

# A Critical Consideration Concerning *Semiotranslating Peirce* (2016) from the Perspective of Translation Semiotics

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## *Abstract*

Since 1994 when Dinda L. Gorlée published her dissertation “Semiotics and the Problem of Translation: With Special Reference to the Semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce”, Douglas Robinson has been critically thinking about the essential problems concerning semio-translation. In 2016, he published *Semiotranslating Peirce* to conduct a critical analysis of Gorlée’s theories concerning semio-translation with the Finnish translations of T. S. Eliot’s poem and Wittgenstein’s philosophy, and responded to 32 problems concerning what semio-translation is, who or what the worldly agent of semio-translation is, where semio-translation occurs, whether semio-translation is really irreversible, etc. As for their divergences, this review conducts a critical analysis, and further criticizes them on the scope of translation semiotics, the range of sign reference, the types of semiotic translation, and the role of translator in the translational sign transformation.

*Keywords: semiotranslating Peirce, translation semiotics, sign transformation*

## **1. Introduction**

An interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary study of translation and semiotics started in the 1960s. Inspired by Peircean semiotics and Saussurean semiology, Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) proposed intralingual translation, interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation in the essay “On linguistic aspects of translation” (1959), followed by Dinda L. Gorlée (1945- ), Peeter Torop (1950- ), etc. They started with the nature, use and interpretation of semiotic signs, especially the triadic relations of sign-object-interpretant, to examine the semiosis in translation and relevant phenomena. Historically, their

achievements contribute a great deal to semiotranslation studies. Among them, Gorlée has been considered a leading figure by translation researchers and translation semioticians in terms of the number of publications.

Dinda L. Gorlée published *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation: With Special Reference to the Semiotics of Charles S. Peirce* in 1994, one year after her oral defense in the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Since then, she devoted herself to redefining and refining the terms of semiosis, translational semiosis, translation semiotics or semiotics of translation (presented in “Traduttore traditore: Semiotica de la traducción”, 1990; see also Jia, 2016a, p. 95), and semiotranslation (1994), revising the established theories related to the theory of signs, and expanding the breadth and depth of Peircean semiotics in translation studies, with *On Translating Signs: Exploring Text and Semio-Translation* (2004), *Song and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation* (2005), *Vital Signs of Semio-Translation* ([Special Issue] *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, 2007), *Wittgenstein in Translation: Exploring Semiotic Signatures* (2012), and *From Translation to Transduction: The Glassy Essence of Intersemiosis* (2015) published to promote this interdisciplinary enterprise, thereby attracting attention from scholars worldwide.

American translation theoretician Douglas Robinson (1954- ) published Book Review: *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation: With Special Reference to the Semiotics of Charles S. Peirce* in 1995. Since then, he has paid close attention to the progress of Peircean semiotics and its application to the translation phenomena. Based on the semio-translation arguments in Gorlée (1994, 2004, 2012), and the pioneering ones presenting “a radically interdisciplinary discussion of how Charles S. Peirce’s philosophy of signs can be made to interact meaningfully with translation theory” (Shen, 1996, p. 53), Robinson published *Semiotranslating Peirce* (2016). He aims to criticize and analyze the problems of established theories and term definitions in the above-mentioned books. Furthermore, grounded on his own understanding of and insights from Peircean semiotic thoughts, he reconstructs a theoretical framework and paradigm through Finnish translations of T. S. Eliot’s poem “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

The book is noteworthy for its eloquent, clear, coherent, comprehensive and critically and creatively profound account of Peircean semiotic ideas on translation, of course, taking Gorlée’s ideas as the starting point, citing widely from both her publications and Peirce’s published and unpublished materials. However, it is far from being confined to Gorlée’s understanding and interpreting Peircean thoughts and their application to translation. To clarify and illustrate his ideas, he introduced several complementary theories to verify and reveal Gorlée’s misunderstandings of Peircean ideas, her misleading points of view and philosophical reasoning methods (abduction-induction-deduction). Therefore, Robinson (2016), by nature, is a critical reading of Gorlée’s ideas and a reference to the Peircean semiotic ideas applied and applicable in translation.

