

**punctum.**  
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SEMIOTICS



ISSN 2459-2943  
<https://punctum.gr>

**06** | **01**  
**2020**

# Translation and Translatability in Intersemiotic Space

EDITED BY  
Evangelos Kourdis & Susan Petrilli

PUBLISHED BY  
THE HELLENIC  
SEMIOTIC SOCIETY





*Dialoghi semiotici*

## INTERVIEW OF

**Paolo Fabbri**

By EVANGELOS KOURDIS

punctum.gr

Professor Paolo Fabbri gave this interview to Evangelos Kourdis, Associate Professor of Semiotics of Translation, on Monday, 4 November 2019, at the Aristotle University Laboratory of Semiotics (SemioLab), three days after his plenary speech at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Semiotics dedicated to *Signs of Europe*. The Conference was held in Thessaloniki, Greece, 1-3 November 2019 and organized by the Hellenic Semiotic Society, the School of French Language and Literature, and the Laboratory of Semiotics of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Lia Yoka and Gregory Paschalidis edited the transcript.

EK: E. Kourdis, PF: Paolo Fabbri

**EK** I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to address a keynote speech in our Congress and to give an interview to the SemioLab at the Aristotle University. It is a great honor and pleasure to have you here in Thessaloniki.

**PF** Thank you.

**EK** Let me start our conversation by asking you what is your impression of semiotics in Greece? Do you have any recommendations for our students?

**PF** Yes, I have several recommendations, or maybe just one. You should not take semiotics as a set of instructions for applying theory to reality; instead, you should use the application of semiotics itself as a problem, and create new ideas, new methods for semiotics. When you describe a text, you have a new text. This new text is a social text, in-

## ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 06

Issue: 01:2020

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2020.0017

Pages: 309-318

By: Evangelos Kourdis

Lic.: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

deed, but not just a text in the usual sense. In this new text, you have to discover something about the other text because you do not need a new application if you have discovered nothing. Every application has to interrogate the meta-language we use in this new text. My view for the future of the new generation is straightforward: Semiotics is not about applying, it is about discovering, within the text itself, its organization, the social organization of meaning, and, at the same time, it is about finding the way by which we interrogate models to modify and transform them.

**EK** *The International Conference on Signs of Europe has just finished. What are your overall impressions from the Conference?*

**PF** Well, in my view, there is a great variety of levels of knowledge and competences. I use the term competences in the Chomskian sense, i.e., knowledge of the lexicon and the knowledge of rules. People speak about - let's not give specific examples here- trope, metaphor, narrative forms, logical inferences. The problem is how to relate all these different notions to each other in one single moment where you want to talk about, say, narrative and logical inferences and action, and so on. For instance, how can you show that sometimes narrative is a form of logical transformation of content? One uses narrative because this transforms meaning, not just to represent meaning. When you speak about tropes, you usually mean tropes as a general term for metaphors. I heard a lot about narrative and a lot about metaphors at the Conference. Why metaphors? Roman Jakobson said that the strict definition of rhetoric includes metaphor and metonymy – but this is a very narrow definition of tropes. They are more than that. I will give you an example: In Chinese classical literary culture, poetry doesn't use metaphors; there are very few metaphors. The dominant figure used is allusion. Allusion is very interesting because, unlike metaphor, you cannot cross from one term to another. In allusion, one person says something, but another takes responsibility for the meaning of what the person says. At the same time, this is a great responsibility because you might believe that you have heard and understood the allusion, but you might be wrong. Another problem with allusion is that it communicates a secret. An allusion is an invitation to analyze and discover the secret that is implicit in its discourse. In my view, we have to enlarge the domain of rhetoric. Certainly, rhetoric includes an enormous quantity of figures, and they all relate to a theory of language, grammar, and so on. Saussure said that we have to integrate rhetoric in the science of linguistics. I think that is important. I am constantly confronted with the problem of metaphor. In our Occidental culture, metaphor is essential; yet, there are cultures where metaphor is not so important.

**EK** *What are your thoughts on the Conference session on Images, Sounds, and Narratives of Europe?*

**PF** It was great. The analyses I heard by sociologists, who were quite a few, were very interesting. But in my opinion, they lack competence in the history of art. Certainly, in the talks about representation, there was a lot about Europa and the Bull, and so on, but how the history of art has contributed in fundamental ways to the semi-otics of Europe would have been very useful to examine. For example, I was very interested in the idea that you have a 2-euro coin representing Europe and the Bull. With minimum knowledge, it is easy to make a more in-depth analysis. It is funny that the only representation of Europe and the Bull on a coin, on a European coin, is on a Greek one!

