

HOW TRANSLATIONS ARE WILLED INTO EXISTENCE

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This paper will argue that translations are willed into existence in three conceivable ways: pull, push and shuffle. Pull is the most intuitive form. It corresponds, for example, to a publishing house that decides to translate a foreign novel. Here, the initiative to invest in a new translation project is almost entirely located on the target side. The push mode, in contrast, can be exemplified by a company that decides to localise its website to cater for foreign markets. Here the decisions to make translation happen are mostly located on the source side. The shuffle mode corresponds to those rare cases in which the process is located neither on the source nor on the target side, but straddles the semiotic barriers or folds that make acts of translating possible or necessary in the first place.

The discussion affirms the status of translators as active players, or agents, of communication. If it is true that in real life translators rarely determine whether a sign will cross a semiotic fold or have much say in the process, in principle nothing prevents them from bringing their desires, motives, and strategies to the table. Translators can – and should – have a larger say on why, whether, and how new translated texts appear in the target environment.

Keywords: *Cognitive approaches, relevance Theory, semiotics and translation, status of translators.*

1. Intentions

I will share a concern to set this paper in motion. It sometimes seems to me that a pestilence has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty – that is, the use of words. It is a plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous, and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness, extinguishing the spark that shoots out from the collision of words and new circumstances.

The two sentences after ‘It sometimes seems to me’ are a comment to a danger of the digital age; a loss of exactitude. As you were reading them, you attributed the comment to the person referred to by the pronoun *me*. Because there is no indication to the contrary – and this is not fiction – you probably inferred that I, Ubaldo Stecconi, am such person. At the same time, you may have suspected the passage was too good to be true. “How can Ubaldo write this well”, you may have wondered. You would have been right. In fact, the two sentences are from Patrick Creagh’s translation of the last manuscript written by Italo Calvino before he passed away. The opening paragraph was an experiment.



Here are Calvino's original passage and its translation in canonical format:

Alle volte mi sembra che un'epidemia pestilenziale abbia colpito l'umanità nella facoltà che più la caratterizza, cioè l'uso della parola, una peste del linguaggio che si manifesta come perdita di forza conoscitiva e di immediatezza, come automatismo che tende a livellare l'espressione sulle formule più generiche, anonime, astratte, a diluire i significati, a smussare le punte espressive, a spegnere ogni scintilla che sprizzi dallo scontro delle parole con nuove circostanze (Calvino 1988a: 58).

It sometimes seems to me that a pestilence has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty – that is, the use of words. It is a plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous, and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness, extinguishing the spark that shoots out from the collision of words and new circumstances. (Calvino 1988b: 56).

Now that you know you were reading a translation, you will no longer attribute the opening words and thoughts to me. But to whom can you attribute the intention to utter and share those bitter remarks: to Creagh or Calvino? More generally, what happens when an audience interprets translated communication? We know that at least two people are behind the text – a translator and an author – so can we attribute intentions to both?²

The question is fraught with difficulties, starting with what we may mean by 'intentions'. The most comprehensive and compelling account I know is given in Relevance theory. Here is how its founders describe their core research strategy:

Relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in detail one of Grice's central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions [...]. In developing this claim, Grice laid the foundations for an inferential model of communication, an alternative to the classical code model (Sperber and Wilson 2004: 607).

Intentions and inference are central to Relevance theory, which draws on people's ability to make inferences on the basis of signs³ produced by a communicator. In relevance-theoretic terms, it all starts with a communicator who intends to convey information to an audience. To do so, the communicator produces a sign designed to alter the cognitive environment of their audience in certain ways. Thanks to this stimulus, the audience will recognise the speaker's intention to communicate and will identify the information to be interpreted. In this sense, the stimulus is ostensive: ie, it results from a behaviour that would be unexplainable if it were not a signal to communicate. In essence, communicators give evidence that they want the

² 'Author' and 'translator' are nothing more than convenient labels here. Some non-translated texts are the product of teamwork and we know that translated texts typically involve teams including project managers, translators proper, revisors, etc. I will continue to use the terms as *partes pro toto*.

