

Inter-Semiotic Translation and Cultural Representation within the Space of the Multi-Modal Text

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Introduction

A brief survey of current trends in Translation Studies suggests a trend that is moving beyond strict textual analysis to broader research paradigms. Indeed, since the 1960s onwards, the concept of “text” has been redefined and reconceptualised to include meaning structures comprised of varying semiotic codes. Furthermore, texts are no longer considered as isolated entities, created in a vacuous space. Rather, texts are now studied within their broader socio-cultural contexts, as well as their spatio-temporal location. In fact, with the advent of newer information and communication technologies (ICTs), the nature of “text” continues to be ever-changing, and ever-evolving. Additionally, more and more studies¹ are focusing on the role and agency of the translator as subject, as well as the social effects translation can and does have in real world situations.

In recent Translation Studies scholarship, there has been an increased interest in the study of inter-semiotic translation, but even more so in regards to, what I will call, multimodal texts. Yves Gambier and Henrik Gotlieb note:

“Technologies for creating and reproducing images have opened up unprecedented opportunities for the discussion of translation. Mass-produced images, now as readily available as printed or electronic words, present translators with a new challenge: to rethink the relationship between word and image. Today, easily accessible visual representations may be combined with words in countless ways. Moreover, the widespread use of multimedia – simultaneously combining sound, text, static and moving images – is constantly modifying not only the forms of meaning construction, but audience responses as well.” (2001: 45)

Thus far I have noted that there has been little work done in Translation Studies in the way of television broadcasting, specifically newscasts in a Canadian context, and the ways in which image and word interact on that

¹ For example, the issue of TTR *Traduction Engagée/Translation and Social* (2007) considers the various ways translators can act as activists and how translated texts can yield certain social effects, as opposed to solely comparing the linguistic features within the source and the target versions of a text.

media. From my point of view, televised newscasts are an extremely rich locus of interacting semiotic systems that not only are created by various discourses but that also create discourses. In fact, it is within the interaction of visual, written and aural texts found in a newscast where I believe translation activity can be located – not just metaphorically, but tangibly. Because newscasts are created by the juxtaposition of a variety of texts on the same interface, it is impossible to ignore the relationships between them, or perhaps how each text is in a way a form of translation of its neighbouring texts. With the dismantling of textual linearity, brought forth by literary criticism, critical theory and the advent of hypertext, many new possibilities of representation have been made possible. Kress and van Leeuwen note:

“This incessant process of ‘translation’, or ‘transcoding’ – ‘transduction’- between a range of semiotic modes represents, we suggest, a better, more adequate understanding of representation and communication. [...]” (2006: 39)

What I propose in this essay is a preliminary exploration of a broader research project. The overall hypothesis suggests that inter-semiotic translation, found in multimodal texts, such as televised newscasts, is a space of constant representational negotiation and should be explored using the lens of translation theory. The power dynamic between *who* is represented and *how* they are represented, especially in the context of certain current affairs such as the events in Hérouxville, Québec, suggests that there may also be a need to consider the relevance of “civic translation” (Basalamah, 2007) for the study and practice of inter-semiotic translation.

Mapping the Concepts

The two key concepts involved in this paper are *multimodal* and *multisemiotic*. I find that the borders between these two concepts can overlap. Because a newscast is comprised of various texts that require the *simultaneous* use of different perception channels (such as sight and sound) to understand the whole message, it is multimodal. And because each of those individual texts use ‘different sign systems’ (such as pictures, graphs, words, action shots), the overall multimodal newscast is also multisemiotic. I would add here that the *connection and interaction* between the various semiotic texts is what I have called *inter-semiotic translation*.

The following example can help in clarifying the differences between these concepts. For the most part, newscasts, have at least these parts in common: the visual and the narration of the anchorperson, the still-images to the right or the left of the anchorperson that appear to signal a change of story, the occasional RSS feed at the bottom or top of the screen, the live-action coverage shots, etc. Each of these parts uses a different semiotic system; verbal systems for the narration of the news, visual systems for the images. Combined, they represent a multisemiotic text. But because as a whole they require the viewer/receiver to resort to various perception channels (sight, sound), they are also multimodal. Lastly, what is also probing of multimodal texts is that they contest previously held assumptions about textual linearity – in other words, a reader can shift their focus to different texts that form the “meta-text” as he or she pleases (for instance, the focus could be placed on the visual narrative before focusing on the aural and vice versa)².

Furthermore, although Jakobson proposed the concept of inter-semiotic translation decades ago³, it seems that research in this area is only beginning to gain momentum, especially due to advents like the World Wide Web, via the Internet, which have facilitated information accessibility. Some may make the argument that this form of ‘translation’ is not translation *stricto sensu*, but something altogether different (adaptation for instance). However, I contend that so long as full systems of communication are involved in an interactive meaning-making process, we can posit translational activity.

