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L'Association internationale de Sémiotique
Asociación internacional de semiótica
Internationale Vereinigung für Semiotik



NEW
BULGARIAN
UNIVERSITY



Southeast European Center
for Semiotic Studies

NEW SEMIOTICS

Between Tradition and Innovation



12th WORLD CONGRESS OF SEMIOTICS

Sofia 2014 New Bulgarian University

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Editor in Chief

Kristian Bankov

Editors

Ivan Kasabov
Mony Almalech
Borislav Gueorguiev
George Tsonev
Reni Iankova
Dimitar Trendafilov
Ivo Iv. Velinov
Yagodina Manova
Boyka Batchvarova

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INTERPRETATION AND ICONICITY IN THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

Susan Petrilli

University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Italy
susan.petrilli@gmail.com

Augusto Ponzio

University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Italy
augustoponzio@libero.it

Abstract

Translation is a structural part of modelling devices, the very condition even for creativity, innovation, simulation, ultimately for what with Peirce we may indicate as the “play of muse-ment” in the human world. Iconicity, as amply demonstrated by Peirce, carries out a decisive role in all such processes.

Canonical translation is based on the code, convention, authority, authoriality, respect. Contrary to such an orientation, the task of the translator is not to give the impression that the translation is not a translation, but rather to convey the uniqueness, the specificity of the interpretant, its unrepeatability, the sense of its untranslatability, that is, its signifying materiality, absolute otherness. Translation is construed in the specificity of the signifier and in this sense is “by the letter”. As such the translation procedure is dominated by iconicity whose signifying value is an “effect” of language provoked by the “original”, by virtue of what Peirce calls its quality.

1. Theoretical perspectives

We wish to begin by thanking Dinda L. Gorfée not only for inviting us to her round table “From Translation to Semio-Translation: Origins, Evolution, and Metamorphoses,” at the 12th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in Sofia, 2014, but also for proposing that we co-organize and chair it together. As it turned out, just a few days before the event Dinda Gorfée most regrettably informed us that she would not be able to attend. So we had to manage without her. All the same we were able to celebrate her work as a pioneer in

studies on translation developed in interdisciplinary terms at the intersection between semiotics and consolidated traditions in the field of studies on translation theory and practice. With her “semio-translation,” an expression she introduced in 1994 to evidence the live, dynamical character of the translational process, Gorlée demonstrates how the interrelation among signs is not only an inevitable fact, but also the aim, the goal in all human semioses, in the sense of committing to the enhancement and increment of such interrelation. In fact, the relation between sign and translation is inscribed in the interpretive web of semiosis generally, to the point that we can make the claim that all signs are in translation or they would lose their character as signs. Indeed, the very condition of possibility of the sign to subsist as a sign, for it to be this sign here, is its capacity for referral and translation into another sign, for deferral from one sign to the next in the open-ended and dynamic chain of semiosis. Dinda Gorlée has authored a series of groundbreaking publications in the field including, in addition to numerous essays and edited volumes, the epochal books, *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation: With Special Reference to the Semiotics of Charles S. Peirce*, 1994, *On Translating Signs: Exploring Text and Semio-Translation*, 2004, *Wittgenstein in Translation. Exploring Semiotic Signatures*, 2012, and most recently, the forthcoming book, *From Translation to Transduction: The Glassy Essence of Intersemiosis*.

Our own analysis of the relation between signs and translation in this paper is focused on the question of iconicity in the framework of our understanding of “global semiotics” (Thomas Sebeok) and “interpretation semiotics” (Charles Peirce, Mikhail Bakhtin), which presupposes the critique of “decodification semiotics” (semiotics understood as “semiology” – a distorted derivation from the Saussurean approach to signs and semiosis). Keeping account of the Peircean distinction between icon, index, and symbol, we evidence the role of iconicity – of central importance in semiotic processes both at the lower levels of perception (primary iconism) and at the higher levels of understanding and abductive inference – and we do so in relation to the problem of translation. Translation contributes to a better understanding of signs, meaning and communication and is clearly not only a topic of semiotic inquiry, but a structural attitude, a method and orientation in semiotic research.

