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Translation as meaning-construction under co-textual and contextual constraints: A model for a material approach to translation

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ABSTRACT

The concept of materiality challenges translation studies to reassess its assumptions about meaning in order to better account for translational phenomena that occur outside verbal communication and linguistic representation. This article combines the idea of materiality with semiotic and textual theories to conceptualize meaning as a construct formed in the interplay of the text and its constituent elements, recipient, and environment of reception. Building on this, translation is reconceptualized as a general-level semiotic process rather than just a linguistic or cultural phenomenon. Translation is seen as an asymmetrical process that involves the interpretation of a material text as well as the composition of a semiotic sign-complex whose form and meaning are subject to co-textual and contextual constraints. This model shows how materiality allows for a generalized translation theory that is applicable to a wide range of specialized cases and compatible with studies in other fields in a philosophically sustainable way.

KEYWORDS

Conceptualization of translation; materiality; semiotics; textual theory; translation process

Materiality as a shared framework for generalized and specialized conceptualizations of translation

In this article, I build on the concept of materiality to reconceptualize translation as a phenomenon and a process. I argue that a philosophical grounding in materiality connects multiple strands of contemporary translation studies (TS) to each other and to a wider philosophical and ontological framework. Developing this argument with insights from semiotics and textual theory, I conceptualize translation as a process of multimodal meaning-construction through material text distribution. Visualized as a material model of the translation process (Figure 4), this conceptualization presents translation as an *asymmetrical process* that involves, on the source side, interpreting a multimodal *material text* and identifying the relevant semiotic *sign-complex* and, on the target side, compiling a new sign-complex designed to fit into a specific *co-textual* and *contextual* space. This model and the theoretical building blocks from which it is constructed show that

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materiality can be used to answer some of the most fundamental questions on the nature of translation.

Materiality, as utilized by translation scholars like Karin Littau (2016), is the notion that language – or any sign-system – always requires a material medium to transmit the signs in order for meaning to be constructed from them. This point of view recognizes, as many traditional TS approaches do, that the interpretation of signs always takes place in a certain environment and is informed by the relevant conventions of the communication process, but it also highlights the meaningfulness of the material aspects of that process. This emphasis on the interplay between the signs, their immediate material surroundings, the wider environment, and the actors involved in it makes materiality extremely relevant to many topical discussions in contemporary TS. For example, in recent years the tendency of TS to focus on interlingual translation – translation taking place in language and between two cultural spheres, or “translation proper” (Jakobson 1959) – has been brought under question based on insights gained from biosemiotics, which sees translational activity also taking place outside human language and culture (Marais 2019; Sealey 2019). Further, the field’s established conceptualizations of meaning have been challenged for privileging representational or referential forms of communication over ritual or performative forms (Bennett 2018) and for improperly accounting for experiential or corporeal meanings (Susam-Saraeva 2021). This criticism is broadly supported by developments in cognitive approaches to TS, which increasingly see the construction of meaning as an embodied and situated process as opposed to mechanical information processing (Jakobsen and Alves 2021, 5).

The central point of these critiques is that giving certain types of semiotic activity precedence over others skews the conceptual basis of TS, needlessly limits the field’s scope of application, and may even ultimately render it obsolete as an academic discipline (Marais 2019, 6–7). At the same time, however, other viewpoints reveal benefits of retaining a more focused scope. For example, it has been noted that translation researchers’ expertise in multilingual communication is often their most valued contribution in interdisciplinary projects (Tietze, Piekari, and Koskinen 2022, 135). There is also some professional and academic pushback against radical reorientations, such as international conferences that explicitly call for a renewed focus on language-based professional activity and its re-establishment as “translation proper” (e.g. TRANSLATA 2021). At heart, this debate about the scope and purpose of TS seems to be the very same identified almost 50 years ago by George Steiner, who stated that translation theory must choose to either function as a model “of all meaningful exchanges, of the totality of semantic communication” or act as a “subsection of that model with specific reference to interlingual exchanges” (Steiner 1975, 279).