**EK** *What are your thoughts on the Conference session on EU symbolic discourses and practices?*

**PF** This is an excellent question because it addresses the relation between symbols and signs. Symbols and signs are not synonyms. In his early work, Saussure used symbol and sign as synonyms. And that is precisely what Cassirer did. I think that now we can distinguish between the two, and this distinction can increase the knowledge and the intelligibility of what is a symbol and what a sign. There is Lacan's distinction between the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. You have Peirce's distinction between the index, the icon, and the symbol. Eco wrote a beautiful article in which he explained the problem with symbols: In logic, you have  $A+B$ , i.e., two symbols, but a flag is one symbol. Eco explained that you have to define the symbol in a way that is not too broad. I think this is interesting because there are different definitions of the symbol. According, for instance, to the glossematics school of Copenhagen, a sign has a double articulation, a form of expression, and a form of content, while a symbol does not. The symbol has a fixed meaning. You can interpret symbols, but not natural symbols, on two levels. I do not necessarily agree with them. You can give different solutions, but that would be the subject matter of a whole new conference.

**EK** *So, do we need Peirce's classification of the icon, index, and symbol?*

**PF** Yes, but the problem with the icon is its similarity with reality. The index is the specific contact with that reality. They both have something in common. But the question of the symbol is a cultural problem since it has no relation to reality. In my view, this tripartition is not coherent and has to be improved.

**EK** *I will move now to the place of semiotics in Europe. Are you optimistic about its prospects, and what do you think about the future of semiotics?*

**PF** I'm not very optimistic because semiotics is nowadays very much in fashion, and that is always a disaster for a discipline. Linguistics, too used to be very fashionable. Jakobson said that linguistics is the super science of human sciences. For a long time, structuralism was identified with semiotics. After that, a new semiotic



attitude arose. There is resistance against strict definitions in the humanities, against, for example, having rigid boundaries between 'signs' and 'symbols.' People in the human sciences do not like this rigidity. They say 'symbol,' 'sign,' 'symbolic dimension' or 'semiotic dimension.' But the semiotician has to say no and explain the difference. They don't like the idea of a system of signs. Europe has spoken about the sign for centuries, millennia probably, but not about the system of signs, except in linguistics. However, the system of signs is a new perspective, and I think it poses a very crucial question. When you talk about one sign, Lotman says, you talk about nothing. You need at least two. That is a structural requirement. It is not a problem of numbers; it is a problem with the relationship between the two. The relationship can be reflexive or transitive and so on, but, in any case, there are at least two signs, at least one relation. I think that semiotics' future lies in establishing a system of signs and a relationship between systems within another system of signs. Semiotics has a future also in meta-definitions, which are also semiotic concepts. You cannot explain everything through the concepts of nature or society. You have to create a meta-language that is semiotically relevant. One example could be the problem of 'context.' People use the concept of context for everything when they have no explanation. Well, what is the context? My coffee could be explained through an explosion that created the universe in the first moment. Without this explosion, there is no coffee. But is this idea a relevant connection, a suitable choice for a context?

**EK** Do you think that semiotics continues to astonish people?

**PF** I indeed think so, and we need people to be astonished by semiotics. Semiotics offers an organon for the human sciences. When I say 'organon,' I mean it in the old Kantian definition opposing 'organon' to 'canon.' Semiotics is not canonical; it is not a canon you have to obey when you discuss signification and meaning. Kant considers 'organon' as a tool of orientation. And when you have what the Spanish call 'una caja de herramientas,' a box of instruments, you have to polish it continuously, which is, in fact, an interesting metalinguistic task.