Translation plays a decisive role in the study of signs from a transdisciplinary perspective. More specifically, translation is pivotal in the interpretive approach to the sign where meaning is described as flourishing in translational processes thanks to another sign, its interpretant. Signs becoming other signs, other than what they were becoming, are signs in the process of translation (Floyd Merrell). Semiotics understood as global semiotics focuses on translation processes interconnecting different sign systems and different languages, which also implies the language of different fields and disciplines, ordinary and specialized languages. Semiotic inquiry translates signs and sign systems into its own language, which also means to invent “signs to talk about signs”, as recites the title of an essay by Augusto Ponzio (1990).

In the language of semiotics, abductive inference is grounded in the iconic relation among different sign processes and objects. In other words, interpretation and understanding achieved through abduction proceed on the basis of relations of similarity. From this point of view, the iconic sign is mostly involved when a question of semiosis in the human world is the metaphor (*traslatum*). Moreover, translation is a structural part of the human modelling device and is the very condition even for what with Peirce we may indicate as the “play of musement” in the human world (CP 6.460–465, 486; Sebeok 1981; cf. Petrilli 2014a: 15.4). As demonstrated by Peirce, iconicity carries out a decisive role in all such processes.

Another inevitable point of reference in our approach to translation theory is Roman Jakobson’s tripartite analysis of translative processes into 1) intralingual translation, or rewording; 2) interlingual translation, or translation proper; 3) intersemiotic translation, or transmutation. We associate this triad to Peirce’s tripartition of signs into symbols, indexes and icons. Any given

sign is the product of the dialectic-dialogic interaction among conventionality, indexicality and iconicity in sign situations in which one of these aspects prevails over the others. By relating Jakobson's triad to Peirce's we obtain a more adequate specification of the relation between translation and signs, and a broader yet more precise characterization of the interpretive-translative processes that constitute our semiosphere and proliferate in it.

In the sphere of interlingual translation with special reference to literary translation, another issue that emerges in all its importance concerns the task of the translator. This issue presupposes the concepts we have hinted at above and constitutes the main focus of the present paper.

2. Dialogic otherness and translation

From a semiotic perspective the text is made of sign material. This means to say that the text in itself is already a translation, an interpretation. Translation across languages is a specific case of translation across sign systems, internally and externally to the same historical-natural language. But translation across languages is possible on the basis of *language* understood as a *modelling device*. Language as modelling is an a-priori and condition for language as communication, for *verbal language* which instead arises originally for the sake of *communication* and thanks to the predominance of iconicity in the relation among signs.

A literary translation, if successful, is faithful to the original in terms of *creativity* and *interpretation*, and is never a mere imitation or repetition. As such the translation establishes a relation of *otherness* (or *alterity*) with the source text. The greater the distance in terms of *dialogic otherness* between two texts, the greater the possibility of artistic re-interpretation through another interpretant sign in the potentially infinite semiotic chain of deferrals from one sign to the next, of which the so-called "original" is a part. From the perspective of Peirce's general sign theory and triad that distinguishes between icon, index and symbol, the relation between source text and target text in a successful translation is dominated by iconicity. A translation is at once similar and dissimilar, the "same other"; this is the paradox of translation. Therefore, a text is at once translatable and untranslatable; the paradox of language (cf. Petrilli 2009; 2010: Ch. 6 and Ch. 8).

3. Similarity and intertextuality in interpretation/translation

Translation involves the question of similarity among signs, and if the question of similarity is central to translation, it is not less important in relation to the text, since this is itself an interpretant sign before becoming an interpreted sign of other interpretants in open-ended reading and translating processes. The relation between the text and that to which it refers presents itself in terms of similarity. The relation of similarity is particularly manifest in the literary text where it emerges in terms of "picturing", "depiction", or "figuration", and not of "imitation", as a mere copy. As Paul Klee has repeatedly pointed out, the text – literary, pictorial, artistic in general, etc. – does not picture or depict the visible (which is what theatrical texts in theatre performances or representations do), but renders the invisible visible.

The question of similarity is central to translation and to literary writing. The relation between the original text and the translating text is a relation of similarity; the literary text itself, and not only its translation, is oriented by the relation of *similarity*. In other words, the literary text relates to "reality", to its referents in terms of similarity, as likely to be credible. But what is to be understood by "similarity", "resemblance", or "likeness"? Similarity is inherent in semiosis, structural to it. Similarity subtends perceptual and logical-cognitive processes involved in categorization, which makes the question "What is similarity?" a crucial one. Similarity can be either regulated by the logic of identity, or by the logic of alterity. In other words, similarity is either oriented by assemblative logic, the logic of aggregation among entities that tend to iden-

tify with each other, on the one hand, or by associative logic, the logic of affinity among entities that are different from each other and relate to each other on the basis of attraction, election, on the other.