In a substantial “Preface”, Robinson combs out the general development of Peircean approaches to translation research ranging from Dinda L. Gorlée, Peeter Torop, Ritva

Hartama-Heinonen, Ubaldo Stecconi, Robert Hodson, to Susan Petrilli and the author himself; he also describes its structure and acknowledges the individual contributions to this project. Following the preface, he keeps asking the same primary question “what semiotranslation is” and other secondary questions concerning “what the worldly agent of this semiotranslation is”, “where semiotranslation happens”, “whether semiotranslation is really irreversible”, etc. in the first six chapters. Of them, Chapter 1 and 4 deal with Gorlée’s own definitions considered repetitive and vague enough to leave most of the big questions; Chapters 2 to 6, anchored in practical studies of specific translation histories, aim at testing the tentative arguments in teasing out of Gorlée’s explanations, with the evidences of Finnish translations of Peirce (Ch. 2), T. S. Eliot (Ch. 3), and Wittgenstein (Ch. 6) as well as Gorlée’s analysis of Peter Winch’s English translations of Wittgenstein (Ch. 5); Chapter 7 answers all the questions (32 in all) and the doubts the author raised about Gorlée’s semiotranslation arguments. Throughout the book, the author focuses on the main theme that Gorlée’s concept of semiotranslation is not a theoretical or practical translation-critical work which can help us do so much as the questions over translational phenomena.

## 2. A View on Its Theoretical Landscape

Gorlée (1994, 2004, 2012) proposes semiotranslation as a translational semiosis (Gorlée’s term) moving progressively towards higher clarity, coherence and rationality, and finally reaching the final interpretant, an ideally ultimate Third. However, Robinson found it seriously problematic in this definition and its explanations through the Finnish translations of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, Peirce’s works and Eliot’s poem, as a translator/interpreter needs not only to take account of the substance and form inside the text, but also to consider the referential relevance between textual content and the objects in the real world outside the text, especially the given tempo-spatial factors when operation is under way. If so, the problems lying in this definition and its application do not only concern the ones mentioned above; human beings as the inventors of meaningful signs, as the subject of sign activities, as the agent and patient of verbal and nonverbal messages, as a translator and interpreter, as the communicators of intercultural affairs, need also to be highlighted, which should be the preconditions of any sign activity, especially in translational process, and who really plays the dominant role in the so-called translational semiosis (Actually, translation is nothing but a sign activity crossing semiotic texts in the same culture or between different cultures, so there is no need to coin such a new term to refer to an old activity.).

As for the role of humans in sign activities, Peirce mentioned much on different occasions, such as “A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.” (*CP*. 2.228) “When an assertion is made, there really is some speaker, writer, or other signmaker who delivers it; and he supposes there is, or will be, some hearer, reader, or other interpreter who will receive it.” (*CP*. 3.433)

“(S)igns require at least two Quasi-minds; a Quasi-utterer and a Quasi-interpreter; and although these two are at one (i.e., are one mind) in the sign itself, they must nevertheless be distinct. In the Sign they are, so to say, welded.” (CP. 4.551) “Every utterance naturally leaves the right of further exposition in the utterer; and therefore, in so far as a sign is indeterminate, it is vague, unless it is expressly or by a well-understood convention rendered general.” (CP. 5.447) “All communication from mind to mind is through continuity of being. A man is capable of having assigned to him a role in the drama of creation, and so far as he loses himself in that role,—no matter how humble it may be,—so far he identifies himself with its Author.” (CP. 7.572), etc. Judged from the cited remarks, we can find the following two points: (1) Judged from the terms of somebody, speaker, writer, signmaker, hearer, reader, and interpreter, we can assure that Peirce did mention the role of humans in sign activities; (2) From the terms of quasi-minds, quasi-utterer, and quasi-interpreter, one can further know Peirce’s sign activities go well beyond the human semiosphere, including all sign activities in the real world, and all the ones who can serve as quasi-minds. However, Peirce did not involve “translational semiosis” and the role of translators in sign activities. Though Gorfée (1994) involves the role of translators in translational semiosis as a special sign activity, she does as Peirce did in the ideal and abstract context, and divides the role of translator into utterer and interpreter, falling into the hedge of structural dualism, ignoring those complicated factors involved in a specific translational process, and discarding the intermediate elements involving the group translation of Buddhist scriptures in ancient China. Thus, though she did elaborate on the role of translator in translational semiosis, she put it in an abstract context of sign transformation, so it is not conducive to translation practice, intralingually, interlingually and/or intersemiotically.