**EK** Is semiotics a distinct philosophy, or is it a strand of hermeneutics? Where lies the difference?

**PF** Well, for me, it's obvious. Let's start with a fundamental system of signs, language. Language is not the only system of signs, but it allows us to translate systems of signs into other systems of signs. There is a moment in which images translate into language, as in writing. Chinese writing is an image strategy to represent sounds, you know. But language is a very crucial system of signs, probably one of the most important. There is a difference between the phenomenology of language and the philosophy of language. Philosophy of language and logic are idealizations of lan-

guage. I think that the essence of language is not in our brains; it lies in the phenomenology of different languages existing globally. Now, we have at least 5.000 or 4.000 languages in the world, and good transcriptions of languages exist for 800 or more. So, we have at least 4.000 languages we don't know about. We have not transcribed enough of them yet. Indeed, the essence of language is not in our brains. Certainly, the brain processes language, it is clear, but the same brain can produce 5.000 languages and much more probably since, in the course of man's history, many languages have died. We should follow the multiplication of differences, not insist on the uniformity of language. I think that we have to study the diversity of languages and try to extract not the essence, but a model of language. Well, in my view, this is a phenomenological attitude.

Language has subjectivity, objectivity, rules. There are languages in which you have subject-verb-object and other languages in which you have subject-object-verb and so on. But this is a generalization we extract from the phenomenology of different languages. I think this is true for semiotic systems, for images, for example. We have millions of images, millions of systems of images, and so on. Let us see how they behave, how we use the practice and meaning of different languages. I don't believe in the philosophy of images. I believe in the phenomenology of images.

**EK** Do you believe that biosemiotics, this relatively new trend in semiotics, has a place in semiotic studies, or do we need to remain within its main field of research, that is, the semiotics of culture? For instance, I remember the interview that Umberto Eco gave to Kristian Bankov<sup>1</sup> in which he said that many people come to our semiotic conferences to hear what we say. Eco said: "Scholars from the Natural Sciences see semiosis, where I see a reaction to a stimulus." In my opinion, Eco was not such an optimist about biosemiotics, but I would like to have your opinion.

**PF** It is a different and interesting approach. I think that biosemiotics is a coherent approach to culture. The problem is that it asks different questions. Let me take just one example—the issue of the status of experiments. The final result might be true. However, it is difficult to take the result out of the laboratory and generalize it. Scientists say that the result of their experiment can be exported to a complex society with a complex culture. I am not sure. Besides, there is also the issue of perspective. The scientist's perspective is a construct. In my view, the biosemiotic perspective is an interesting way to approach the problem of meaning, but I'm not really competent in biosemiotics.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, *An Afternoon with Umberto Eco*, by Prof. Kristian Bankov, directed by Smilen Savov and translated by Tatsuma Pandoan, prepared for the 12th World Congress of Semiotics organized by the Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies, New Bulgaria University of Sofia ([link here](#) – accessed on April, 26, 2020).

**EK** Is translation the language of Europe, as Eco suggested?

**PF** Eco had the gift of formula. He says translation is the language of Europe because if you go to North and South America and you speak English and Spanish, there is a great chance you will be understood. In Europe, you have dozens of different languages, while in New Guinea, a small space, we have hundreds of languages. In China, people have discovered that, apart from the official state language, their languages will never be transcribed. Eco is right. In Europe, we have to make a choice of language. Why do you use English now? Why do I have to use my poor English? It is very bizarre because if Brexit succeeds, the English language will only be officially spoken in Malta. The rest of Europe will not officially speak English. It's a paradox, but the idea of Umberto – and I share it with him – that translation is a good translation when the procedure of translation enriches both the source and the target languages at the same time. You have to discover something new. For example, the impersonal 'ça' in French doesn't exist. Or the zero sign of impersonal forms in Latin languages and other languages. We don't need it in Italian or Spanish or in old Latin and so on. You don't need to say 'it rains' or 'il pleut' [in French], you simply say 'rains,' 'pleut.' That is a zero sign. Language is full of zero signs in which we have positions not filled by concrete signs. There are many empty, implied, tacit positions, which creates many problems for what we call 'big data.' Big data count signs, but it is not easy to consider an implicit zero sign. You have to reconstruct the system to discover that we have a zero sign there and integrate it into the data. But actually, you don't have enough knowledge of the culture to allow us to reconstruct the zero sign with some tacit assumption of a language or a system of linguistic forms. There are zero signs in images. How can you explain them? How can you discover them? And if you take into account empirical signs, you get very interesting results, but you miss a lot that is tacit, implicit, underdeveloped.

**EK** In his book *Experiences in translation*, Eco seems to disagree with your stance that translation is interpretation, arguing that first, we interpret, and then we translate. Do you insist on your position? I am interested to know your opinion because there are many translation scholars who believe that translation is interpretation.

