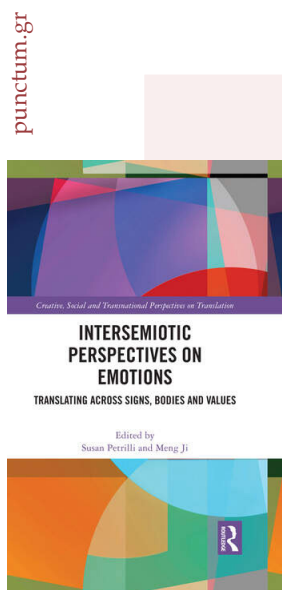


Semioethic translative practices concerning emotions and the challenges of localized identity

BY: Ionut Untea



Susan Petrilli and Meng Ji

Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values

Routledge, London and New York, 2023, 357 pages, hardback,
ISBN 9780367521288.

The seemingly never-ending conflicts, wars, and terrorist attacks that invalidated the post-Cold War promise of an ‘end’ of History point to the aspect that ‘his-story’ leads to a turning of emotions ‘outside-in.’ This again confirms that individual and collective feelings are almost exclusively defined by identities imposed externally, and especially by the geo-political agendas of those in power. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that many, if not all emotions, either “grand” or “private,” are “cultured,” as Susan Petrilli notes in her “Introduction”, basing her insight on Valentin Vološinov’s 1973 argument, in the sense of being “conditioned” by “those I live with,” by “life experiences distant from my own in time,” or by education (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 4). Indeed, emotions “flourish in semiosis” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 4). But how to *translate* emotions, if not by redoubling the ‘outside-in,’ when one tries to express the content, color or appeal of one’s own inner feelings, since the feelings inside have already been deeply affected by outside ambitions and animosities?

This is the phenomenon that is current in the case of contemporary ultranationalist and populist sympathies across the world. Many individuals and collectivities take

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 09

Issue: 01

Summer 2023

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0014

Pages: 217-222

Lic.: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

as genuine inner feelings that which has been inculcated through collective ambitions of conquest, glory, or mere collective refusal of responsibility for historical misdeeds. Their capacities for translating genuine emotions have gotten impaired by the externally imposed obsession with the localization of identity, which triggers a potentially antagonistic relation with the 'alien,' the 'outsider,' the 'other.' Hence the aim of Susan Petrilli and Meng Ji's recently edited collection *Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values* to offer multiple perspectives on the kind of translation of emotions that is rooted in what Petrilli and Ponzio, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, call "extralocalization" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 26). Also inspired by Levinas' "humanism of alterity," Petrilli understands extralocalization as the valorization of alterity, and the "answerability / responsibility towards the other beyond the limits of short-sighted identity and its alibis" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 7).

While acknowledging, through its editor, that emotions "are felt differently" according to the cultural, historical, social, intellectual, psychological, or sociological backgrounds and frameworks of those experiencing them (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 3), the collection of essays takes extralocalization as a central dimension of the translative effort regarding emotions. The semiotic, and, in particular, the semioethic stance, that generally characterizes Petrilli's work, encourages both translators and readers of emotionally infused texts to open themselves and embrace "the dynamics between translatability and untranslatability" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 2), not only at the intellectual level, but also at the level of an "incarnate," and "corporeal interpreted-interpretant" selfhood (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 2). This should be done not only from a privileged vantage point, but also "beyond the rights of the privileged community" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 5), and not only with an attitude of condescendence towards what it is to be translated, but also with "dialogical responsibility" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 6). This encouragement is consolidated as extralocalization helps the author, the translator and the reader engage both with their inner manifestations and outer perceptions of textual or embodied emotions, in ways that render the translations of these emotions as both *same* and *other*. This is conceivable because the sign is primarily at the heart of the emotional expression towards the outside and emotional infusion, from the emotional milieu of the semiosic or semiotic entity towards inner translations, in ways that are more fundamental than any cultural, ideological, or disciplinary analysis. In Petrilli's own words "the 'same' sign is always the 'same other,'" and this translative vocation of the sign allows for its "semiotic materiality" to escape the "traps of identity," and therefore allows for the "possibility of its liberation, of communication beyond communication of the same with the same" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 7). This argument of the liberation of the sign through the translation that makes it the "same other" and the extralocalization approach are echoed, alluded to, or directly engaged with throughout this collection of essays in multiple ways.