The Newscast: Inter-semiotic Translation and the Power Dynamics of Cultural Representation

² The aspect of non-linearity in multimodal texts will need to be further explored. In a sense, even though the multimodal text does disrupt textual linearity, newscasts are constructed in such a way that the viewer is still guided along by the selection of images and progression of the stories decided upon by the producers. Conversely, the viewer still has a certain amount of ‘reading freedom’; in fact, he or she could completely ‘disconnect’ themselves from the main multimodal texts (anchorperson, images, aural narrative, etc.) and focus on the RSS feed at the bottom of the screen.

³ “Inter-semiotic translation, or transmutation, is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.” (Jakobson, 1966:233). Although Jakobson defines this third category as a transfer from the verbal to the non-verbal, or vice versa, I would also add that non-verbal to non-verbal transfer can also occur. An example of non-verbal to non-verbal would be perhaps a picture into a caricature (without words).

There is no denying the power of television. Various authors, notably Pierre Bourdieu with his essay *"On Television"*, have suggested that due to its power of diffusion to the public masses, television has come to replace more traditional forms of cultural production such as the printed press. What is particularly interesting with the newscast format is that it appropriates discourses occurring in the public and political spheres and represents them on a multimodal, multisemiotic interface. When the nightly news appears on the TV screen, the viewer is not just confronted with a verbal discourse pertaining to current affairs, but also a visual discourse that fuels the overall message (in fact, the process is dialectical). Furthermore, television newscasts operate along the lines of what Foucault called a "régime of truth". Television newscasts are one of the ways in which statements made to be 'true' are produced and subsequently disseminated to the masses. Newscasts exercise control over what is deemed to be worthy of discussion and coverage, and in recent Canadian news⁴, the 'truth' is a discourse pertaining to the flaws of Canada's multicultural policies.

As recent events in Canada, specifically in Québec, have demonstrated, there is a discourse pertaining to multiculturalism that is calling into question what tolerance of "Otherness"/ "Difference" really means to Canadians (or, what newscasts would have Canadians think it means). What once used to be Canada's 'pride and joy' now seems to be caught in a cross-fire of debate as to whether we are too tolerant or not tolerant enough not only of newcomers, but also, of "second and third generations"⁵. What is also worthy of noting is that when these various verbal/aural discourses are brought up in newscasts, particular images are associated with them (or, perhaps, certain visuals prompt certain verbal discourses) and it is this 'translation' that is of interest for Translation Studies because it suggests that such a transaction can potentially

⁴ For instance, the Québec news channel LCN showed a number of stories relating to reasonable accommodation and immigration throughout most of 2007, some of which are available on the channel's website: <http://recherche.lcn.canoe.ca/?sen=lc&ie=UTF-8&q=accommodements+raisonnables&cx=013125685354215780428%3Akspibuyhy9c&cof=FORID%3A9>. These issues were also present in national news, for instance with Canada's public broadcaster CBC and its show "The National": http://www.cbc.ca/national/blog/video/immigrationdiversity/reasonable_accomodation.html. Finally, a number of print media also covered the debate, including Québec City's *Le Soleil* and Canada's *Macleans'* magazine.

⁵ "Alors que les premières générations étaient des populations décrites à juste titre comme étant "immigrantes", il est à noter que les générations suivantes, jusqu'aux plus récentes sont toujours présentées comme immigrantes ou de descendance immigrante." (Basalamah, 2007: 59)

yield concrete social effects such as the automatic association of certain cultural groups with the notion of reasonable accommodation.

For instance, lately, whenever there is an aural or verbal “source text”⁶ about reasonable accommodation in various Québécois newscasts, generally the image that becomes the “target text” of these narratives depicts a stereotype of cultural “Otherness”. And because the newscast acts as a carefully controlled context for the stereotype, audiences are more likely to associate a truth value to the beliefs and viewpoints used to “translate” the image. Newscasts therefore have power to further cement discourses that associate reasonable accommodation to certain images, which in turn can transpire in how viewers interact with cultural differences in everyday situations.

