Translation and Ideology

Semiosis as translation

Victoria Welby describes man's capacity for signification in terms of "translative thinking," an automatic process "in which everything suggests or reminds us of something else" (Welby 1983:34). Translated into semiotic terms we could say that translative thinking is a semiosic process in which something stands for something else, in which different sign systems are related, in which one sign is more fully developed, enriched, criticized, put at a distance, placed between inverted commas, parodied or simply imitated, and, in any case, interpreted in terms of another sign. Translation is a method of investigation and discovery, says Welby, of verification and acquisition of knowledge and development of critical consciousness:

As language involves both unity and distinction (the one actually and the other implicitly), language must itself be recognised 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. (1983:150)

We could develop such intuitions in the light of more recent results of studies in language theory and the science of signs generally and state that semiosis, that is, the situation in which something functions as a sign, cannot subsist without translation for semiosis *is* a translation-interpretation process. The role of translation is fundamental in the constitution itself of the sign, both verbal and nonverbal, in the determination itself of meaning. As observed by Ponzio (1981) in a paper entitled "Polisemia e traduzione," the intimate connection between signs and translation emerges when we set the category of replaceability as a necessary condition of signness, when the sign is considered not only as something that replaces something else, but that may also in its turn be replaced by something else. Consequently, meaning is defined as a class of verbal and nonverbal sign materials in which these materials may replace each other reciprocally, in which, that is, an interpretant sign may act as a possible alternative to a previous less developed interpreted sign. In other words, as Charles S. Peirce teaches us, a sign subsists thanks to another sign acting as its interpretant, so that its meaning is its translation into some further sign. It subsists only in relations of reciprocal translation and substitution among signs with respect to which the original sign is never given autonomously and antecedently.

In the citation above Welby explicitly states that "while language itself is a symbolic system its method is mainly pictorial" (Welby 1983: 38). Through recourse to Peirce's most basic tripartition of signness into symbolicity or conventionality, indexicality and iconicity (cf. *CP* 2.247-2.249; also letter of Oct. 12, 1904 from Peirce to Welby, in Hardwick 1977: 22-25), we could "translate" or "reword" this sentence as follows: "if verbal language itself is a conventional system its method is mainly iconic." In other words full recognition is given to the role of iconicity in the development and multiplication of signifying processes, to the iconic relation of hypothetical similarity in verbal language

Reference here to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the interpretation of Ponzio (cf. 1991a: 185-201) is instructive. Wittgenstein distinguishes between names and propositions: the relation between names or "simple signs" used in the proposition, Welby's "bare signs", and their objects or meanings, is of the conventional type. In fact, being arbitrary, the rule or code relating the sign to the object to which it refers cannot be discovered simply by guessing: sign

arbitrariness is a category proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his book of 1916 to characterize certain types of signs–verbal signs, or words taken singly, and nonverbal signals. On the other hand, the relation between whole propositions or "propositional signs," Welby's "pictorial symbol" and "representative action," and what they signify, their interpretant, is a relation of similarity, that is, of the iconic type. Wittgenstein's "proposition," like Welby's "pictorial symbol" and "representative action," are complete signifying units with a high potential for semiotic resonance.

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein develops the role of situational context in the completion of the proposition's representative and therefore signifying function. Thus contextualized, the "proposition" is transformed into the "utterance" as understood especially by Mikhail Bakhin who made a thorough analysis of this particular category with reference to the Russian word *vyskazyvanie* (cf. Bakhtin 1986b; Voloshinov 1973; 1987). The utterance, when dominated by an iconic relation between the interpretant sign and the interpreted sign is, as Bakhtin demonstrated, a dialogic relation of "answering comprehension" with a lesser or higher degree of alterity. Accordingly, it is endowed with a varying capacity for criticism, cognitive innovation, and creativity.