As the core semiotic coordinates of the argument briefly described above have been elaborated, throughout decades of co-authorship between Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, this collection of essays is notable for being dedicated to Ponzio, as “a great master of the sign,” on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The way the collection is organized brings forth, right from the start, the suggestion that a semioethics of translation has the vocation to summon the translative potential of semiotic beings worldwide as a way of contributing to the emergence of a transcultural and global semiotic *ethos*. This *ethic* coordinate of semiotics incorporates translation less in its oversimplified understanding of an “imitation, homologation, passive repetition of the same,” which, in Petrilli and Ponzio’s view, are the attributes of a mere “transcription” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 25), but as a multimodal expressive, and creative sign activity. That is why, Part I therefore deals with the translation of emotions as “sensing,” Part II approaches translation under its facet of “negotiating emotions,” Part III analyses translative efforts in diverse settings (economic, geographic, and virtual), Part IV deals with translation as “depiction,” rather than a simple “representation” of emotions (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 6), while Part V invokes the performative aspect of translation as rendered especially in film and music.

Before engaging in a systematic reading of the essays, according to the order of the essays, or according to their own interests or expectations, readers might be interested in first consulting section 10.4 of the essay “Rituals and games in translation: The chiasmic relation of duty and delight,” authored by Marco Fiola and Jamin Pelkey, as it brings forth a fair synthesis of Susan Petrilli’s own conception of translation. This is particularly useful, especially for the reader less familiar with semiotic terms, as it gives a clear idea of the main editor’s own approach to translation before engaging with the very diverse, and sometimes puzzling, aspects of translating emotions. For instance, this is where the reader might learn, if they did not already know, that Petrilli sees the activity of translation as “a token of a more general type” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 184), which brings translation closer to other tokens of the general effort towards “nascent communication and interpretation” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185). From this point of view, Petrilli’s approach to translation seems to be, at least according to Fiola and Pelkey’s interpretation of it, quite similar to the activity of other agents dealing with communication between/within cultures, such as “the interculturalist, the language learner, the negotiator, the newcomer, or the new couple for that matter” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185).

While this may be the case at a first level of interpretation, the authors nonetheless emphasize that what makes Petrilli’s argument noteworthy is its emphasis on the translative activity as a way to develop “new situations” of a “relative” alterity out of a “non-relative” alterity (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185). This is directly connected with the conception of the “same other,” with the addition that this very “same other” is not only to be thought of in relation to the original “same,” but that it is an actual *relative* of the original sign. This is Petrilli’s original approach regarding cultural and ethical

relativism through an initially metaphorical expression (Petrilli 2006: 76) of a wish for making cultures truly *relatives*, in the sense of integrating them coherently as part of a greater family, but soon thereafter as a truly semiotic exchange, and a liberation of the sign from the chains of sameness and closed identity (Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 21). That is why giving closer attention to Petrilli's conception of translation might reveal that her conception of "relative" alterity goes beyond the chiasmic patterning model that is central to Fiola and Pelkey's argument (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 184-193). This is because the chiasmatic inversion, involving the changing of places between the self and the other seems rather a mechanical "x" inversion that can indeed be found in Shakespeare, Merleau-Ponty, or Lévi-Strauss (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 186). What the *relative alterity* dimension invoked by Petrilli might also bring is an important ingredient: the "dialogical responsibility as inscribed in the sign" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 6) responsibility that might help in de-colonizing knowledge about, and give proper deference to, what is considered to be different (Petrilli 2013: 100).

This *deference to difference* approach is appropriated by Anne Sophie Voyer, who talks in her essay of "Translating emotions: Articulating affect," as a way to counter "the stigma of difference," since "difference" – in her case, the difference between translation and the source text – "does not necessarily indicate a deficit" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 92). This indicates both the open character of the sign, emotion, or text, in the dialogical relationship that happens across cultural or geographical space and time and its liberation from the constraints of identity. This approach is also present in the essay by Verónica Estay Stange and Audrey Moutat, "Translating the rhythm of emotions," which allows for a similar countering of the impression that difference is a kind of deficit in the communication of emotions and, generally speaking, the reaching of sameness from starting points that seem too "different" from each other. The emphasis here is less on the finite product, but on the rhythm that facilitates relative translations of emotions, and the "incarnation" of this rhythm not in a monolithic, but in a "triple" translation of emotions: expression of "inner movements," their "kinesthetic interpretation by another subject," and a "reenunciation" by means which are "specific to the target language" (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 65, 76-77). That is why, commenting on this essay, Petrilli emphasizes that the "emotional sign" always contains a "margin of alterity," which comes to the fore in the reciprocal semiotic activity, once the sign "transitions" from one experience to another (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 8). The outcome of this semiotic activity is thus seen in a positive sense: instead of being pretexts for the creation of either gaps or walls between subjectivities, "shared rhythm in translation" made possible in the "margin of alterity" shows difference as a way to enhance the quality of the experience of intersubjective relationships (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 8).

