

Article

The Sociosemiotic Approach to Translation

Y.Q. Fang

Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College, Xiamen, China

* Correspondence: 247682022@qq.com

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Abstract: Sociosemiotics takes all the signs in human society into consideration including linguistic signs and social-cultural signs. There is still some limitation in the semiotic theory of Morris. The limitation of semiotics urges a new perspective to think over the relationship between language and social culture. Under this circumstance, sociosemiotics was developed on the basis of semiotic theory. This paper tries to apply sociosemiotics approach to translation. It is found in the study that the sociosemiotic approach takes into consideration all the signs in human society including linguistic and social-cultural signs. Translating thus is regarded as the message transition between two semiotic systems. Translation study based on sociosemiotics has become a new research sphere along with linguistics, philosophy, aesthetics, psychology and sociology. The development and perfection of sociosemiotics inspire researchers to interpret the meaning of the text in a wider web of relationships among language, culture, psychology, and society. The equivalence translation from a sociosemiotic perspective can be applied in different discourses such as legal translation, foreign news translation, English business advertisements, to name just a few.

Keywords: Sociosemiotics; Semiotic Theory; Sociosemiotic Approach to Translation

1. Introduction

Sociosemiotics is an important theory. It is interdisciplinary being full of semiotics, linguistics, and sociology. It derives from the theory of sign and the theory of semiotics. It takes into consideration all the signs in human society including linguistic and social-cultural signs. Therefore, this paper tries to apply sociosemiotics approach to translation. It consists of four main parts excluding the introduction and conclusion: Sign world and semiotics, the sociosemiotic feature of language and sociosemiotics, sociosemiotic approach to translation, the advantages of sociosemiotic approach.

General semiotics extends the study to nonverbal signs as well as verbal signs and puts the language subject and the outside world into the sign process. On the basis of the above insight, we can realize the fact that the sign not only covers a combination of signified and signifier, but also includes the user's interpretation in a specific context, so we can start from the fixed signification and, revise or enrich the sign system. Translation is by no means a closed mechanical procedure; it is supposed to be an open-ended semiosis. Directed by general semiotics, translators can understand language from the perspective of the social structure and process.

Translation theories based on sociosemiotics enable translators to interpret the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and texts; moreover, it can help them to comprehend the symbolic meaning in that the theories emphasize all related to the message.

2. Sign World and Semiotics

2.1. Sign world

The world is composed of signs. Flower, grass, tree, desk, chair, smell, color, machine, plane, and so on are signs or combination of signs. A car is a sign. It is an advanced vehicle, which is convenient, quick, and composed of many parts, each of which is a sign, too. A car has social meaning. A private car is prevalent in the Western world. Therefore the owner of a car is not bound to be rich; while in the 1980s, whoever owned a car must be wealthy in China. Thus a car is associated with wealth in China. A car can be painted in various colors, in the sign system of which, black is the noblest one, symbolizing wealth and power, so it attracts a lot of buyers but it is vulnerable to attacks of gangsters. Body language is also a sign system because different gestures can express different meanings.

There is a long history for the research on signs, which is as long as Plato (427 B.C.-347 B.C) and Aristotle (384 B.C--322 B.C.), both of whom have papers on signs.

In the 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure says in his book *Courses in General Linguistics*: "A sign "denote" or "refers to" something "out there in the real world", "the linguistic sign does not unite a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image"(Saussure, 1971).

It was Saussure who laid the foundation stone of semiology. It was he in fact who coined the term (which he developed from the Greek word for "sign"). He used the word to describe a new science, which he saw as "a science, which studies the life of signs at the heart of social life"(Saussure, 1971). This new science, he said, would teach us "what signs consist of, what laws govern them." As he saw it, linguistics would be but a part of the overarching science of semiology, which would not limit itself to verbal signs only.

Semiologists generally prefer the term "reader" to "receiver" (even of a painting, photograph, or film) and often use the term "text" to "message". This implies that receiving a message (i.e. "reading a text") is an active process of decoding and that the process is socially and culturally conditioned.