In relation to Wittgenstein, Ponzio (1991a: 198-199) makes the following observation:

Even though propositions are also no doubt conventional-symbolic, they are based fundamentally on the relation of representation, that is, on the iconic relation and, similarly to Peirce's "diagrams," this relation is of the proportional or structural type. Consequently, in Wittgenstein's view, the proposition is a logical picture.

To know a proposition, says Wittgenstein, means to know the situation it represents; furthermore, comprehension of a proposition does not require that its sense be explained, for "a proposition shows its sense" (4.022). Consequently, while "the meanings of simple signs (words) must be explained", "with propositions [...] we make ourselves understood" (4.026). The importance of Wittgenstein's picture theory for a better understanding of the processes of language production and, by extension, of signification generally, is commented by Ponzio (*ibid*.: 199) with words we could easily apply to Welby:

[...] as a logical picture, representation tells of the mechanism that produces propositions and explains how language, through propositional signs, is able to escape the pure and simple convention of names, which would render [language] altogether repetitive. The question invests the mechanism of the production and development of thought given that "a logical picture of the facts is the thought" and that "a thought is a proposition with a sense" [Ponzio is here referring to propositions 3 and 4 of the *Tractatus*].

For both Welby and Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* language analysis must not merely limit itself to the surface description of signifying phenomena, of language and thought, but must account for the production processes of such phenomena. From this point of view an ideal connection can be signaled with Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921-1985) and his notions of "common speech", "linguistic work" and, in a more mature phase of his theoretical elaborations, "social reproduction" (cf. Rossi-Landi 1985, 1992b, 1998).

The work of Welby, Wittgenstein, Bakhtin and above all Peirce helps account for the more complex levels of signification, expression and communication–and not in their reduced form to the mere function of information and message exchange. Each of these scholars calls our attention to the importance in communication of iconic representation and alterity, of establishing relations among signs beyond systemic restrictions. Such an orientation also helps to highlight the dialectic nature of ongoing interpretive-translative interactive processes between "unity and disparateness", as Welby says in the citation above, between centripetal forces and centrifugal forces operating in language, as Bakhtin would say (1975, Eng. trans., 1981: 272), between centralization and decentralization,

monolingualism and plurilingualism, monologism and polylogism, identity and alterity. Thanks to such dialectic, knowledge and truth are never given once and for all, but rather are open to continual investigation and modification in a process of constant renewal and adaptation to ever new communicative requirements, at the level of simple everyday exchange as well.

We shall now consider Roman Jakobson's analysis of translation in the light of Peirce's subdivision of signs into symbols, indexes and icons. Any one given sign (identifiable as such only by abstracting from real semiosic processes for the sake of analysis) is the product of dialectic interaction, among other things, between conventionality, indexicality and iconicity even if one of these aspects prevails in a given sign situation. By considering this Peircean tripartition in conjunction with the analysis of translative-interpretive processes as proposed by Jakobson, we obtain a more adequate specification of the relation between translation and signs and a more precise, and yet broader characterization of the interpretive-translative processes constituting and proliferating in our semiosphere.

In his paper "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", Jakobson (1971), reflecting on verbal signs, identifies three different translative (or interpretive) modalities: 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. Each of these translative-interpretive modalities presents a relative predominance of conventionality, indexicality or iconicity, a relative predominance of the symbol, index or icon in the relation between a sign and its interpretant. Furthermore, these three types of translation are identified by Jakobson as always being interrelated, more or less co-existent with a relative predominance of one or the other. For example, in interlingual translation, for a full understanding of the sense of the object of translation and its adequate rendition in the "target" language, it will also be necessary to continually resort to intralingual translation in each of the two languages in question.

When conventionality predominates the relation between a sign and its object (or referent) is established by a code. This occurs in verbal language and is the kind of relation alluded to by Welby when she says that "[verbal] language [..] is a symbolic system". We know that to decipher the linguistic elements of a text, reference to the code is an inevitable, especially in the initial phase. At this level distancing in translative processes between interpretant signs and interpreted signs is minimal, the mere activity of recognition and identification, of course, being of first importance.