It is here that a power dynamic may be noted: it is not “difference” that represents itself, rather, it is often the production team of the newscast that represents what “difference” should mean – it translates “difference” into discourses of reasonable and unreasonable accommodation using images of headscarves, YMCA pools, and sugar shacks. And because of the multimodality of the newscast, not only are the pervasive effects of verbal/aural discourse at play, but perhaps even more strongly, that of the visual. Though it is at times suggested that the visual is a universal sign system, I think it is extremely culturally specific. As such, when hot topics such as reasonable accommodation and multicultural policies are discussed as items on the agenda, usually the images mobilized to translate” these issues in the newscast are catered and cropped to cohere with Québécois values, norms and ideologies – as such, the “target text” stereotypes are not just descriptive, but also prescriptive: the image illustrates how the host culture views difference while simultaneously telling newcomers how they are perceived and how they should view themselves. Inter-semiotic translation in newscasts is also the “translation of general values or ideas shared by a community into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular “situations” (Toury, 1995: 54-55). In short, the stereotypes act as *pathos* strategy to persuade the Québécois viewer/audience (this perhaps acts as an implicit “Skopos” for those producing this type of inter-semiotic translation). For instance, a common visual that is associated with news reports pertaining to immigration, integration, accommodation and multiculturalism in

⁶ To this I would add that the lines between source text and target texts become blurred on the multimodal interface. In fact, a visual narrative can just as well be translated into a verbal or aural narrative and create an entirely different representation (just as there can be a space of overlap).

Québec is that of the veiled Muslim woman. For some Québécois, especially Québécois women who claim to be at the vanguard of feminism, the *hijab* is seen as a symbol of male oppression and a step back for the women's movement (working on the hypothesis that there can only be one discourse of women's liberation); as such it affects the emotions of Québécois women who hold particular views on what "feminism" should and does look like to them. The result of this translation is that the average viewer of the newscast is most likely to associate the "social problem" to the image, even if, and I would like to stress this, the aural/verbal narrative never makes explicit the culture or religion involved. The result is that the visuals become stereotypical representations of "difference" and can become the root cause of conflict and cultural misunderstanding.

Proposing an *Ethos* for Inter-semiotic Translation

Because intercultural contact is now inevitable due to globalization, there is a greater need for dialogue and understanding, not just the superficial use of *tolerance*⁷, especially within local communities where the effects of stigmatization and alienation may be most directly felt. In fact, in various disciplines such as conflict studies, communication and cultural studies⁸, the tropes of translation are used to discuss the dialectical process involved in cultural understanding, and yet, within Translation Studies, there appears to be a reluctance to venture down the 'idealistic' slope of cultural dialogue. "Translating between cultures" – what a nice metaphor! And yet, is that not exactly what happens when individuals or communities navigate between the interstices of "Self" and

⁷ I use the word 'tolerance' as per its denotative meaning found in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: "1: Capacity to endure pain or hardship; 2: a sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting one's own". For more on the discussion of "tolerance" as a problematic concept, refer to "*The Trouble with Tolerance*" (full reference provided in bibliography), specifically the comments made by Prof. Michael Blake.

⁸ In fact, in the professional *milieu*, there is an increase of "interculturalists" (i.e. experts in intercultural communication and business practices). "They look upon 'intercultural communication' as a new professional field, emerging out of a practical need to understand what happens in cross-cultural encounters [...] many of the interculturalists work as trainers or consultants [...] for many interculturalists a humanitarian ethos is also involved in their work; by promoting intercultural communication they will help make the world a better place to live in [however] with increasing international business, and with the establishment of the intercultural field as a context of a profitable career, the humanitarian motives with time came to mix more and more with concerns of professionalization and credentialism." (Dahlén, 1997:10-13)

“Other⁹”? To quote Mary Snell-Hornby, Translation Studies has “a uniquely fruitful position as an interdiscipline among the plurality of languages and cultures in the world today” (2006: 169) to position itself as one of the most pertinent types of communication to explore not only in the context of hyper pluralized cities, but also in smaller peripheral communities.

Having said this, I would like to place my conceptualization of inter-semiotic translation within the multimodal newscast as one of the ways in which we can further investigate cultural translation and civic translation. Because inter-semiotic translation creates cultural artefacts, it is a part of the overall process of cultural translation, in which we (as in the collective “we”) try to understand and negotiate our identities in relation to identities that are “Other” to us. In so doing, inter-semiotic translation needs to mobilize some of the insights provided by other disciplines such as postcolonial thought and ethics in order to revert some of the power imbalances we are currently faced with. This, in my opinion, would be a step towards Salah Basalamah’s concept of ‘civic translation’ which encourages translators to adopt an ethical stance towards the translation of “Otherness” within society; in other words, that they realize the social weight translations can have in terms of representing others. Moreover, it seems that civic translation also looks at creating points of convergence between “selves” and “others”, i.e. a space of reciprocity (cf. Basalamah, 2007).