Saussure points out that the value of signs is culture-specific. The French mouton may have the same meaning as the English sheep, but it does not have the same value. Why? Because English has the terms mutton and sheep, a distinction which is not available in France. He emphasizes that a sign gains its value from its relation to other similar values. Without such a relationship signification would not exist.

2.2. Semiotics- icons, indexes, symbols

At about the same time as Saussure was developing semiology, the American philosopher C.S. Peirce (1839-1914) was developing semiotics (as it tended to be known in the US and is now generally known across the world).

Following Peirce, semiologists (or semioticians) often draw a distinction between icons, indexes and symbols.

Icons : Icons are signs whose signifier bears a close resemblance to the thing they refer to. Thus a photograph of me can be said to be highly iconic as it looks like me. A road sign showing the silhouette of a car and a motorbike is highly iconic as the silhouettes look like a motorbike and a car. A very few words (so-called onomatopoeic words) are iconic, too, such as whisper, cuckoo, splash, crash.

Symbols: Most words, though, are symbolic signs. We have agreed that they shall mean what they mean and there is no natural relationship between them and their meanings, between the signifier and the signified. In movies, we would expect to find iconic signs- the signifiers looking like what they refer to. We find symbolic signs as well, though: for example when the picture goes wobbly before a flashback. Certainly the "real world" doesn't go wobbly when we remember a scene from the past, so this device is an arbitrary device, which means "flashback" because we have agreed that that's what it means. The road sign with the motorbike and car has iconic elements, but it also has symbolic elements: a white background with a red circle around it. These signify "something is forbidden" simply because we have agreed that is what they mean.

Indexes: In a sense, indexes lie between icons and symbols. An index is a sign whose signifier we have learnt to associate with a particular signified. For example, if we see someone walking down the street with a rolling gait, we may associate the rolling gait with the concept of "sailor". We may see smoke as an index of "fire". A thermometer is an index of "temperature." Peirce gives the examples of a weathercock, a barometer, and a sundial.

To sum up, Saussure proposes language is a sign system expressing concepts, whose linguistic object is the relationship between signs. But he has no further study. Peirce gives more comprehensive illustrations and opened the door for developing the science of sign. But his theory is only applied in philosophy study without systematic study on semiotics.

2.3. Charles Morris's View on Semiotics

Charles Morris is an American philosopher and behavioral semiotician. He developed semiotics systematically. His monograph *Foundation of the Theory of Signs* (1938) was paid great attention to. In this work, he proposed his threefold divisions of a sign as consisting of sign vehicle, designatum, and interpreter, and of semiotics as consisting of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. This latter distinction became normalized in linguistics. He said that there are three meanings of semiotics: form meaning (relationship between signs), existent meaning (sign and object), and pragmatic meaning (sign and object), e.g. linguistic meaning, designative meaning, and pragmatic meaning.

Morris contributes a lot to the study of semiotics, particularly to linguistic and translation research. He acknowledged the argument of Saussure that meaning is a relationship. What's more, he put this relationship into a three-dimensional relationship, including the relationship between text and referent between words, sentences, and discourse in a text, between text and the reader, covering all relationships in language communication.

2.4. Classification of Meanings

Linguists have different classifications of meanings (table 1). The most frequent is the distinction between designative meaning and connotative meaning. They concern words and styles, but neglect syntax and form. Leech insists on seven types of meanings: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning.

Table 1. Classification of meanings

Conceptual meaning		About logic, recognition, and connotative meaning
Associative meaning	Connotative meaning	About logic, cognition, and denotative meaning.
	Social meaning	The social context in which language is used
	Affective meaning	Feeling and attitude of the speaker or author
	Reflected meaning	Associated with another meaning of another word
	Collocative meaning	Meaning through the frequent co-occurrence with another word
Thematic meaning		Way of organizing information (word order, stressing means)

Conceptual meaning overlaps with the concept "referent"; reflected, collocative, affective, social, and connotative can altogether be summarized into associative meaning. In addition, it is hard to distinguish connotative and social meaning, since connotative meaning changes with culture, historic periods, and individuals' experiences. According to Leech, affective meaning to a considerable degree is a category overlapping with register, connotation, and reasonable content; thematic meaning is a problem concerning the options between different grammatical structures.