The principles of materiality imply that this does not need to be thought of as a dichotomic choice. In this article, I argue that it is possible for TS to deepen its philosophical foundations and widen its scope of application while retaining a focus on the language-based approaches that it has unique expertise in and that are most often expected from it. As an academic discipline, TS can only benefit from taking a critical look at its established ways of thinking, reassessing conventional positions that focus on language-based translation or linguistic meaning, and shifting to examine translational phenomena from a more general perspective where necessary. Considering the calls for an “outward turn” (e.g. Bassnett and Johnston 2019) that would require TS to

establish theoretical and methodological connections to other academic fields and to the world beyond, the ability to fall back on a general-level model of translation as a semiotic phenomenon seems all the more necessary. However, doing so does not have to mean abandoning interlingual translation as a prominent object of study. Materiality enables a non-linguacentic approach to interlingual translation – and much more besides.

In the following discussion, I will show how a material approach to translation can combine reconceptualizations of translation as a generalized semiotic phenomenon with the language-centred study of translation practice. Materiality posits that language and the non-lingual textual elements surrounding it are all meaningful: as I suggest at the end of this article, materiality makes it possible to conceptualize translation as a phenomenon based on a comprehensive philosophy of meaning that reflects the totality of “all meaningful exchanges” and to conceive of a model of the translation process that accounts for the practical concerns of interlingual translation without having to cede any special status to language or linguistic meaning on the level of theory. Materiality makes this possible, as explored in the following sections, because it enables the use of semiotic and textual theories which recognize that the material, social and cognitive factors involved in meaning-construction are fundamentally interconnected and functionally inseparable, but also acknowledge that these factors inhabit existence in different ways and therefore require a combination of different approaches to be comprehensively engaged with.

Materiality as a concept: Implications for semiotics, textual theory, and translation

I use the term *materiality* to refer to the notion that any type of sign or sign-system, such as verbal language, must always employ some sort of material medium and inhabit a material form in order for an observer to be able to derive meaning from it. This is a relatively simple idea, but if developed further, it carries wide-reaching implications for the concepts of meaning and translation. As Littau notes: “Media are not merely instruments with which writers or translators produce meanings; rather, they *set the framework within which something like meaning becomes possible at all*” (2016, 83, emphasis in original). All communication and other semiotic activity are predicated on materiality, involving not only meaningful content but also *form and matter* (88) – meaning derived from signs, but also structural and material conditions surrounding the signs that contribute to the construction of that meaning (Gumbrecht 2004, 8). The communication of signs always requires a material medium, and since the medium affects the form in which the signs are presented and observed, the material realities of the medium affect the meaning constructed from the signs. Furthermore, the material objects and phenomena involved in semiotic activity are themselves conducive to meaning-construction (Armstrong 2016, 102–103; Coldiron 2016, 97), both apart from and in relation to the signs. In effect, then, materiality affects meaning by way of *constraints* to the production of signs and to the construction of meaning from signs: the material medium utilized constrains the form in which the signs can be presented, and this in combination with the meanings invoked by the material medium itself constrains the meaning that can be derived from the signs. Following semiotician Floyd Merrell, these two ends of the communication process could be called “meaning-making” and “meaning-taking” (2000, 48; see also Marais 2019,

5). Simply put, materiality constrains the way in which meaning can be made and the way in which meaning can be taken.