**PF** Well, I disagree with Eco on other questions, not only on that one. Our main disagreement was on the possibility of translation from linguistic to other systems of signs. Eco doesn't believe in 'transduction.' Roman Jakobson wrote an excellent article, in *Linguistic Inquiry*, on the verbal art of the poet painters.<sup>2</sup> He quotes Rousseau le Douanier, Blake, Paul Klee, and he says there is a possibility of homology

<sup>2</sup> Jakobson, Roman 1970. On the Verbal Art of William Blake and Other Poet-Painters. *Linguistic Inquiry* 1 (1): 3-23.



between a system of representation, textual representation, linguistic representation, and an image. And some poets and painters do that. De Chirico, in Italy, made precisely the same thing. For me, a translation from language, not language in general, but a specific organization of language, to a particular organization of images is entirely possible. I believe in this kind of transduction. Eco doesn't believe in that because he always writes about language translation. This is one of our disagreements.

The other involves the problem of terms, of interpretation. Let me use a very simple definition. I need to go to Aristotle University and visit the 'Red Building'<sup>3</sup> I take my little dictionary, and I search for 'Kokkino Ktirio' [Red Building, in Greek]. There is no interpretation. This 'Kokkino' is 'Red,' and 'Ktirio' is 'Building,' and they don't need interpretation. It depends on the size of the text. They are simple signs that have common content but different systems of expression. You can transmit the same content with different expressions, but you can also transmit different content with the same expression. I think this problem of interpretation is another level of language, which is precisely the level 'asking for interpretation.' I know that if you have to translate complex systems of languages, interpretation is critical. It looks like the problem of metaphors. If you translate a metaphor literally, the result is absurd. In this case, interpretation is necessary. It depends on the level of languages, the level of images being translated; this is the question. I will give you an example very well-known in the history of art. In the 15th century, Leon Battista Alberti said that when you paint something, you paint a story and a narrative. You have actors, actions, and narration. Not only that, you may even introduce an actor pointing to the story itself, and looking towards the viewer, he says, 'these are the very important things.' For example, Paul of Tarsus, Saint Paul, there's a moment in which he is very close to his horse because he has fallen from the horse, and he appears relatively small. But there is a man, a commentator, pointing his finger at him. It is an instruction to the viewer. It doesn't explain the specificity of the painting. Still, it is a common organization in our culture in which you translate the main idea of a narrative and the idea of what we call 'enunciation.' In other words, transduction does not mean the projection of linguistic models to images. To perform transduction is to show that there is a common ground in which systems, semantic systems, can be represented by linguistic and visual strategies.

**EK** As far as the notion of transduction is concerned, why don't you adopt the idea of intersemiotic translation as proposed by Jakobson?

**PF** I use both translation and transduction. Well, if you don't like it, we can come back to Jakobson.

---

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle University's Conference Center.

- EK** It's not that I don't like it, but sometimes we integrate new terms from another field of research. For instance, some scholars propose the notion of transduction in the context of intericonicity. Do you share this view?
- PF** Intericonicity sounds very banal. Because one has two images, he says intericonicity. The idea of transduction implies that there are rules. Do these rules of transduction apply to intericonicity? Usually, when people speak of intericonicity they mean a face-to-face interaction, where you look at the other in the face, and the other looks at you. Now, is that a concept?
- EK** But there is a structure, a transported structure, not just intertextuality. Intericonicity is a transposition of the informational load.
- PF** Yes, if intertextuality means that there are many texts with different substances of expression, that also is banal. Certainly, we have writing and image. But the idea of intertextuality is more than that; it is also the rules that allow us to integrate, oppose, or integrate the substitution of such data and data organization. I prefer to speak about transduction because transduction implies that we have to discover transformation rules from one system to another. The idea of intertextuality as this kind of force points to a problem. We cannot say that if you open a newspaper, you find intertextuality because there a picture and there is written text. It's like saying that rain comes from up high down to the earth. Yes, but the problem is gravity, the force of gravity.
- EK** Do you agree that there are different degrees of intersemiotic translation? Is the information load a criterion in establishing a typology of intersemiotic translation? If not, what is?
- PF** I know that we have to use the knowledge that comes from different disciplines in different ways. For example, we spend too much time trying to have a look at images because they are so pervasive, we live in a world of ghosts. But there are more interesting things, for example, music. Music poses crucial questions for semiotics. The semiotics of music distinguishes between 'words' and 'grammatical' rules, such as phrasing, notation, melody, and harmony – very seriously. However, we do not have a good grasp of continuity; we place too much emphasis on grammatical and lexical differences. But there is a musical problem in language as well, the problem of prosodic forms, which are continuous, they have stress, accent, differentiation. Their continuity is actually a musical problem. That is very interesting for us because the prosodic dimension is the dimension of emotion. It is difficult to describe an emotion just by words of distinction. Sometimes, it lies in the intonation of words. The imperative force and the interrogative force of discourse are expressed by intonation. I have friends working on music and the semiotics of music. I asked them if they have a strong definition, a minimal definition on which