Translation is actually translating meanings. The seven division put forward by Leech is complicated and not so easy to understand, while meaning by a sociosemiotic perspective proposed by Morris is obviously better than Leech's from a semantic perspective. It can comprehensively reflect the relationships between sign and referent, sign and sign, sign and interpretant, which is easy to learn.

Thus, the meaning through the sociosemiotic perspective is helpful to successful communication and cross-cultural communication. By understanding the similarities and differences of the three semiotic meanings in different cultures, translators achieve similarity transfer the source can more easily employ all kinds of effective means to and correspondence while eliminating differences and meaning into the target language, which will result in a smooth sign transfer in the process of cross-cultural communication.

2.5. The Problems of the Semiotic Theory

The semiotic theory of Morris attracts great attention, but there are still problems in it. The division in this theory is not in a clear order; the founder of this theory Peirce focused on philosophy and he had never studied semiotics. His studies are, to some degree, empirical. The Formal Semiotics presented by Saussure is different from the meaning used in a real social environment. Thus it is necessary to further explore the relationship between man and signs, e.g. the use of the sign system in social practice. The limitation of semiotics urges a new perspective to think more over the relationship between language and social culture. Under this circumstance, sociosemiotics was developed on the basis of semiotic theory.

British linguist Halliday insists that semiotics should study the sign system, which is what we call meaning. So linguistics is also semiotics as it is a system studying meaning. In any culture, there are diversified means to express meaning including arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance. A cultural behavioral model such as exchanging model, clothing design, family structure, etc is all carriers of meanings. So culture can be defined as a collection of relevant sign systems, which is also a collection of a whole set of meaning systems.

However, this is not sufficient to say that sign exists as a solid object. We have to consider the system of meaning, which exerts influence on the outside through signs. Inside meaning systems are not individual things but networks of relationships. Language is such a meaning system, which can compose culture, together with other meaning systems.

Halliday maintains that language as a sign system originated and develops in societies, so language is in nature a social phenomenon. Learning can be regarded as a cognitive process and psychological process, but first of all a social process; the educational and learning environment is a social one; the imparting of knowledge is also realized through social activities in a social context. Vocabularies used in social context can only derive their meanings from activities in which they are used. These activities are purposeful on certain social occasions. So Halliday holds that we should study language from the social-semiotic perspective.

His student Gunther Kress, who is also an American linguist, follows Halliday's idea. In his book *Social Semiotics* he says that sign (including activities) meaning is closely related to society. Language, as a sign system, is social, which is known clearly but ignored easily by many people, who only pay attention to the features of texts and linguistic structure themselves (Kress, 1988). With the sociosemiotic approach, we can connect information, its meaning, and social structure as well as a social process. A theory that simply directs people to understand the meaning of language is far from satisfaction since meaning also lies in other meaning systems such as visual, audio, and behavioral codes, therefore, a theory which is constructed in societies and regarded as all sign systems of social practice should be employed. Sociosemiotics is such a theory. Therefore Halliday and Kress enlarge the horizon of people and offer the theoretical base for sociosemiotic translation.

3. Sociosemiotic Approach to Translation

3.1. Nida's View on Sociosemiotic Approach to Translation

Eugene Nida regards the translation of the Bible as a transfer of culture as well as words. He wrote books and papers to explore the science, art, and techniques of translation with an attempt to successfully communicate and eliminate barriers cross-culturally in order to achieve Dynamic Equivalence. In 1982, he wrote a book *Meaning of Translation*, presenting the sociosemiotic approach.

In his later book *Style and Text*, the three-dimensional relationship of meaning is highlighted. He proposed in his book *Sign, Meaning, Translation* that the world is a world of signs in which people are engaged in the understanding and explaining meanings of signs. However, to know exactly the meaning of a sign, one must be completely clear about the system in which a sign lies, so we can say translation is indeed a transformation activity between signs (Nida, 1986).