By his empirical experiments on translations, Robinson pointed out that poetic translation is not an ideal and singular Third, but “a collective Third circulated through individual members as an ‘intuitive’ or ‘instinctive’ First, which would tend to organize engagements with both verbal/textual and human social Seconds to conform them with its Thirdness”, which constitutes the fundamental theoretical difference in the categorical views on Third/Thirdness between Gorfée and Robinson. The key point to this problem lies in what a Third is. Thirdness is an abstract entity, embodying the rule of feeling and action by general principle and thus representing a universal relations and necessity. Therefore, Thirdness is a category more abstract than Firstness and Secondness, so it “creates orderliness, law, and regularity as opposed to, and out of, chaos, randomness, and chance”, with an instance for Peirce as an example: “the thread of life is a Third” (CP: 1.337). From the properties and features of the three categories illustrated by Peirce on different occasions, we can learn that a Third/Thirdness is universal in a given culture, continually consolidated by the conventions and habits in that culture, so “a collective Third” and “a collectively guided Thirdness” are paradoxical in that, firstly, a sign is invented by human for their communication needs, so it is a collective product; secondly, a Third/Thirdness is only collective as a category in reference to Firstness and Secondness

categories, so it is universal all the time and in all spaces; thirdly, a translation, though it is a byproduct of the author and the source text, is by nature a product done by individual(s) (if it is done even by a group translators, it is still a quasi-individual in reference to the whole population of the translators/interpreters in this world), embodying the universal categorical properties of verbal and nonverbal signs.

Grounded on the comparative and contrastive analyses between the source text and several target texts, Robinson criticizes Gorlée for regarding text-signs as static syntactic forms, ignoring the roles of speech act and communicative intentions in translation, and replacing wrongly the triadic relations of term-proposition-logic for word-sentence-text in assessing a translation based on equivalence and *quid pro quo* between the source and target texts. In fact, Gorlée's taking text-signs as static forms in translation is inconsistent with the dynamic and endless process of sign activities, viz. semiosis, since there occur the interactions between the source text and its interpreters or translators, between the source text and its source text-related sociocultural and tempo-spatial factors in the present and past times, and between the source text and its target text-related sociocultural and tempo-spatial factors in the present and past times. And furthermore, interpretation of any text is also a dynamic process, so it is not conducive to taking the source and target to conduct a static analysis on the level of word-sentence-text. In contradistinction to Gorlée's approach, Robinson took instinct-experience-habit and abduction-induction-deduction approaches to analyze the Finnish translations of Wittgenstein's works, and took into consideration the extratextual factors, which is progress with reference to Gorlée's, but his performance is still implicitly based on the concept of equivalence by taking the (con)textual features and message of the source as the reference. Hereby, it is still done in the context of structuralism. Essentially, translation is an interpretation of the source text. In the context of translation and the interactions between the source and the target, interpretation implies the breadth and depth of this activity, with the former presupposing the intra- and extra-textual factors in question while the latter presupposes the tempo-spatial elements in the present, past and future, which is closely consistent with Wittgenstein's "forms of life".

In fact, as what Shen (1996) comments on Gorlée (1994), "translation as semiosis" is both object-oriented and interpretant-oriented, which, in my view, led to the divergences in translational semiosis between Robinson and Gorlée here. Specifically, the divergences between them come up with their interpretations of Peircean semiotics from different perspectives. Gorlée emphasized among other things the interpretant (that is, abstract logic) of the triadic relation of sign-object-interpretant and its role in dominant *readerly* translation operation, and focused on intralingual translation, interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation of icon-index-symbol, which is strictly located inside the text. Therefore, Gorlée's works are clearly "meant to be theoretical rather than practical" as she uses translation only as a heuristic device for clarifying Peircean philosophy of signs. Whereas Robinson put more weight on the object (that is, the referential relevance between a text-sign and its immediate and dynamic objects in the real world)

in this trichotomy, and put in the dominant position the sociocultural, tempo-spatial and ideological elements outside the text to help determine the sign transformation inside the translating text. Hereby, Robinson takes dominant writerly role of object, considering the role of interpretant in the readerly orientation, so he focuses more on instinct-experience-habit and abduction-induction-deduction approaches to analyze the Finnish translations of Wittgenstein's works and of the poem "Prufrock".