we can agree - because we have spent a lot of time thinking that music is a signifier without a signified. Derrida said that if there is no 'signified,' you cannot use the term 'signifier.' If there is a signifier, it means that there is a signified. If there is no signified, do not use the term signifier. A signifier without signified means nothing. So, what is music? I don't really know. I think that it is possible to discover very strong homologies between poetic forms and musical forms. There are narrative forms in music, and there is a poetic organization in music and language. Sometimes, people working in music make interesting hypotheses. For example, Meyer Shapiro looks at some mimetic images, and he says you have a frontal image and the profile image, and he thinks it is possible to translate these two positions in pronominal forms. The frontal is 'I-you,' and the profile is 'he' or 'it.' I don't believe there is a strong morphological relationship between the pronunciation in language and frontal/profile position in mimetic images. There is a deictic relationship in a deictic space, in which you can express the deictic relationship with images, with a certain kind of treatment of images, which corresponds to a particular type of organization of pronouns – personal pronouns, temporal pronouns, and especially spatial pronouns. The question is not how to translate pronouns to images. It is to discover a homology and then to systematize this intuition. This is what Greimas suggested: Different disciplines offer interesting connotative descriptions. We have to take these connotations and translate them into a more general metalinguistic and coherent level. But we have to know the different meanings of connotations in different sign systems.

**EK** Yes, because culture lies in translation, it resides in connotations, because they are cultural constructions, so it's quite complicated to translate connotations.

**PF** It is indeed challenging, but also necessary. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes suggested something structuralist, i.e., that connotation is a sort of gold powder on the text, that it disseminates in the idea of dissemination and so on. In my view, it depends on the intelligence of the analysts, their sensibility and knowledge, and competence. I think there is a structure in connotations. Let me give you an example: Some people speak or behave in a certain way. You can say it is vulgar or elegant, but then you have two categories, vulgar and elegant. There are social connotations, but these can be opposed to each other. You can define a social connotation, for example, of 'kitsch' and its aesthetic dimension. Kitsch is very bizarre because it refers to both the ugly and the beautiful; it can be vulgar and elegant, beautiful, and disgusting.

**EK** Do you agree with Barthes' definition of connotation as 'voluntary noise'?

**PF** Yes, but it is a metaphor. We have to transform it into a theoretical concept.

**EK** Do you think that there is a significant role to be played in public discourse for scholars of semiotics?

**PF** I certainly think so. In my view, people now don't like this point of view, but I believe that at the very beginning of semiotics in Russia and Europe, it was all about the political discussion of the regime. In the USSR, the imposition of dialectical materialism, which, at the time ruled over human sciences, found its opposition in formalist analysis, in the attempt to analyze language in a different way. It is no accident that Lotman was not in Moscow but a marginal part of the USSR. The same is true in Europe: Barthes used semiotics as a way not to destroy, but to expose and discuss the ideology of the bourgeoisie in formal terms, at a period where he was at his most Brechtian phase and was also very much into theater. I think that semiotics has a tradition of formal studies, which is also a tradition of political engagement. This is very useful. Without utopian dreams, semiotics promotes the idea that the humanities are critical sciences. I recently wrote something about zombies because zombies are not just monsters; they also aptly represent humans with their social contradictions today.

**EK** Thank you very much for this interview, and I hope to see you again in Greece.

**PF** I hope so.

**PAOLO FABBRI** (1939-2020)

Professor of Semiotics and Director of the International Center for Semiotic Studies Umberto Eco (*Centro Internazionale di Scienze Semiotiche Umberto Eco*), University of Urbino, Italy.

# Punctum



ISSN 2459-2943  
<http://punctum.gr>

PUBLISHED BY  
THE HELLENIC  
SEMIOTIC SOCIETY