In his book *From One Language to Another*, he tells us that the approach is helpful to the comprehension and expression of designative meaning and associative meaning and it is an effective way to achieve Functional Equivalence. The core of the approach is meaning. He applied this sociosemiotic approach to the translation of the Bible and explained the possibility and effective ways to achieve functional equivalence. The core of this approach is semiotic meaning. He proposed that 1) semiotics is the most comprehensive system to analyze signs; 2) sociosemiotics insists that the meaning of word signs concerns the whole process of certain activities in social contexts. That is to say, texts can not be isolated from the social situation; the explanation of sign meanings is connected with the structure where signs exist, that is to say, any word sign can only be explained through the relationship with other relevant signs (Nida, 1986).

3.2. Integrated theories of Halliday, Kress and Nida

It is a creation by Nida to apply sociosemiotics to the study of translation, which is a cross-language and cross-cultural communication. This contributes a lot to the research on translation theories and practices. Unavoidably his theory is still partial and superficial in some way. It will be perfected if we integrate the theories of Halliday, Kress, and Nida. In this way, we can get a more comprehensive knowledge of translation through sociosemiotic approach:

3.2.1 Translation is Translation of Meanings.

Meanings are represented by signs. Meaning is a three-dimensional relationship, including sign, referent, and interpretant. Verbal signs have three meanings: a designative meaning which indicates the relationship between language sign with the object it refers to; linguistic meaning which embodies the relationship between language signs; and pragmatic meaning which represents the relationship between sign and interpretant. The translation is the translation of the three meanings.

3.2.2 Translation is Communication of Culture

Culture is the combination of material civilization and the spiritual civilization of mankind. In accordance with categorization it can be divided into 1) material culture (all material civilization created by mankind; 2) institutional culture (social institution, family system, daily life, and educational system, religious institutions, lifestyles, customs and habits, ritual standard, language, etc.); 3) psychological culture (thinking modes, belief, values and view, aesthetic perspectives, etc.). The three types of cultures can

be regarded as three sets of a sign system, which constitute a large social and cultural sign network. Each set has codes as their representing signs. A translator has to do decoding and encoding in such two intricate and complicated social and cultural sign networks. A translator when decoding signs should keep in mind that the source text is only the collection of many sign systems, which exist in the society, therefore the comprehension of their meaning cannot ignore the social environment or the relationship between signs. A translator when encoding should also remember that barriers are inevitable due to the differences between cultures, particularly psychological cultures, and linguistic cultures, so during the encoding process when the designative meaning, linguistic meaning, and pragmatic meaning of source language are transplanted into the target language, translators should try to eliminate barriers so as to minimize the loss of information during the cultural communication.

3.3. *Chen Hongwei's View on Sociosemiotic Approach to Translation*

Prof. Chen Hongwei has done an extensive study on semiotics and sociosemiotics. She sums up the sociosemiotic approach to translation. Here is the summary of her theory:

Translation is translating meaning. The sociosemiotic approach to meaning is suitable for translation, in which verbal signs have three types of meaning: a designative meaning which indicates the relationship between verbal signs and their referents, linguistic meaning which indicates the relationship between verbal signs, and pragmatic meaning which indicates the relationship between verbal signs and interpretants. A text may simultaneously have three types of meaning, or just two types of meaning, or only one type of meaning.

Translation is exchanging cultures. Culture can be roughly classified into three categories on scope: material culture, institutional culture, and mental culture. The three categories of culture can be regarded as three subsystems of signs composed of numerous subsystems of signs. All these systems are indicated by codes.

Language is a unique system of signs. It can express the meanings of all the other systems of signs. It has social functions. Halliday's classification of three functions of language is too rough to be used in translation, It is found that Peter Newmark's distinction of six functions is suitable for translation: expressive function, whose core is the mind of the speaker, the writer, the originator of the utterance; informative function, whose core is the external situation, the facts of a topic, reality outside language, including reported ideas or theories; vocative function, whose core is the readership, the addressee; aesthetic function, which is designed to please the sense, first through its actual or imagined sound, and secondly through its metaphors; phatic function, which is used for maintaining friendly contact with the addressee rather than for imparting foreign information; metalingual function, which indicates a language's ability to explain, name, and criticize its own features.