Peirce demonstrated that meaning is not in the sign but in the relation among signs, whether these are the signs of a defined system – a code, a *langue* – or of dynamic interpretive processes, passing from one type of sign to another, or from one sign system to another. Interpretation is not mere repetition, literal translation or substitution by synonyms, but rather re-elaboration, and creative reformulation. Thus conceived interpretation-translation is risky in the sense that it does not appeal to a pre-established code, is not guaranteed by a convention of some sort. Indeed, the higher the degree in iconicity, firstness, and originality regulating interpretive-translative processes, the more these processes are capable of fully rendering the meaning of a sign, of developing it to high levels of expressivity. Moreover, sign identity calls for continuous displacement; each time the sign is interpreted-translated it becomes “other”, in fact, is another sign which acts as an interpretant of the preceding sign.

Translation – with special reference to semiosis in verbal language, whether among different languages within the same language family, or among different language families (interlingual translation), or among different idioms within the same language (intralingual translation) – involves the iconic dimension in the relation among signs, which it in turn enhances. This means to enhance the relation of absolute otherness and creativity in the relation between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign, therefore between the source text and the target text as new interpretants develop the meaning of the preceding sign, of the preceding text relatively to new signifying contexts. A sign’s meaning is not defined in terms of a given sign or sign system, e.g. a given historical-natural language. Meaning converges with the interpretive trajectory delineated by the processes of deferral from one sign to the next in the great sign network, which knows no boundaries of a typological or systemic order. This is particularly obvious when translation processes involve interpretants, whether verbal or nonverbal, from another language or linguistic-cultural modelling system.

Literary texts escape the bounds of deductive logic. This is replaced by *associative* logic. This is the logic of translation understood as reading-writing, which involves active participation and answering comprehension. Where associative logic predominates, the relation between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign proceeds by hypothesis. It calls for reader initiative and inventiveness, and develops according to inferences of the abductive type, which means logical procedure at high degrees of creativity. Translation processes across languages further enhance the capacity for innovation and linguistic creativity and involve high degrees of iconicity.

As Roland Barthes observes, to read literary writing means to rewrite it (1982 and 1993–2002, vols. I–III), and this process is enhanced in the transition from one historical-natural language to another. Literary writing is characterized by dialogism and intertextuality and by the capacity to move the signifier in semiotic directions which enhance signification. In other words, literary writing is characterized by high degrees of otherness, autonomy, resistance, objectivity, that is, *semiotic materiality*. All this escapes literary criticism when it directs reader attention to what the author says and to his or her autobiographical, psychological, ideological or historical-social reasons for saying it. To consider translation issues from the complex perspective of literary translation, of secondary genres (Bakhtin 1986), also throws light on the problem of translating nonliterary texts, primary genres (cf. Bachtin e il suo Circolo 2014).

Translation across languages further enhances the associative and dialogic character of the reading/writing (rewriting) process, and contributes to freeing the text from a single type or system of signs. This is the task of translation. Translational processes among languages evidence dialogic intertextuality in the relation among texts as much as internally within a single text. Consequently, textual practice in a single language is already in itself an exercise in translation.

4. Metaphor, modelling, and translation

By virtue of the potential for absolute otherness and for irreducible uniqueness or singularity connected to it, iconicity and firstness involve the capacity to evade the logic of totalization and of the identical. This makes the metaphor an inexhaustible source for the generation and renewal of sense, an interpretive-translative device for the enhancement of sense across signs and sign systems. The capacity for signifying innovation, “linguistic creativity”, is the capacity to form new metaphorical associations and to invent new cognitive combinations, the capacity to figure, picture, portray, to present by contrast with the capacity for mere representation. This capacity for “presentation”, rather than “representation”, for “figuration”, “depiction” is programmed by our primary modelling device, specifically what Thomas A. Sebeok (1986) calls “language” understood as “modelling”, more precisely, “primary modelling”, the preliminary basis for human symbolic behaviour, therefore for secondary and tertiary human modelling systems.