Moreover, relations of a compulsory nature also intervene between signs and their interpretants. As such this relation takes on the aspect of indexicality in Peirce's sense. To mechanical necessity a bilingual dictionary adds the relation of contiguity–proper to the index, says Peirce, jointly with causality– between the sign and its interpretant, when it places the vocable and its equivalent(s) in the target language alongside each other. Therefore, interlingual translative processes present indexicality in addition to mere conventionality. It is in this perspective that we may read Wittgenstein's observation on translation from the *Tractatus*:

When translating one language into another, we do not proceed by translating each proposition of the one into a proposition of the other, but merely by translating the constituents of propositions. (Wittgenstein 1961, 4.025)

Indexicality refers to the compulsory nature of the relation between a sign and its object, a relation regulated by the dynamics of cause and effect, of spatio-temporal necessary contiguity, pre-existent to interpretation. When indexicality predominates translation-interpretation processes simply evidence correspondences where they already exist. The degree of creative work involved is minimal.

Bakhtin, who envisages communication and social intercourse in terms of dialectic and dialogic interaction between identity and alterity, introduces another two important categories in his analysis of verbal language and extensible to other sign systems as well: "theme" (*smysl*) and "meaning" (*znacenie*), or if we prefer, "actual sense" and "abstract sense" (Bakhtin-Volosinov 1973: 106). The second term in these pairs covers all that which is identical, reproducible and immediately recognizable each time the utterance is repeated–it concerns the meaning of linguistic elements, e.g. phonemes and monemes, forming the utterance. "Meaning" thus intended corresponds to signality rather than to signness, to the "interpretant of identification," rather than to the "interpretant of answering comprehension," to "plain meaning," rather than to plurivocal meaning, to translation processes (and phases) where the degree of dialogicality and distance regulating the connection between interpretant sign and interpreted sign is minimal. "Theme," instead, refers to all that which is original and unreproducible in an utterance, to its overall sense, signifying import and evaluative orientation as such aspects emerge in a given instance of communicative interaction. This category accounts for communication and signifying processes in terms of answering comprehension, dialectic-dialogic response, multiaccentuality–it concerns translation-interpretation processes capable of qualitative jumps in knowledge and perception, of amplifying the semantic polyvalency of discourse, of opening new ideological horizons. As says Bakhtin:

Theme is a complex, dynamic system of signs that attempts to be adequate to a given instance of generative process. There is reaction by the consciousness in its generative process to the generative process of existence. Meaning is the technical apparatus for the implementation of theme. (*ibid.*: 100)

In interlingual translation, iconicity, or the iconic relation between a sign and its interpretant, is present as well. Indeed, this relation is fundamental for without it the sense of discourse could not be rendered, to the point that if translation processes remain at the level of conventionality and indexicality, the translator ends in failure. When in relation to translative-interpretive processes Welby states so simply and clearly that the method of language is pictorial, she is evidencing a component of verbal signs irreducible to indexicality or to conventionality. The translator must necessarily deal with this component by moving beyond the conventions and obligations of the dictionary and entering the live dialogue among national languages, among languages internal to a given national language, among verbal signs and nonverbal signs. The presence of iconicity in interaction between interpretant signs and interpreted signs in translative processes involves dialogism and alterity to a smaller or greater degree.

Iconicity implies that the relation between a sign and its object is not wholly established by rules and a code, as in the case of symbols, does not preexist with respect to the code, as in the case of indexes, but rather is invented freely and creatively by the interpretant. The interpreter, in our case, the translator, must inevitably keep account of this given his/her task of rendering the original interpretant with the interpretant of another language. In the case of icons, the relation between a sign and its object is neither conventional, nor necessary and contiguous, but hypothetical–it corresponds to Bakhtin's "theme," or "actual sense."

Where the relation between a sign and its object, between varying different types of signs, is regulated by the iconic relation of similarity, affinity and attraction, as Peirce would say (cf. 1923), ongoing interpretive-translative processes forming the signifying and cognitive universe are founded on dialogism, alterity, polyphony, polylogism and plurilingualism–all essential properties of language which render such things as critical awareness, experimentation, innovation, and creativity possible.