These principles of materiality as they apply to communication and translation reflect larger philosophical issues for the humanities. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht sees contemporary discourse about human experience and existence being dominated by “metaphysical” attitudes that value “the meaning of phenomena” over their “material presence” (2004, xiii–xv). Karen Bennett recognizes a similar attitude in translation studies. Quoting Naomi Seidman, she suggests that TS has a vested interest in retaining a “representationalist” or metaphysical attitude towards meaning: “Mainstream translation theory in the West rests on the separability of word and meaning, signifier and signified, enabling meaning to be transferred ‘whole’ from one linguistic vessel to another” (Seidman 2006, 17; quoted in Bennett 2018, 94). Because of this, the field has tended to see meaning as something predominantly “representational, and therefore translatable” (Bennett 2018, 92). Kobus Marais concurs, claiming that “translation studies share the idealist bias of cultural studies, by being more interested in representations of reality than in reality itself” (2019, 11).

Biases for the metaphysical over the physical inform the prevalent frameworks of thought in spheres of life outside TS as well. Merrell considers this the result of “centuries of indoctrination” by Plato, Descartes, and their intellectual ilk (2000, 3, 46–47). Similarly, both Bennett (2018, 92) and Gumbrecht (2004, xv) see the philosophical tradition of the Western world as a process of progressive de-emphasis on material presence and increased emphasis on the supposed ability of physical phenomena to represent metaphysical meanings that are independent of material form or experiential context. This tendency has caused certain problems. For example, Şebnem Susam-Saraeva discusses challenges involved in translating *experiential* knowledge strongly linked to personal bodily sensations and lived experience (2021, 85–86). Knowledge like this – meaning that is intimately connected to physical existence – is inadequately represented by a notion of meaning as something purely metaphysical that can be transferred essentially unaffected between linguistic vessels. Bennett, however, recognizes an epistemological shift taking place that seems to take note of the idea that “language does not merely refer to something beyond itself but also performs an action in real time” (2018, 114), moving from a representational notion of meaning to a new focus on *performativity*, on meaning that is actively performed and experienced during the social act of communication as much as it is invoked by signs (2019, 1–2). Concepts like experientiality, performativity and materiality are all part of this shift, all emphasizing the same point: meaning is constructed through active engagement with material reality, not just transmitted through language. Highlighting the semiotic value of material presence allows theories of meaning to break away from any linguistic biases.

This increasing awareness about material concerns can be seen as part of a larger movement in the history of philosophy and science. Physicist David Bohm, for example, frames the question of the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical in terms of the relationship between reality and thought. In Bohm’s view, Western mainstream intellectual tradition has tended to follow the Cartesian position that the one who thinks is in principle separate from the rest of reality they reflect on, which leads to a view of existence as being composed of fundamentally disparate fragments (1980, xi). Bohm’s alternative to this is to see existence instead as a unified whole in

itself, a totality that only appears to exhibit different forms because it is undergoing constant change and movement (xiv). Other similarly non-fragmentary worldviews have of course been explored by numerous thinkers, from historical examples like Spinoza, Marx and Russell to contemporary academics working on subjects ranging from quantum physics (Barad 2007) to new materialist philosophy (Bennett 2010) and theories of human cognition (Clark and Chalmers 1998).

Non-fragmentary worldviews allow for states of existence that are otherwise treated as ontologically separate – like the body and the mind, the physical and the metaphysical – to be considered under a shared framework, for reality and reflections of reality alike to be seen just as different forms of the same process of existence. For its part, materiality resists fundamental divisions between the physical and the metaphysical by highlighting the interdependent nature of the form in which signs are presented and the meaning derived from them as well as the wide array of meanings that exist beyond linguistic representation. All things material are meaningful and all things meaningful are material.

Materiality and semiotics: Icosis and contextual constraints on meaning

Based on the preceding discussion, a material approach seems philosophically justified: all semiotic activity depends on materiality and materiality affects all semiotic activity. However, before these tenets can serve as a basis for translation theory, two practical questions present themselves. Firstly, if all semiotic activity is dependent on materiality, then how exactly does the material nature of the sign affect semiosis? Secondly, if a sign must always have a material form, then what is this material form and how does it function? The former is a question for semiotics and the latter for textual theory. In this section, I will discuss materiality in terms of semiotic theory, and return to the second question in the next section.

