituted in the relation of alterity; and by calling the self back to its responsibilities without limitations and justifications, the other renders that self unique. In other words, it is only in the relation with the other that the self emerges in its singularity (Petrilli 2013).

The theory of linguistic relativity assigns a given historical-natural language with its own “ideology” and “vision of the world”. No doubt this is true if we consider language in the terms discussed by Sebeok and his concept of “secondary modeling”. The concept of “secondary modeling” refers to modeling processes operated by each language relative to species-specific modeling, that is, “primary modeling” which, as discussed above, Sebeok also indicates with the term “language” as distinct from “speech”. The concept of “modeling” is present in the term “patterning” used by Sapir: cultural patterning and linguistic patterning. According to Sapir, unconscious patterning operates at all levels of natural language—the phonological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Historical-natural language resists any intervention for modification and rationalization by the speaker. If language thus understood is subject to transformation, this is due to an internal “drift” process. Interpreting natural language as something perfectly autarchic, Sapir does not keep account of “language” as understood by Sebeok, as primary modeling, fundamental and species-specific. Language-as-modeling—and this is true exclusively of the human species—allows for the invention of numerous possible worlds. This even explains what Chomsky leaves unexplained with his theory of universal grammar: why Babel?, how come many languages?

What we could now call “common human modeling”—which can somehow be associated to the concept of “common speech” as thematized by Rossi-Landi in his 1961 book, or to what from the second half of the 1960s onward he preferred to call “linguistic work”—explains translation as a possibility in spite of substantial differences among languages, which means to say, among the different secondary modeling systems. To the prejudice of the autarchic and hermetic closure of “secondary modeling” characteristic of natural language (with respect to other historical-natural languages, but also with respect to “primary modeling” which is what makes the existence of manifold and different historical-natural languages possible) is added the prejudice of language inexorably understood as the same for all individuals who speak that language, which also means to exclude that particular difference which, instead, Saussure recognized and evidenced with the distinction between “langue” and “parole”.
With “ideology” we are not alluding to a monological vision and prerogative of language, just as worldview is not the monolithic expression of a culture. A so-called “linguistic community” is socially stratified and differentiated. Thus differentiated multiple ideological visions, differentiated expressions of interest, needs and aspirations, that give rise to different social programmes, projects and plans with different possibilities of converging with the dominant worldview, linguistically and culturally, or of being dominated by it, with different possibilities of converging with the order of discourse and with the dominant social order, can all subsist together in the same “linguistic community”.

A theory of translation with any claim to adequacy must take all such factors into account. Any difficulties, incongruities and even the paradoxes of translation should be reconduted to such differences as just outlined (even if only synthetically), and not exclusively to difference among languages, historical-natural languages, which is reductive. What’s more, these languages are conceived as the expression of closed and monadic worldviews. But precisely because differences and relations of alterity among languages, cultures, ideologies, among individual paroles do not subsist—indeed are not even possible—outside encounter, involvement, mutual exposition and dialogism (resulting from inevitable provocation, instigation by the other, and not from concession by the same); and precisely because such relations are the expression of a common, species-specific human capacity for innovation, recombination, invention, creativity and transformation, translation is always possible.

Here “always possible” also means that finalizability is excluded, that what is translated is always retranslatable, that translation like interpretation (two faces of the same process, inseparable like the two faces of the same sheet of paper) has no limits. And this is because translational and interpretive processes are constitutive of semiosis and semiosis is infinite.

6. Translation as encounter and responsibility

In the light of our observations so far, we can make the claim that for semiotics, the general science of signs, the question of translation is central. Specifically in the sphere of anthroposemiosis, translation is pivotal for the relation between bodies, signs and values—translation across cultures, across languages, across sign and value systems is the condition for signs, values, cultures and languages to subsist as such and to flourish. Bodies, signs and values are interconnected and develop on the basis of ongoing translational processes. Meaning in human semiosis is engendered in the continuous flux of signs in the signifying universe, therefore, as observed above, meaning itself is in signs, or better in the relation among signs, and in this sense meaning is translational. It ensues that translation theory cannot avoid the problem of the relation between signs, bodies and values, and in this perspective ultimately the problem of ideology.
And let us repeat that in addition to the connection between signs, values and social practice in the human world, a general translation theory is also open to developments in biosemiotics and inevitably to the connection between culture and nature.

Considering the opening onto the different orders and systems of signs, a general theory of translation is a theory of global translation, one that addresses the semiotic founding of translation and the translational founding of semiotics understood as global semiotics. On the level of practice, this means to address two faces of the same semiosical processes which are sense producing processes.

We have stated that translation is no less than the condition for life. Translation is the condition for the sign to subsist as a sign and signs are the material of life. This means to say that translation—both internally to the sign and externally in the relation to other signs, interconnectedly with sign systems that are ever more extended, ever more complex—is the a priori and necessary condition for translingualism, transculturalism, transhumanism in a global world.