³ I will use 'sign' as a superordinate term for all verbal and nonverbal communication, including utterances, written texts, winks, hand gestures, etc.



audience to make a certain inference. The audience need only attribute two intentions to the communicator: an informative intention and a communicative intention. Informative intention is “[t]he intention to inform the audience of something” (Sperber and Wilson 2004: 611). Communicative intention involves “[making] it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intention” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 61, full discussion at pages 46–64). In successful communication we infer information and meaning from signs that modify our cognitive horizons. When we recognise these signs as ostensive stimuli, we use the evidence provided by them to attribute beliefs and desires to the communicator – ie, we engage in mind-reading. “Recognising these two intentions requires theory of mind abilities – ie, being able to attribute mental states to other individuals” (Padilla Cruz 2016:1).

2. Intentions and translating

How does all this play out in translating? First, we have to agree that translating is a form of sign production, or semiosis, in its own right, distinct from other forms of communication behaviour. Following the theory of signs of Charles S. Peirce (cf. Peirce 1992–1998 and 1931–1958), I have argued that it is possible to identify translating as a specific form of sign-action; we can call it translation semiosis or T-semiosis for short. More accurately, “it is possible to state the logico-semiotic conditions of translation – the conditions that set it apart from non-translation. These are *similarity, difference and mediation*” (Stecconi 2009: 262. See Stecconi 2010 and 2004 for a fuller treatment). Peircean semiotics and Relevance theory overlap in one important respect: both move from inference. This is crucial for the present paper, because “[d]escribing translating as a necessarily inferential form of sign-action brings to the fore translator’s creativity and agency” (Stecconi 2018: 93). If there exists a specific form of semiosis for translation, it follows that translating is a deliberate and fully fledged act of communication. As such, T-semiosis gives evidence of beliefs and desires that can be attributed to (at least) two minds at the same time: the source author’s and the translator’s. The next step is finding out who is responsible for what in T-semiosis and to what degree.

2.1. Reading the translator’s mind

I will argue that three states of mind can be generally inferred from the verbal and nonverbal signs that reach us as products of T-semiosis: a desire to play *interpretes*, certain motives behind individual translation projects, and strategies to respond to historically and culturally determined norms that regulate T-semiosis.

The target audience can attribute to all translators the desire to make source signs accessible or more accessible to them. I will call this the desire to play *interpretes*. *Interpres* is a Latin term of uncertain etymology used to denote translators (*inter-pres* can be either ‘between parties’ or ‘between prices’, cf. Folena 1991). I chose it because it also meant ‘middleman, negoti-



ator, and broker', suggesting that all translators act like mediators who want to close a deal between buyer and seller. *Interpres* highlights translators' position as focus points of the negotiation that T-semiosis always involves (cf. Eco 2003a, b).

The *interpres* intention is an abstract notion that applies to T-semiosis in general, but it must be embodied in actual acts of translating to manifest itself. Every translation project has its own motivations. So, the audience can use translations, paratext and collateral information to attribute a second set of particular intentions to the translator. I will call these the **motives** for a T-semiosis event (cf. Toury 1986: 1116 for a similar view). For example, the audience may wonder why those responsible for the translation event thought that this particular text would be worth translating and why they would expect that introducing the new text in the target environment would be worth the effort. They may ask themselves such questions as: Why this text and not another? Why was it done here and not elsewhere? Why now and not at another time?

Finally, one can read the mind of a translator focussing on textual and other evidence to find out *how* T-semiosis was used to negotiate the differences between the source and target sides. I would call this a translator's **strategy**. In most cases, this is for fairly sophisticated audiences. One should be familiar with source and target contextual implications, the two sign systems, issues and topics as they are represented in the signs that have been the object of T-semiosis, etc. This kind of audience is very small but fairly influential. For instance, it includes translation students, critics, and scholars. In publishing houses, localisation firms, and multilingual institutions it would include revisers, managers and other figures who have a say on how translators should go about their business. When this audience includes the source author the story becomes interesting. You may have the relaxed attitude Umberto Eco recorded in many of his writings on translation (eg. Eco 2001, 2003b) in which he related the open dialogue and cooperation he established with his translators. Or you may have terrifying accounts like the one Milan Kundera included as a preface to the 'definitive' version of his novel *The Joke* in English (Kundera 1992).

Paratextual information may help us infer a translator's strategy. The most famous such paratext must be Cicero's *De optimo genere oratorum*, which is a preface to his translation of two Greek speeches. In it, Cicero included indications that allow us to reconstruct both his motives and his strategy (and he actually called himself an *interpres*). Rita Copeland identified his motives in the context of a rhetorical debate (Copeland 1991, esp. 9–36). As to his strategy, his famous statement juxtaposing the styles of translators and orators is exactly what I mean by a translator's strategy. When Cicero said that he had weighed words as opposed to counting them, he gave us a penetrating trope to describe his translation strategy.