Concepts in the human brain are the product of the activity of three different modelling systems largely corresponding to Peirce’s firstness, secondness and thirdness (Sebeok 1986; Danesi and Sebeok 2000). The primary system is rooted in sensory experience, the secondary in referential and indexical forms, and the third in highly abstract, symbolic forms of modelling: “This ‘flow’ from iconicity to connotativity and symbolicity, that is, from concrete, sensory modes of representation (and knowing) to complex, abstract models, characterizes most of human modelling” (Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 171).

The modelling capacity is an interpretive-translative capacity and is regulated by iconicity. Modelling constitutes the very condition for all types of translative processes. The propensity for creativity, inventiveness and innovation is not a prerogative of poets, scientists and writers, but in fact is common to human beings generally. As humans we are all capable of metaphorical associations, of establishing relations among terms that are seemingly unrelated and of extending our gaze beyond the sphere of human culture to contemplate the great semio(bio)sphere at large. As clearly emerges in the semiotic tradition delineated by Peirce, Jakobson and Sebeok, language as a modelling device relates iconically to the universe it models.

5. Signs and meaning in translation

Reading together the typology of translation elaborated by Jakobson (1959) – featuring 1) intralingual translation, or rewording; 2) interlingual translation, or translation proper; 3) intersemiotic translation, or transmutation – and Peirce’s tripartition of signs into symbols, indexes and icons – where any given sign is the product of the dialectic-dialogic interaction among conventionality, indexicality and iconicity in sign situations in which one of these aspects prevails over the others –, we obtain a more adequate specification of the relation between translation and signs, and a broader yet more precise characterization of the interpretive-translative processes constituting our semiosphere and proliferating in it. Each of the three translative-interpretive modalities identified by Jakobson is either dominated by symbolicity, indexicality or iconicity. In other words, the relation between the interpreted and the interpretant, the translated sign and its translant sign is either dominated by the symbolic, or the indexical or the iconic relation among signs. Furthermore, the three types of translation identified by Jakobson are always interrelated, more or less co-existing with each other to different degrees. For example, in the case of interlingual translation a full understanding of the sense of the source text and its adequate rendition in the “target” language will always involve 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 on the basis of a code. Reference to a code is inevitable to translate the linguistic elements forming a text, especially in the initial phases of translative-interpretive processes. When

reference to the code predominates, distancing between interpreted signs and interpretant signs is minimal. In this case, the mere activity of recognition and identification plays a primary role in translatable-interpretive processes.

Moreover, signs and interpretants are also united by indexical relations of contiguity/causality. To mechanical necessity, a bilingual dictionary adds the relation of contiguity between the sign and its interpretant when it associates the words in the source language to its equivalent(s) in the target language.

Therefore, interlingual translational processes present indexicality (contiguity/causality) in addition to symbolicity (convention). Read from this perspective, Wittgenstein's observation on translation in his *Tractatus* is particularly interesting: "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" (1961: 4.025). Indexicality refers to the compulsory nature of the relation between a sign and its object. This relation is regulated by the dynamics of cause and effect, by relations of spatio-temporal necessary contiguity, and is pre-existent with respect to interpretation. When indexicality predominates, translation-interpretation processes simply evidence correspondences where they already exist. The degree of creative work involved is minimal.

Bakhtin (-Voloshinov) conceptualizes communication and social intercourse in terms of dialectic and dialogic interaction between identity and alterity. Bakhtin introduces another two important categories in his analysis of verbal language that can also be extended to other sign systems: "theme" (*smysl*) and "meaning" (*znacenie*), or "actual sense" and "abstract sense" (Voloshinov 1927, Eng. trans.: 106). The second term in these pairs covers all that is identical, reproducible and immediately recognizable each time the utterance is repeated – it concerns the meaning of linguistic elements, e.g. the phonemes and morphemes constituting the utterance. "Meaning" or "abstract sense" thus understood corresponds to signality at low degrees of otherness, rather than to signness at high degrees of alterity, to the "interpretant of identification", rather than to the "interpretant of responsive understanding", to "plain meaning" rather than to plurivocal meaning, therefore to translatable processes (and phases) where the degree of dialogism and distance regulating the connection between the interpretant sign and interpreted sign is minimal. Instead, "theme" refers to all that is original and irreproducible in an utterance, to overall sense, signifying import and valuative orientation as these aspects emerge in a given instance of communicative interaction. "Theme" accounts for communication and signifying processes in terms of responsive understanding or answering comprehension, dialectic-dialogic response, and multi-accentuativity. It concerns translation-interpretation processes dominated by the iconic relation among signs and capable of qualitative leaps in knowledge and perception, of amplifying the semantic polyvalency of discourse and opening it to new ideological horizons.