We may conclude that translation is a distinctive characteristic of life and of the sign, insofar as it is inherent to life, its vocation, because life and semiosis converge. Translation is the necessary condition for the renewal and regeneration of life in all its expressions—human and nonhuman, verbal and nonverbal, in nature and in culture, planetary and local, all terms that take on consistency and meaning in the global sign network that is our semiobiosphere, as part of the uninterrupted continuum of semiosis, interconnectedly with each other and never in isolation.

Not only are translation and life interconnected, but also, as a consequence, translation and alterity. It is the other that calls forth translation, that calls for translation, generates and justifies it, its motor and motivation.

Translation implies encounter among different languages, different verbal texts and different cultures. On the level of intercultural relations, the condition of translational intersemioticity, of transemioticity tells of the processes of compromise, hybridization and negotiation that necessarily shape difference and identity in all aspects and dimensions of culture. Translational processes are the condition for the formation of differences and identities; but they are also the condition for the illusory relationship of mutual independence and indifference, opposition and conflict. Moreover, as studies in intercultural translation have clearly revealed, in addition to verbal signs interlingual translation also involves nonverbal signs, customs, habits, beliefs, knowledge, artistic expressions, and consequently values.

One of the most striking phenomenon characterizing our world today is that of migration. Migration as we know it today in our globalized world is provoked by situations of unsustainability produced by “development” itself, with its ecological disasters, with its ideological conflicts and with its wars all justified under the banner of “preventive wars” and of “humanitarian wars” (Catone and Ponzio, ed. 2002; Ponzio 2007 and ed. 2011-2012). In the face of these relentless and overwhelming
migration fluxes, listening to the other means first and foremost to understand the other’s ailment, the other’s *malaise*, uneasiness, the other’s difficulties, to take a caring attitude toward the other. This too is an effort, an exercise in translation, an effort in opening oneself to the other. And this involves establishing and fulfilling conditions of welcome toward the other, of hospitality toward the other.

Translation understood in terms of listening is associated with the ethical dimension of semiosis and is inseparable from responsibility understood as responsibility without alibis. Even “human rights” can count as alibis for the defence of acquired advantages, of powers achieved and flaunted, of forms of superiority vaunted on the basis of prejudice, illusion, false beliefs. All this leads Levinas to entitle one of his essays, and rightly so, “The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other”, thereby evidencing the possibility of a contradiction between making claims to the rights of identity as the rights of man and the rights of otherness, the rights of the other man. In other words, Levinas evidences how the rights of the other do not necessarily enter so-called “human rights” (see also Levinas 1972). As he says in “Substitution”, an essay first published in 1968, “responsibility is what first enables one to catch sight of and conceive of value” (1989 [1968], p. 113), and from the point of view of translation the primal value is the other, alterity. The other is the very condition of possibility for translation. Translative-interpretive processes regulated by the logic of alterity supersede the boundaries of identity and limited responsibility as defined by professional roles, social status, political orientation, ideological convictions, etc. Unlike difference based on identity and the corresponding condition of indifference among identities, the logic of alterity inherent to translation allows for transcendence with respect to limitations and boundaries, which means that it allows for crossing over barriers and perceiving the other in relations of dialogic participation and unlimited responsibility.

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 today is our neighbour, in one way or another. We may speak of responsibility conceived in such terms as “semioethic responsibility” given that it concerns signs, values and their relative translations. In this case signs are not understood as a means through which to assert one’s own identity and one’s own rights over the other, but on the contrary they are finalized at last to acknowledging others and their rights.

Translation must account to the other and for the other. Therefore, its role in the encounter among signs, languages, and cultures in global communication today is of central importance, indeed, is no less than vital.

Communication today is global communication and with reference to the possibility of encounter among different languages, which the planetary extension of the communication network enhances, *global communication is ever more global translation*. However, put at the service of the dominant order global

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communication is synonymous to global homologation according to the being of the world, the world-as-it-is. Thus understood global communication facilitates relations of assimilation and identification among behaviors, ideas, even desires and fantasies of people belonging to different ethnic groups, cultures, social classes, that come from different walks of life, from different life experiences.

But the question we need to ask is whether or not it be possible to get free from the trap of identity (Pirandello 2004 [1921], 2005 [1904]). On this account translation can proceed according to two different orientations: either in the sense of forced homologation or in the sense of evidencing differences and alterities, multiform viewpoints, thereby contributing to the development of the capacity for critique, creativity and responsibility (Ponzio, ed., 2009b). When the logic of homologating identity prevails, all demands, all requests, including, as we have remarked, the claim to human rights, are based on the logic of identification. Claims are made to identical rights to the people in power, to identical opportunities, identical life styles, identical forms of happiness. Thus construed the world-as-it-is, being-as-it-is, with its alternatives that propose nothing more than different faces of the same world, of the same being, is a world dominated by the archetypes of envy, stupidity and stasis.