What has been said à propos interlingual translation is also valid for intralingual and intersemiotic translation. It has also been observed that interlingual translation implies the other two types of translation. Hence the translative process always involves a process of interaction between the three

types of sign-interpretant relation as identified by Peirce and the three modalities of translation as identified by Jakobson.

Meanings subsist and flourish in translation processes regulated by the relation between identity and alterity in a polylogic and plurilingualistic context, internal and external to a single language. In this theoretical framework as it is delineated by interpretation semiotics, and especially thanks to contributions from Bakhtinian theory, communication is confirmed as a primary function of human language, but with an important specification: communication as understood not in terms of its potential for message transmission, but of the unspoken, the unsaid, its capacity for vagueness, ambiguity, inscrutability, concealment, reticence, allusion, illusion, implication, simulation, imitation, pretence, semantic pliancy, polysemy, polylogism, plurilingualism, alterity–all of which determine the very possibility of communicative interaction.

Concrete live speech is possible thanks to continual translative processes both on the side of production and of interpretation in the passage from one code (linked to class, linguistic register, idiolect, genre, etc.) to another, from one language to another, from one communicative context to another. And fundamental requisite for the success of communication-translation processes is "answering comprehension". This implies speaker ability to adapt and reformulate one's own language to suit the language of one's interlocutors, to reflect metalinguistically on one's own language in the effort to develop and specify one's meaning through recourse to interpretants from the language of others, as well as the ability to reflect metalinguistically on the language of others in order to specify their meaning in terms of interpretants from one's own language. "Active or answering comprehension" concerns the "theme" or "actual sense" of an utterance. It is achieved thanks to dialogic relations among different languages and codes which permit operations of rewording, transposition, and transmutation in the deferral among interpretants as they substitute each other without ever perfectly coinciding.

Far from being a compact, unitary and monolithic phenomenon, human language may be described as a live signifying process, constantly renewing itself through the generation of different idioms, discourses, logics and viewpoints thanks to a predominant tendency toward decentralization and otherness. Plurilingualism and polylogism, both internal and external to a single language, ensue from the potential in human language for distancing, for the expression of viewpoints that are other, for different and other worldviews: indeed human language develops as a function of this very potential.

Remembering the words of George Steiner (1975), language thus intended is the main instrument through which man can refuse the world as it is. Each single language presents its own interpretation of reality, but man discovers the pleasure of freedom thanks to otherness inherent in language and therefore to the possibility of translating, of moving across different languages and cultures. From this viewpoint, thanks to the propensity inherent in man for "the play of musement", language, as observed by Thomas A. Sebeok (1981), not only concerns the real world, but accounts for the possibility of generating an infinite number of possible worlds.

Translation and ideology

The verbal sign is an ideological sign par excellence, says Bakhtin. As an ideological phenomenon it refracts historico-social reality. The verbal sign has an ideological function, an ideological materiality. It refracts ideologically the social reality in which it is produced and used. Insofar as it is ideological, the verbal sign may be characterized as a historico-social event.

Though nonverbal signs contribute toward shaping reality, the modelling influence of verbal signs is far greater. Reality as we experience it is organized verbally–a conviction at the basis of extreme forms of linguistic relativity. Supporters of this theory maintain that the structure of a given language wholly determines a language user's thoughts and worldview as well as his nonverbal behavior, so that, echoing Wittgenstein (1953), we could say that our world is the language we speak. For his part, by contrast with the idealism of linguistic relativity, with opposing neopositivist stances and the conception of language, thought and reality as separate though variously interacting entities, Rossi-Landi stresses the dialectic interaction between thought, language and the economic, social and cultural context 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: 70)

So-called "semantico-ideological pliancy" characterizes the verbal sign and is expressed in its possibility of transferring or transmuting into varying ideological fields whereby acquiring new meanings and functions. The plurivocality, ambivalence, ambiguity and semantico-ideological pliancy of the verbal sign is given in its translatability into other verbal interpretant signs belonging to different semantic classes, that have different meanings.