The iconic relation between a sign and its interpretant plays a fundamental role in the rendition of the "theme" or actual sense of discourse. This is just as much the case when a question of interlingual translation.

Iconicity implies that the relation between a sign and its object is not wholly established by rules and codes as in the case of symbols, does not pre-exist with respect to a code as in the case of indexes, but rather is invented freely and creatively by the interpretant. In the case of icons, the relation between a sign and its object is neither conventional nor necessary and contiguous, but rather hypothetical. It corresponds to Bakhtin's "theme" or "actual sense" (Voloshinov 1929: 73). All these aspects come into play in the interpreter/translator's work of rendering the original interpretant with the interpretant of another language.

When the relation between a sign and its object and among different types of signs is regulated by the iconic relation of similarity, affinity and attraction, ongoing interpretive-translatable pro-

cesses forming the signifying and cognitive universe at large are regulated by dialogism, alterity, polyphony, polylogism and plurilingualism. These are all essential properties of language which together also form the condition of possibility for the development of critical awareness, experimentation, progress in knowledge and enhancement of sense. What we are claiming *à propos* interlingual translation is also valid for intralingual and intersemiotic translation. We know that interlingual translation implies both these other two types of translation.

Moreover, taking off from Jakobson's tripartite typology and in light of our conceptualization of the sign and semiosis reading together Peirce and Bakhtin, we have proposed a more elaborate typology of translation. On the one hand, our schema contextualizes human semiosis in the larger picture of biosemiosis in the semio(bio)sphere overall; and on the other hand, it focuses on translation processes in human semiosis articulating the different levels and types of translation in greater detail. This typology was originally proposed in Italian in Petrilli 1998 (now in Petrilli 2014b) and subsequently in English (in Petrilli, ed. 2003). It may be considered as the result of work done by Augusto Ponzio and myself on translation/interpretation theory up til then and a launching pad for further itineraries in our scientific research in the same area (see also Petrilli, ed. 1999/2000, 2000a, and 2001; Ponzio 1985 in Bonfantini, Mininni, Ponzio 1985; and in English in Ponzio 1990; Ponzio 2004, 2005; Ponzio and Petrilli 2008).

Communication is a primary function of human language, but it cannot be reduced to the terms of message exchange. Communication is a far broader semiotic phenomenon, it converges with life processes in the biosphere and presupposes the dynamics of dialogism and intercorporeity. With reference to the human world communication includes the capacity for the unspoken, the unsaid, the vague, the ambiguous, for inscrutability, concealment, reticence, allusion, illusion, implication, simulation, imitation, pretence, semantic pliancy, polysemy, polylogism, plurilingualism, alterity. All this presupposes the predominance of iconicity in semiosis and determines the possibility itself of successful communicative interaction, which involves successful translational practice.

6. Translating the untranslatable. On language as absence, equivocation, and silence

The iconic relation of similarity regulates translation and is associated with the capacity for exotopy, distancing, or extralocalization. This in itself makes translation a privileged place for the orientation of discourse towards literariness. Such characteristics are shared by the literary word and the translatant word and, in fact, render them less distant from each other than would be commonly expected. However, "translatability" does not only signify the possibility of translation. It also denotes an open relation between a text and its interpretations/translations. With reference to the general "interpretability" of a text – with respect to which "translatability" is a special case –, translatability also indicates that the interpretation/translation of a text remains open and is never definitive; that a translated text may continue to be translated, in fact may be translated over and over again, even in the same language into which it has already been translated, and even by the same translator, producing a potentially infinite number of translatant texts. The sign materiality of the translated text, its otherness and relative capacity for resistance with respect to any one interpretive trajectory, its signifying complexity, is evidenced by the fact that the original is never exhausted in any one interpretant/translatant, but rather can potentially be rendered, reinterpreted, translated by a great plurality of different texts.