One can attribute these three states of mind to whoever is actively engaged in T-semiosis. A desire to play *interpres* is a precondition for anyone who wants to do T-semiosis; motives factually correspond to translation events; and successful strategies tend to become translatorial habits. These states of mind should be regarded as three parts of a single continuum. An



exclusive focus on strategies, for instance, would produce incomplete accounts. Also, if one would only look at motives, it would be difficult to tell translations from non translations. People may legitimately wonder ‘why this text and not another?’, ‘why here and not elsewhere?’, and ‘why now and not at another time?’ also when a new novel is published. In sum, what counts in T-semiosis is the *interpre*-motives-strategy triad. It is the series, and not its parts, that helps us approach a theory of translatorial agency.

3. Who wills translations into existence?

I have tried to show that translators have informative and communicative intentions of their own and that these specific states of mind can be inferred on the evidence provided by T-semiosis. However, the wish to play *interpre*, a motive like – say – making a poetological statement through translation, or the strategies employed to mediate between source and target environments are necessary but insufficient conditions for T-semiosis to happen. The triad ultimately refers to people’s intentions as they engage in actual translation projects. But these must be willed into existence by sentient agents. The ‘agents of translation’ topic is recurrent in the literature (cf. Milton and Bandia 2009, Buzelin 2011, Khalifa 2014 and Solum 2017). In this final section, I will bring the discussion to a close and add my semiotic approach to the list by advancing a general theory of agency for T-semiosis. T-semiosis occurs close to what we could picture as *folds* in the semiosphere. The most intuitive folds are those created by mutually incomprehensible natural languages. Hermans, for instance, refers to a similar concept as he defines translation “as a verbal representation of an anterior text across an intelligibility barrier” (“The second debate” in Schäffner 1999: 79). But folds need not arise only between natural languages and they need not result only in utter incomprehensibility. “Translation-like operations are also required to overcome other folds in the fabric of communication, such as those created by the participants’ perceptions or attitudes, by semiotic systems other than verbal language, by the materiality of communication channels, etc.” (Stecconi 2004: 10).

T-semiosis occurs across such folds, often involving several people. In fact, there may be quite a crowd around translated communication: communicators and an audience on the source side, translators and other figures in between, more communicators and audiences on the target side, etc. However, not all these figures have the same say on the *birth* of a translation. American viewers watching *Game of Thrones* contributed little to the series being exported to France. Executives from HBO and Orange had much bigger roles in bringing to life this large – impact translation event. I will collectively call ‘agents’ those who are responsible for a new strain of T-semiosis.

I believe agents can be divided in three classes:

1. Agents on the target side that **pull** a text over a fold;
2. Agents on the source side that **push** a text over a fold; and
3. Agents at some intercultural that **shuffle** texts on their own initiative.

The term ‘agent’ is essentially a function and does not necessarily correspond to individuals. Often, it corresponds to large groups; think of a board



of directors that decides to localise a company's website. Very rarely, it corresponds to very small groups. Perhaps self-translation is the best example; such Beckett into French (cf. Steiner 1975: 473), Tagore into English (cf. Sengupta 1990), and Joyce into Italian and French (cf. Eco 2003a: 303–312). I am not presenting the three classes as mutually exclusive. It is altogether possible that the interests of agents from both sides of the fold converge on a single translation project as would be likely – for example – for a corporate website that gets localised because of a trans-national merger.

3.1. Pull

Descriptivist scholars (eg. Toury 1995) stress that translations are facts that belong with the receiving culture. They have a point, especially when it comes to locating where the longing, the need, or the demand for translation arises most often. Translating – when done well and by humans – is expensive, time consuming and hard work. Therefore the wish for translation is likely to turn into reality where one expects a large enough return – monetary or otherwise. When this comes to pass translation projects are pulled by agents that lie on the receiving end of semiotic folds that translation projects are supposed to overcome.