The debate on the translation of Karl Marx's (1818-1883) *Theses on Feuerbach* is now worth remembering in the light of our discussion of the relation between semiotics, ideology and translation theory. Our reference is to the debate between Adam Schaff and Lucien Sève published in the French journal *L'homme et la Société,* in 1971 and 1972, concerning the official French translations of Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach. This debate involved, directly or indirectly, numerous French intellectuals (apart from Schaff and Sève, Louis Althusser, Auguste Cornu, Roger Garaudy), as well as the international community at large with a concern for Marxist theory. Thanks to Augusto Ponzio (1975b) who has collected contributions in the volume, *Marxismo e umanesimo*, this debate which also extends to Polish and Russian, has also been made available in Italian.

Even though this issue may seem over specialized and therefore of restricted interest, in reality its effect on interpretation of Marxist theory generally has been determining–many scholars believe that the *Theses on Feuerbach* are the key to Marx's thought system even if interpreted differently because of their elliptical and metaphorical nature. For our specific concerns in the present context, this particular issue is helpful in highlighting the close relation between translation and ideology: to translate in one way rather than in another, as in the case of this text by Marx, is full of ideological implications. The solution to this particular controversy is full of consequences at a philological, philosophical and political level as well as being crucial in establishing the validity of Seve's overall interpretation of Marxism and of his criticism of existentialism, structuralism, Althusser's theoretical anti- humanism, etc.

Sève believes that Schaff's translation of Marx's sixth thesis is wrong, the result of his misinterpretation of marxism, of reading Marx in a humanistic-speculative key, with consequences at the political level as well. The whole debate ultimately concerns the relation between Marxism and humanism: interpretation of thesis VI reflects one's general attitude to relations between Marxism and humanism, ideology and science, scientific socialism and Marxist humanism, Marx's youthful writings and his mature works, all of which are connected with the meaning and value of Marxism taken as a whole (cf. Ponzio 1975b:6). And though this debate centres around the translation and interpretation of just a few expressions in the *Theses*, as Schaff observes, it extends beyond "words" and can only be fully understood by looking "behind the screen," by inquiring into

the history of left-wing political movements, and by relating the consequences of this debate to the "controversy on the humanistic contents of socialism, the controversy on the means of overcoming the effects and consequences of Stalinism in the Communist movement, etc." (Schaff in Ponzio 1975b: 114).

The immediate object of discussion concerns the translation of a number of propositions in *Theses on Feuerbach*, all of which contain the German word "*Wesen*" as in the key expression in thesis VI "*das menschliche Wesen*". Schaff contends that recurrent translation of this expression with "the essence of man," generally consolidated by tradition, is wrong. The German word "*Wesen*" is ambiguous: it counts up to eleven distinct groups of meanings, each with numerous semantic nuances. Two of these meanings are relevant in relation to the debate in question and correspond, respectively, to the Latin "*ens*" and "*essentia*", English "being" and "essence", French "*être*" and "*essence*", Italian "*essere*" and "*essenza*", intended as "living being" on one hand, and "essence of things", "that which is essential" as opposed to incidental, on the other. None of these languages have a term–single and ambiguous–corresponding to the German "*Wesen*", though this word does have an equivalent for polysemantism and plurivocality in the Russian "*sochtchestwo*", and in the Polish "*istota*". Consequently by contrast with Russian and Polish which have an equivalent to the German "*Wesen*", when translating into French, English or Italian, for example, the translator must choose from its varying meanings: for appropriate rendition in the target language the meaning and sense of the word "*Wesen*" must be identified each time it occurs in a different context.