The problem of translatability must be addressed with the problem of the untranslatable, being two faces of the same process: translatability, interpretability, and the capacity to express the untranslatable, even the uninterpretable, or the inexpressible. By virtue of semiotic materiality, the absolute otherness of signs, their capacity for resistance thanks to their signifying otherness with respect to all attempts at interpretation-translation by the interpreter-interpretant,

the concept of translatability relates to the untranslatable, to that which evades the limits of comprehensibility, to that which cannot be englobed, to the infinite with respect to the totality, to the unsayable with respect to the said of any linguistic system whatever, to that which cannot be possessed, to the unconscious with respect to the conscious, to the impossible.

If repression, removal, silence, the unsaid, absolute otherness, the shadow is the other face of the word, this has consequences for the act of translation, as interlingual translation makes particularly evident. On the one hand there is common speech, invariability, semiotic fluxes, energy, progress, succession, return, transitive writing, transcription, synechism, continuity, what Barthes calls *mathesis universalis*; on the other, there is uniqueness, otherness, fragmentation, death, loss, intransitive writing, variability, unrepeatability, discontinuity, what Barthes calls *mathesis singularis*. All these factors interact and overlap, evoking each other in uncertain, ambiguous relations, relations of *chiaroscuro*, diffraction. An act of forgetfulness, oblivion, neglect, a slip, an omission, an oversight, inadvertence are all phenomena that show how language is discord and not harmony, dissidence and not a system of opposite pairs, absence and not presence, and how language proceeds in the dialogic dialectics among all such elements. The self is not master of its “own” home, the speaker is not at home in its “own” mother-tongue, but rather tends to be spoken by another utterance, by another language that defers to another utterance still, to another language, and so forth. The speaker, the self is nomadic. We are always “strangers to ourselves” (Kristeva 1988): the condition of strangeness implies that what we share and have in common is the condition itself of strangeness, that is, our absolute otherness, our uniqueness.

The code of translatability may attempt to render translation automatic by cancelling the other, by homologating the other to the self, by asserting the principle of totalization, of authority, of authoriality, by cancelling writing understood *à la* Barthes as intransitive writing, indirect writing, writing *avant la lettre*. However, the translation process is regulated by the logic, or, better, the dia-logic of otherness (on the concepts of dialogism and otherness in relation to signs and language, see Ponzio 2006a, 2006b); it emerges from difference and at once is oriented towards difference. Insofar as this is the case, translation is infinite interpretation, deferral among signs, intransitive writing, re-creation: neither translation word by word, letter by letter (*verbo verbum reddere*, criticized by Cicero), nor translation on the basis of sense (St. Jerome’s *non verbum de verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu*).

The experience of translation, like writing, intransitive writing, unfolds in the materiality of signs, as such it is a material process involving letters and the deferral of signifiers (cf. Petrilli 2015: Ch. 12). Translation encounters the turns and twists of language, its equivocations, the indirectness, and the obliqueness of the interpretive trajectories that it puts into play and that translation across languages amplifies. Whether we translate “by the letter” or “on the basis of sense”, we cannot leave out the letter, since it marks the specificity of the signifier, its materiality, which makes a difference in terms of that which cannot be levelled, or equalized, according to the logic of identity. We cannot translate the letter, for the materiality of the signifier, of the letter itself, that is, signifying material, is not translatable. Decisions play on ambiguities, not to dissipate them, given that nothing can be decided, but to evidence their signifying potential, the signifying import of the play between interpreteds and interpretants, which is further enhanced through deferral across the interpreted-interpretants of other languages.

A translation is active and non transparent. As we have said, it is connected with the work of re-reading and re-writing, of re-creating. Canonical translation is based on the code, convention, authority, and respect of authorial intention. Contrary to such an orientation, the task of the translant is not to give the impression that it is not a translation, but rather to convey the sense of its uniqueness, its specificity, its unrepeatability, and together the sense of its untranslatability. Translation is construed from the specificity of the signifier and in this sense is “by the

letter". As such translation procedure is regulated by iconicity whose signifying value is an "effect" of language provoked by the "original", by virtue of what Peirce would call its quality.

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**SOBRE LA CORPOSFERA:
NUEVOS AVANCES EN LAS
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