An agent pulling a text-sign across a semiotic fold is the most intuitive setting for T-semiosis. The mind goes to a publisher who attends the Frankfurt Book Fair; eyes a promising foreign title; and secures the translation right for his company. I would like to give you a different story to exemplify what one may mean by 'pull'. I collected it from an official of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) in the year 2000. I had noticed that the portal of the IADB offered a surprising choice of languages: English, French, Portuguese and Spanish – which are the institution's working languages – plus Japanese. I asked Mr Ortiz of the IADB Department of Information Technology to explain the presence of Japanese. This is part of his reply:

Our publication section has a newsletter called *El Bid*, written in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. [...] A few years ago, our organisation opened an office in Tokyo, and we realised that most of our publications were delivered but not read, so this office created a new version in Japanese of *El Bid*. Because the creation of pages in Japanese does not incur in any type of major expense for us other than converting them to PDF files, we have a link to pages in Japanese (Ortiz 2000, personal communication).

Since then, things have changed. The site has been properly localised and structured around the organisation's four main languages (<http://www.iadb.org/>). But back in 2000, the desire to jump over the fold originated in the target environment. I chose this story because it helps us isolate the desire to trigger T-semiosis. The source text *El Bid* was pulled by the Tokyo office from Washington D.C., where the institution has its headquarters, because an agent put themselves in the shoes of a potential target audience and realised that a fold hindered the growth of a strand of semiosis they really cared for.



3.2. *Push*

Not everybody is happy with the idea that translations are *only* facts of the receiving culture. The rise of the localisation industry since the turn of the century tells a different story. I will use the term ‘localisation’ in its most commercial sense: a company’s strategy to make its goods and services available to several locales in the global market in the terms of these locales (cf. Esselink 2000, Pym 2004a and Jiménez-Crespo 2013). Localisation has taken the world of professional translation by storm, especially in the United States at the turn of the century. U.S. companies had been running operations in foreign markets for a long time, but most products would be marketed abroad as made in the U.S.A. With the advent of the internet it became very easy to adapt products and corporate images to foreign locales. More importantly, corporate America was struck by the epiphany that in the new economy serious money could be made by trading in information. But information must reach foreign customers in familiar forms. I will leave the economic and social implications to the specialists; here I intend to present localisation as a large, collective, source-side movement that pushes signs across semiotic folds. Imagine our agent is a manufacturing company based in St. Louis, Missouri that decides to go global. Because of the main markets in which it sells, it would translate its website into French, Italian, German and Spanish; set up sales offices and distribution networks in Europe and Latin America; launch an international advertising campaign; perhaps merge with or acquire foreign companies. Its management sees a globalisation strategy, what I see instead is an attempt at pushing a highly organised set of signs over the edge that delimits the company’s existing semiotic systems. These systems would include at least technology, language, corporate culture, brand management, business practices, standards and regulations and legal systems. Translation—like forms of semiosis are required to negotiate every one of these folds. Some would be traditional — such as translating the verbal content of web pages. Others would not — such as adapting the corporate website’s color palette to match expectations in certain locales or internationalising operations. In this respect, localisation can be considered as a large, coordinated movement willed into being by push agents.

3.3. *Shuffle*

Let me recall that ‘pull’ refers to a desire by a target-side agent while ‘push’ belongs to agents on the source side. How about agents who cannot be clearly located on either side? Of all the spatial metaphors that may give a home to this third category, I will borrow the space Anthony Pym called ‘interculture’. According to Pym, an interculture is a space created by the overlap of at least two cultures and is delimited by two restrictive notions — professional status and ‘secondariness’. These notions are linked as follows: “Sec-



ondariness here defines professional intercultural agents in that the main business of such groups is to work on communication between cultures perceived as primary" (Pym 2004b: 18). Although secondary and subaltern to their principals, intercultural agents do enjoy a relative degree of autonomy that Pym described "as the degree to which they can make decisions concerning cross-cultural communication without explicit authorization from other parties or institutions" (Pym 2004b: 20). In my scheme of things, one manifestation of this autonomy is the power to start a fresh strand of T-semiosis.