Things get even more complicated if we consider that there exist two different and even contrasting official French translations of the *Theses*: the expression we are describing, "*das menschliche Wesen*", is rendered either as "*l'essence humaine*" (*Œuvres completes de Karl Marx*, A. Costes, ed., 1937) or as "*l'être humain*" (*Œuvres choisies de Marx-Engels*, Editions du Progrès, Moscow, 1946). These different translations bear different philosophical implications given that Marx is accordingly interpreted as discussing either the "essence of man" or the concrete "human being," that is, the real human individual defined in his relations not only with nature but also with society of which, insofar as he is a social being, he is the product.

It should be observed that most official translations of *Theses on Feuerbach* in varying languages are from the original Russian translation. Strangely enough, the Russian translator Plechanov, in 1892, chose to render the German "*Wesen*" by the unambiguous Russian word "*suschtschnost*" (that is, "*essence*", "*Wesenheit*"), rather than by "*suschtschestwo*" which, similarly to the Polish "*istota*", has multiple meanings and is consequently closer to the German original. Having made this particular lexical choice, the Russian translator–an authority, observes Schaff–was in fact to heavily condition this text's future philosophical and political interpretations.

In French, as in Italian and English, the same word cannot be used indifferently as in the case of "*Wesen*", "*istota*", "*suschtschestwo*" and influenced by the original Russian translation, "*Wesen*" is translated prevalently with the equivalents of "*essentia*", a solution refused by Schaff who favors the equivalents of "*ens*". He reaches this decision by combining the results of grammatical analysis with analysis of the philosophical context, averring that the sense of such an ambiguous term as "*Wesen*" can be established by appealing to the rules of German syntax.

If the expression "*das Wesen*" is followed by a noun in the genitive, it means "essence". Therefore, "*das Wesen des Christentums*", which is also the title of a work by Feuerbach, means "the essence of Christianity", and correspondingly "*das Wesen desReligion*" means "the essence of religion", "*das Wesen des Menschen*", "the essence of man". "*Wesen*" followed by "of something" or "of somebody" functions in the sense of "essence". On the other hand, if "*Wesen*" is preceded by a qualifying adjective, it means "being". Therefore, "*das christliche Wesen*" means "the christian

being," "*das religiose Wesen*" means "the religious being", "das menschliche Wesen", "the human being". In all these cases, as syntax tells us, we are dealing with a "being" that is respectively Christian, religious, human.

In the light of the connection not only between "sign" and "ideology", but between "sense" and "ideology", it would seem that the problem of ideology must necessarily be taken into consideration in a semiotic approach to translation. The task of translation can only be properly accomplished if the translator grasps and expresses the "sense" of a text: to remain at the mere level of "meaning" is not sufficient. Given that sense, as intended above, involves problems of evaluation, orientation, standpoint, and social planning, it is connected with ideology. Consequently, what we wish to underline in this paper is not so much the ideological character of translation as the inevitability of taking into account the problem of sense and therefore of ideology in translation theory (which I believe must necessarily be a semiotics of translation).

It is in this perspective that I have referred to the work of such thinkers as Sapir and Whorf (cf. Petrilli 1992a): their theory of linguistic relativity implies a specific theory of translation and a given ideology which obviously influenced, indeed, is at the basis of their rather limited vision of the very possibility of translation. It should also be mentioned that the theory of linguistic relativity is subtended by a hidden ideology of an ethnic-cultural order, an ideological orientation turned to justifying the various forms of separation and segregation imposed on peoples, Amerindians, speaking different languages from our own, referred to by Sapir and Whorf (cf. Solimini 1974: 98-102, 1991: 30-33). The debate on Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* also stresses how the problem of translation is the problem of correctly interpreting the ideology expressed in a text as well as the problem of the ideological stance that the interpreter-translator chooses to take toward that text. Such issues shed light on the close relation between ideology theory and translation theory viewed in semiotical terms. Expressed differently, my focus on the study of the relation between semiotics, ideology and translation theory is motivated by the fact that for an adequate treatment of the problem of translation we must necessarily consider the problem of the relation between "signification" and "significance", or "semantics" and "pragmatics", or, if we prefer, between "meaning" and "ideological sense".