Before elaborating why I believe the concept of “civic translation” to be relevant in the realm of media and inter-semiotic translation, it may be worthwhile to distinguish it from other *en vogue* collocations such as “translation and political engagement” (Tymoczko, 2000). I believe Sherry Simon aptly sums up what constitutes “translation and engagement”: “translations are a form of engagement when the necessary partiality of translation becomes *partisan*, when translators adopt advocacy roles in situations of socio-cultural inequalities” (2007: 11). With translation as a form of engagement, we are referring to the practice of translation with a certain “agenda” in mind, e.g. subverting

⁹ By “Other” I do not necessarily mean only that which is *radically* “Other”; in other words, this includes the movement towards people who speak the same language but share different religions, political views, or conversely, who share the same religion, or political views but speak different languages. This echoes Basalamah’s argument that calls for an adjustment of “the falsely dichotomous notions of “foreignness” and “home culture” (Simon, 2007: 12). “Peut-être faudrait-il désormais concevoir la traduction, non plus dans son rapport avec l’étranger radical, l’étranger de l’extérieur, mais avec celui qui parle la même langue, l’immigrant et ses descendants.” (Basalamah cited in Simon, 2007 :12-13)

patriarchal discourse in translation as per the work of feminists such as Barbara Godard and Nicole Brossard. To distinguish translation as a form of engagement from civic translation, I would suggest that the former is somewhat unidirectional; it is not a process that necessarily looks to reach mutual understanding. Whereas the first type of translation, translation as engagement, looks at subverting what generally appears to be written, verbal texts, civic translation can function both in the space of the textual and the space of inter-cultural contact (in this sense, it is closer to the idea of 'cultural translation' found in Postcolonial Studies). Furthermore, the translator assumes an ethically active role in the creation of a cooperative dialogue that no longer *tolerates* difference, but rather, accepts it, and in which the participants (translator included) allow themselves to open up to the possibility of reviewing previously held world-views.

My argument is that because the media yield so much power in terms of representation and because more and more of its agents (such as journalists, photographers, researchers, etc.) act as cultural translators, they can no longer be perceived as being without some degree of responsibility towards their fellow citizens. Cultural translators can potentially act as those "mediators" who facilitate and in fact, make dialogue possible – mediators not in the sense of neutral third parties, but rather those who travel between the metaphorical borders of cultural differences, and who are fully vested in creating tangible spaces of "vivre-ensemble"/community (Basalamah, 2007: 65) within society¹⁰. Agents involved in the construction of the newscast should, in my opinion, refute the simple binarism of "cultural supremacy or sovereignty", or of "Us versus Them". In the words of Homi K. Bhabha: "Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial cultural from which they emerge to construct visions of community" (1996: 58). The "Us" needs to go towards the "Them" and vice versa. The insight provided by the framework of civic translation is that it is not enough to simply relay cultural differences as they are perceived by one part of society. What is needed is a dialectical process, an ethical process, where all parties can come together and construct a different type of newscast: one that does not simply commodify alterity in the name of the 'easy sell' scoop or seek to

¹⁰ We are reminded here of Ricoeur's "moral vision expressed in the goal of "to aim to live a good life with and for others in just institutions" (Neufeld-Redekop, 2002: 149).

fragment society into cultural ghettos. What is needed is a newscast that is self-critical of its process of inter-semiotic translation and its ensuing social effects.

Concluding Remarks

This article was intended to explore how translation could be positioned within the space of multisemiotic, multimodal texts. In my opinion, this type of investigation would help in bridging one of the on-going debates in Translation Studies: the schism between technology and theory (or more appropriately, I think anyway, the schism between technology in a broad sense – not just translation technology like translation memories and computer-aided translation tools, but information and communication technologies – and studies in the humanities). In a sense, these two broad fields of study may appear at opposite ends of the spectrum. However, I would argue that they are not as disparate as we make them out to be. How can technology be disassociated from the people who use it (and the whole socio-cultural, economic, and temporal context surrounding its use)? From this perspective, studies that merge both technology (in its broad sense) and studies conducted in the humanities can, in my opinion, deepen our knowledge on how we make meaning, distribute meaning, create representations, disseminate certain discourses as well as ideologies, and more importantly, how we posit translation in all of these operations. Not only does this mean new horizons for Translation Studies in terms of translational practices, but it also means changes to the discourses that pertain to translation in general. To draw on some of the comments made by Theo Hermans in *Cross-cultural Translation Studies as Thick Translation* I contend that extending and including inter-semiotic transfer as a new area of investigation “has the potential to counter the flatness and formulaic reductiveness of the jargon of translation studies, and foster instead a more diversified, richer vocabulary (2007: 8)”.

Additionally, Canadian newscasts comprise a relatively unexplored space in which the tropes of translation come into question and are called upon to describe communicative and representative phenomena.

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