Here the illustration will be autobiographical. It's the story of *Balikbayan*, an anthology of Philippine short stories I edited and translated for Italian readers (VV. AA. 1999). It all started in via Veneto, Rome in the spring of 1997, when I overheard a conversation between two ladies. One said "Luisa, did I tell you I hired a Mexican Filipina?" I was shocked. I had been living in Manila for five years then and while I was away 'Filipina' had become synonymous to 'household help' or 'maid' among Italian speakers. My fellow country people were building an image of the Philippines as a place where domestic help came from – an image that still prevents them from forming a broader and fairer idea of the country and its people. On that day in Rome I saw the economic, geo-political and ideological fold rise before my eyes, and I didn't like it a bit. After I returned home in Manila, I began to circulate the story among writers, scholars and intellectuals. During those conversations, someone suggested that I translate Filipino stories and had them published in Italy. This would give evidence "that there are excellent maids in Manila, and excellent writers as well" (Id.: 13, my translation) and this is a feature the city has in common with – say – Lisbon and Rome. So, my desire to poke a hole in the fold took a definite shape in 1997. I spent the next three months collecting and selecting the originals, a couple more to write first drafts, and two years infecting enough people in Italy with the desire to see the book in print. As a proof that the 'intercultural agent' was a collective subject, let me tell you that the acknowledgment page eventually listed fourteen people, including only those 'without whom this book would not have been possible' as the formula goes. Even factoring in poor introspection and weak memory, never for a moment did I have the feeling we were on either side of the fold. Speaking for myself, I am quite convinced I was on both – or neither. I probably reacted to the phrase 'Mexican Filipina' as an Italian (shame, surprise), as a Filipino (rage, resignation), and as a cultural mediator ("what can be done about it?"). Looking for a label for this third and final class of translatorial agency, I propose shuffle. I chose the term because it does not imply any definite sense of direction. In effect, only three years earlier I had been part of the team that brought out *Daydreams and Nightmares*, a selection of Italian short stories for the Philippine market (VV. AA. 1996). The fact that I was an Italian living in Manila was a crucial qualification for the rest of the team. Intercultural agents straddle semiotic folds; source and target are much weaker notions to them.



4. Close

I am aware that projects such as *Balikhayan* make up a very small proportion of all translations actually produced around the world, so why bother with ‘shuffle’ and all that? My answer is that they can help produce useful descriptive and predictive narratives. In a phenomenology of translating, they may take us to neglected places and complete the present discussion of intention and agency. What can we gain from the discussion? Firstly, we can confirm the claim that there is such thing as T-semiosis. Translation events and the texts they produce are communicative acts in themselves and can be legitimately used as evidence of beliefs and desires different from those that can be inferred from nontranslated communication. Secondly, discussions about agency help put translators firmly among communication players. If it is true that a translator rarely determines whether a text will cross a semiotic fold, it is equally true that in principle nothing prevents translators from bringing their *interpretes* desires, their motives, and their strategies all the way up to a project’s conception and design stages – and make it count. As Theo Hermans once wrote to me “all you need is i) something that is available for translation, ii) an assumed benefit; and iii) an enabler that knows how to let the text-sign grow across the fold (ie, an agent with relevant expertise)” (Hermans 2005, private communication). Translators have all it takes to become these professional enablers; they can and should have a say on why, whether, and how translations are made. If this is almost never the case, it is because people – including translators themselves – are not aware of what translators can do. Or perhaps this is almost never the case because of a deliberate down-playing of translation. Either way, I hope the present study will help researchers and practitioners recognise this state of affairs and fight back.

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КАК ПЕРЕВОДЫ ОБРЕТАЮТ СУЩЕСТВОВАНИЕ

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Создание текста перевода может быть инициировано тремя способами. Иногда перевод осуществляется по инициативе реципиента (*pull mode*), что интуитивно кажется очевидным. Например, издательский дом принимает решение о переводе нового романа. Инициатива инвестировать в переводческий проект практически полностью зависит от реципиента перевода и будущего спроса на текст. Примером второго типа инициативы (*push mode*) может выступить компания, локализирующая свой веб-сайт для иностранных рынков. В данном случае инициатива по созданию текста перевода принадлежит самой компании. Третий тип (*shuffle*) соответствует тем редким случаям, в которых инициатива по созданию текста перевода не принадлежит ни одной из указанных сторон. Перевод осуществляется с целью преодоления семиотических барьеров, будучи вызванным к жизни возможностью или необходимостью. Особое внимание в статье уделено статусу переводчика как активному участнику коммуникации. В реальной жизни переводчики редко имеют право голоса в инициировании перевода. Однако ничто не мешает им открыто выражать свое мнение, говорить о мотивах и стратегиях создания текста перевода. Переводчики могут и должны играть более активную роль в инициировании переводов, в определении того, как и какие тексты появляются и функционируют в принимающей среде.

Ключевые слова: когнитивные подходы, теория релевантности, семиотика и перевод, статус переводчика.

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