Shared rhythm is very different from the kind of rhythm that is obsessively restated in the phenomenon of "monologism," which is defined by Petrilli and Ponzio in the

essay “Emotions from identity to alterity, and their possible translation” as “subservience of the verbal sign to preestablished meaning,” and as “elimination of heterodox meanings” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 38). So, no matter how attractive, genial, or exquisite the interpretant of a sign, emotion, text, or work of art might seem, this very interpretant needs to be protected from falling into the trap of the external identity that the sign might generate around itself, and which may cover the sign as a crust, and trap its interpretant, fossilizing it for generations to come. Hence John Deely’s warning, following Peirce, that an interpretant needs to be rediscovered as always a “being *in futuro*” (CP 2.92; Deely 2001: 39). This is echoed in Moira Inghilleri’s essay “Migration, materiality, and structures of feeling,” when noting that, one morning, Willem De Kooning, the author of the painting *Excavation*, while looking at the surface of his own painting, suddenly found himself humming a tune, which he identified as the Dutch “Klimmen in het wand” (Climbing in the raft) (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 111). In this case, the material crust of the painting did not prevent, but propelled the artist to ‘excavate,’ that is to look for, through his apparently rhythm-less, static crust formed out of the objects depicted on the canvas, the ingredients of a bridging rhythm with something that was ‘other,’ in regard to dynamism and liveliness.

This is also a perspective borrowed by Margherita Zanoletti, in her essay “Translating Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s *My People*,” when talking about the multiple “semiotic rebirths” of the depiction of Oodgeroo’s emotions through the multiple translations of her text (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 256). Like a text, even a place, or an object may go through this process of semiotic liberation or rebirth. This is what Luca Tateo and Giuseppina Marsico understand, in their essay “Sensing the city: Affective semiosis and urban border-zones” with their concept of “semiotic *sensescape* of the urban space as a multisensorial fabric of signs disseminated in the environment” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 207). This is also what Pierluigi Basso Fossali and Julien Thiburce refer to, in their essay “Emotions through touristic discourses: Mediation and rendition of an urban experience” when talking about an “emotional climate” and an “atmospheric integration” of the multiple experiences that “can only be tasted on the spot” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 223). The stakes are set even higher by Labao Wang, in the essay “Translating China: A semiotic reading of Linda Jaivin’s *The Empress Lover*,” when arguing, following Petrilli and Ponzio, that any translation starts with, and it actually is, listening, and that “[w]hen you have become so emotionally involved with another country, writing about it becomes a process of translating yourself and your love for it” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 269).

These are only some of the gems that can be found in this masterfully arranged collective volume, and the reader might wish to excavate more deeply into the texts, and found out more about the meaning of phrases such as “answerability” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 7), “extralocalization” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 26), “habitus” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 83), “Umwelt” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 147), “affective revolution” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 174),

“relative alterity” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 179), “chiastic patterning” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 185), “semiotic sensescape” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 207), “homologation” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 263), “tourism of catalysis” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 224), “empathy with the unknown” (Petrilli & Ji 2023: 346), and many others. While the content of this collection might somehow seem overly dense, and its message too abstract for the average reader, the reader needs to take it as an opportunity for personal reflection on what a feeling expressed in words such as ‘I love you’ might mean, or have meant, both for themselves, and for their receivers, at several stages of their own life, from childhood to adulthood and potentially parenthood. Then, they will need to *extralocalize* this feeling and understand that it is not only them, and their ‘kind’ (i.e., nation, race, ethnic group) who are capable of having such higher feelings and express emotionally infused signs. Or is it?

References

- Deely, John 2001. Physiosemosis in the Semiotic Spiral: A Play of Musement, *Sign System Studies* 29(1): 27–48.
- Petrilli, Susan 2013. Semioethics and Translation as Communication in and across Genres. *Semiotica* 195: 97–118.
- Petrilli, Susan 2006. Meaning, Metaphor, and Interpretation: Modeling New Worlds. *Semiotica* 161: 75–118.
- Petrilli, Susan & Augusto Ponzio 2005. *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press.
- Petrilli, Susan & Meng Ji (eds.) 2023. *Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values*. London and New York: Routledge.

AUTHOR

Ionut Untea Fellow-in-Residence, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany and a Research Professor in Western Philosophy at Southeast University, Nanjing, China.