In fact, as observed by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1976), all this creates a communicative universe capable at the very most of perspecting alternatives according to the mechanisms of identification. But this means to remain trapped within the same dominant social reproduction order. Instead with Levinas we believe that another world is possible, that the properly human consists in the possibility, the freedom to reach for the condition of “otherwise than being”, rather than remain trapped in being, even if in the form of “being otherwise”. And to remain trapped in being, therefore in the logic of mere alternatives means to remain trapped in the logic of identity, closed identity, instead of proceeding according to the logic of alterity (Ponzio 2009a).

With respect to the possibility of evading the condition of “being otherwise”, that is, “otherwise” with respect to the world-as-it-is, and moving towards the condition of “otherwise than being”, the liberating role of plurilingualism—whether internal to the same language, or external, among different languages—, and with it of critical linguistic consciousness is essential. The allusion here is to dialogic plurilingualism and the capacity to shift across languages, cultures, worldviews as they encounter each other and respond to each other in their common search for the other, in the common effort to listen to the other and welcome the other.

7. Semioethics or ethics of translation

At this point it is in place for us to speak of “ethics of translation”, also keeping account of our brief considerations above à propos “semioethics”.
With the expression “ethics of translation” our reference is not simply to the “task of the translator”, to use an expression introduced by Walter Benjamin (1968 [1923]). No doubt all tasks, all professions require an “ethics”. The professional ethics of the translator requires that s/he should not mistake, misunderstand, falsify, or distort the words, the text, s/he translates. To evoke the title of a renowned book by Umberto Eco (1990), there exist “limits of interpretation” which for us, as stated, are the limits that ensue from the encounter with otherness. This otherness that gives rise to the “limits of interpretation” is not only the otherness of the author of the word of the other, of the author of the text to be interpreted and translated, but also, as evidenced above, the word’s otherness, the text’s otherness with respect to the very author even. But here, let us repeat, we are not referring to what is commonly called “professional ethics”.

From the very beginning we have perspected the question of translation in relation to semiotics understood not only as a science, but also as a species-specific modality of semiosis that characterizes the human being. Therefore, on speaking of the “ethics of translation” and in light of our arguments as developed so far in this essay, we are also referring to each human individual’s responsibility as a “semiotic animal”. The semiotic animal, that is, each one of us, is endowed with a capacity for metasemiosis, for awareness, for reflection, for a totalizing vision, for critique, for planning different ways of organizing individual and social life, for deconstruction and reconstruction, for inventing different worlds in contrast with the so-called “unchangeable reality of things”. In fact, the latter—the “unchangeable reality of things”—is generally evoked when the aim is to maintain and reproduce the status quo, to safeguard and consolidate any acquired advantages, “with all necessary means”, as when politics resorts to war as the “extrema ratio”, justified in the name of the dura lex of “reality”.

As a semiotic animal, each one of us and even more so the semiotician (this is actually a part of his task, of his profession) is in a position to read signs, to interpret and translate signs, therefore to foresee and prevent, to provide. And this is so not only in the restricted sphere of one’s own professional life, one’s everyday life, one’s own context, one’s own role, but also in that broad horizon which includes all life generally, that is, all semiosis over the planet.

As we have amply explained elsewhere (Petrilli 2014), semioethics recovers the ancient vocation of medical semiotics as conceived by Hippocrates and Galen, and featured by Sebeok both in the statute of biosemiotics as well as in the construction of what he understood by his “global semiotics”. Medical semiotics is one of the most ancient branches of the science of signs, concerned as it is with the interpretation of symptoms (in fact, it is called medical semiotics or “symptomatology”), with the identification and the translation of signs that appear as symptoms of some malaise, of some ailment, of some dysfunction or pathology.

Now, if semiotics recognizes the need for that bend we have denominated “semioethics”, it does not need to resort to the alibi of being just one among the
many sciences with its sectorial tasks and concerns, according to that vision of things that goes under the name of scientific separatism, scientific specialism. This is also the condition for it to be effectively a general science, theory, or doctrine of signs. So if this is how things stand, there is a precise task that the semiotician as such must not only take on as his own, but must also commit to explaining that it pertains to every human being as such, to each human individual in his singularity. This task consists in interpreting signs, in translating signs—and this requires awareness, critical capacity, intellectual honesty (the ethics of translation, precisely)—especially those signs recognized as “symptoms”, signs that indicate forms of anomaly, of malaise, of ailment and sickness in semiosis and involve all aspects, sectors, or levels of life: whether natural, environmental, ecological, economical, social, or political, etc. And all this to an end of the “semiotic”, or rather “semioethic” order: to keep life on the planet healthy, in each and every one of its manifestations, under every aspect, in all of its forms. On this task of translation depends not only the possibility of the possibility of human survival, but also the possibility itself of improving the quality of life for all, for each and every one of us.

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