Meaning and function should be considered as essential for translation criteria.

The text is a semantic unit with meaning and function. It is a product in the sense that it is an output, something that can be recorded and studied, having a certain construction that can be represented in systematic terms. It is a process in the sense of a continuous process of semantic choice, a movement through the network of meaning potential, with each set of choices constituting the environment for a further set.

The context is the environment in which meanings are exchanged.

The register is the semantic unity. It can be defined as a variety according to use. In other words, the register is what you are speaking at the time, depending on what you are doing and the nature of the activity in which the language is functioning. It consists of three important elements: field, tenor, and mode.

The social structure determines all social situations and their meanings(Chen Hongwei, 1998).

These viewpoints of the sociosemiotic approach towards translation are quite enlightening and particularly applicable to the study of pun translation.

4. Advantages of Sociosemiotic Approach

The sociosemiotic approach has taken its insight from semiotics. The meaning of signs always involves the total communication of events within the social context, finding correspondence in another culture through the process of decoding and encoding. It has several advantages over other approaches to translation.

First, this approach focuses upon the significance of sign that carries a message to receptors and circumstances. Such an approach takes into consideration various aspects of the philological, linguistic and communicative approaches to translation, and expands considerably the base for recognizing the meaningfulness or significance of both lexical content and rhetorical form. It helps one understand not only the meanings of words, sentences, and discourse structure but also the symbolic name of the events and objects. In the past, there was a tendency to divorce form from content, as though content provided the meaning and the formal features simply embellished the discourse. In the light of sociosemiotics, rhetorical features are also signs that have significance.

Secondly, the advantage of this approach is that equal attention is paid to referential and pragmatic meanings. The referential meaning of lexemes represents referents in the practice of the linguistic world. It includes the bundle of semantic features that serve to define the range of referents that the lexeme in question can represent. Pragmatic meaning represents the values and attitudes resulting from the use of contexts (both cultural and linguistic) in which such lexemes habitually occur.

Thirdly, since an understanding of signs involves the total communication of an event within the social context, it is relevant to any and all other signs that combine verbal symbols. In translation, this approach goes out of the range of pure linguistic research pays attention to others that also convey meaning; register, context, culture many other factors are taken into consideration in the process of translation.

5. Equivalence Translation from a Sociosemiotics Perspective in Different Discourses

Since sociosemiotics approach to translation takes into consideration various aspects of the philological, linguistic, and communicative approaches to translation. It helps one understand not only the meanings of words, sentences, and discourse structure but also the symbolic name of the events and objects. The author anticipates that this approach can be applied in equivalence translation in different discourses. For instance, translation of legal discourses is subject to both legal and linguistic systems. In legal translation, equivalence translation is not an individual behavior but a sociosemiotic transformation of speech. Moreover, foreign news translation should not only focus on the language itself but also study other social and cultural factors beyond the language other social and cultural factors. Therefore, the translation of foreign news from sociosemiotic perspective would solve both the linguistic and the cultural problems. Another discourse that may benefit from the sociosemiotic approach to translation can be the English business advertisements. Since the purpose of business advertisements and the principle of semiotic translation method "matching meaning and similar function", the translation strategy for such business advertisements may offer some new perspectives for advertisement translators. In a word, equivalence translation from a sociosemiotic perspective can be applied in different discourses, researchers from different fields may integrate this approach with various subjects and create better translation versions.

6. Conclusion

Translation theories based on sociosemiotics enable translators to interpret the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and texts; moreover, it can help them to comprehend the symbolic meaning in that the theories emphasize all related to the message. It is found in the study that the sociosemiotic approach takes into consideration all the signs in human society including linguistic signs and social-cultural signs. Translating thus is regarded as the message transition between two semiotic systems. Translation study based on sociosemiotics has become a new research sphere along with linguistics, philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and sociology. The development and perfection of sociosemiotics inspire researchers to interpret the meaning of the text in a wider web of relationships among language, culture, psychology and society. The equivalence translation from a sociosemiotic perspective can be applied in different discourses such as legal translation, foreign news translation, English business advertisements, to name just a few.

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