In this regard, we seem to conclude that the two scholars are standing on the right and left shoulders of Peircean thoughts, respectively. When they are in distinct positions, they will hold different views with different landscapes. This fact seems to somewhat reveal that different interpreters caged in their own backgrounds and standing in the different positions will come up with different interpretative results, so it is reasonable that Robinson anchoring in a practical approach to semiotranslation criticized the superficially reasonable idealness of the concept "semiotranslation" Gorlée put forth, for Gorlée tended to construct the supreme goal of translational semiosis by underlining the abstract and ideal properties of Thirdness while Robinson aimed at the construction of practical and explanatory power of semiotics in translation operation by laying emphasis upon the indeterminacy and complexity of Secondness.

In the final analysis, through considering all the factors involved in interlingual translations of Wittgenstein's philosophy from German into Finnish, and of T. S. Eliot's poem from English into Finnish, Robinson gives specific responses to 32 problems on majorly what semiotranslation is, how, when and where semiotranslation happens, and other related problems, and he considers translation in the narrow sense, i.e., interlingual translation as the conventional case, missing too much that shall be included in the categorization and conception of translation semiotics, namely the semiotic transformation between tangible or physical signs, including Jakobson's intralingual translation, interlingual translation, and intersemiotic translation, from tangible or physical signs into intangible or mental signs (i.e., ideas, design outlines, conceptions), and vice versa. Moreover, with the advance of computer technology used in recording and transmitting messages, a single tangible sign text can be transformed into a synthetical multimedia and multimodal sign text consisting of linguistic signs and non-linguistic signs, performed on stage, and played on screen at any time (cf. Jia, 2016a, 2016b). Finally, Robinson (2016) is a general work, but not universal in that the author did not consider anything going on in translation semiotics. Since 2014, Jia (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017, 2018a, 2018b) explored the possibilities of translation semiotics in the context of semiotic studies in China, reclassified signs in terms of translational sign activities in the broadest sense, constructed intrasemiospheric, intersemiospheric and suprasemiospheric transformation or translation in the broad sense, and discussed translation-related belief on the levels of state, group, and individual; Wang (2015, 2016) talked about a new disciplinary connotations of translation semiotics, and incorporated the concept of physical energy conservation into semiotic energy conservation of sign transformation; Lv and Shan (2016, 2018) reviewed Peeter Torop's semiotic translation theories and discussed

intertextuality in terms of translation semiotics; Pan (2016) examined text regeneration of the Chinese novel *Red Sorghum* and cited semiospheric transformation into its analysis.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

As to the distinct positions they are in, we have another thing to stress. What Robinson (2016) deals with theoretically is in terms of translation proper, focusing on philosophic and poetic translation in the sense of Jakobson's interlingual translation, and so at the same time is deemed to be limited from the perspectives of intralingual and intersemiotic translations, as the translation between tangible signs (that is, between verbal signs and verbal signs, and between verbal signs and nonverbal signs), and that between tangible and intangible signs (that is, between intangible or mental signs and linguistic signs of tangible class, between tangible signs and non-linguistic signs of tangible class, such as behavior, gestures, etc.) which are the objects semiotranslation in a broad sense cannot afford to ignore. So, we wonder if Robinson's framework is applicable to any other type of translation besides interlingual translation, and further the effect of Secondness-based approach to other genres need to be experimented and verified.

Finally, though it is unlikely to solve in a satisfactory way almost all the problems concerning Gorlée's conception of semiotranslation, it cannot make it any less prominent and attractive for its radically empirical, critical, creative, interdisciplinary approaches to semiotranslation. To the degree that it highlights the power of Peircean semiotics applied and applicable to translation phenomena and serves as complementary to Gorlée's works in semiotranslation theory and practice, especially in the field of poetic translation that Gorlée rarely touched upon. In this sense, it takes a step further and becomes a grand work in translation semiotics.

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