The principles of materiality pull the focus of the inquiry into semiotic activity in general and translation in particular away from linguistic representationality. What is required instead is an alternative system of meaning-construction that accounts for the material presence of the signs, the performative nature of the communication event, and different types of non-linguistic meaning. One such alternative is the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, previously explored by translation scholars like Dinda Gorlée (1994), Ritva Hartama-Heinonen (2013), Douglas Robinson (2016), and Kobus Marais (2019). Peirce conceives of the semiotic process as involving three interrelated elements: the sign, the object, and the interpretant (Figure 1). Peircean semiotics incorporates a general conceptualization of the sign that applies to all types of meaning-construction, not just to verbal language and linguistic meaning. The sign can be a word invoking a specific linguistically-defined meaning, but it can also be anything else that in some way stands for something other than itself to some observer. The interpretant is the effect that the sign has on the observer: it can invoke a concept or idea, or it can be an action, a feeling, or any other kind of response (Peirce 1994, 1.339, 4.536) – but crucially, it is connected to the object in some capacity (2.228). Finally, the object is what the sign stands for as it exists apart from the sign and the interpretative effect related to it (5.473).

According to Peirce scholar T. L. Short, what is relevant in Peirce's triadic model is not just the number of its parts but also the way in which they are put together. The sign, the

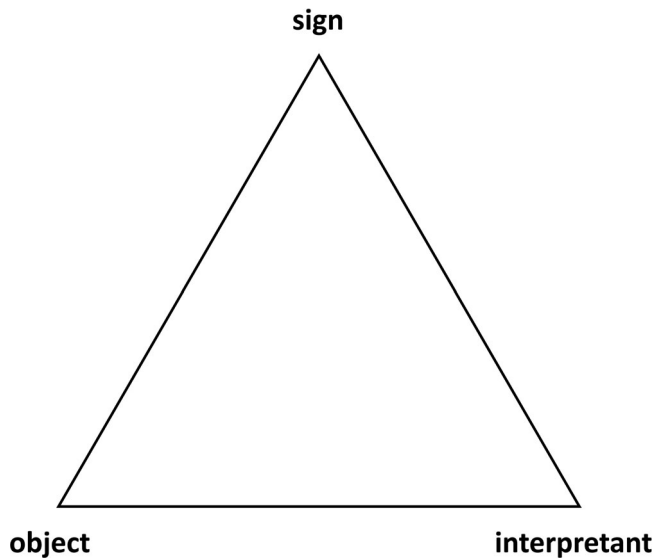


Figure 1. Peircean model of the sign (after Peirce 1994, 2.228, 8.343).

object and the interpretant combine into a “relational property” where all three are distinct from one another but still only exist in relation to each other (Short 2007, 19). None of these elements “is what it is [...] except by virtue of its relation to the other two” (18). The model as a whole explains how a sign functions, but the sign itself is only one part of a tripartite system that necessarily always involves an object and an interpretant, as well. There is no sign if there is nothing for it to refer to and no interpretative link between them. This means that signs do not exist apart from the real environment in which they are used and the communicators who use them.

The notion of relationality brings important nuance to the idea of a non-fragmentary framework for meaning-construction. Peirce’s sign-process shows that aspects of reality can be conceptually separate while also being functionally inseparable. The same applies to the relationship between materiality and meaningfulness. All things that are material are semiotic, and vice versa, but the phenomenon of being material is not the same as the phenomenon of being semiotic. The key difference, as the Peircean framing suggests, is the presence and perspective of an observer – someone or something to take and make meaning from matter.

By conceptualizing meaning as something that is arrived at through the interplay of the different elements involved in the sign process and with the active engagement of an observer, Peirce achieves a semiotic model that represents all kinds of meaningful reactions to signs that are not necessarily embedded in a language-system (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala 2017, 57). The links that extend from the sign to the object and to the interpretant certainly can be ones born out of linguistic representation and social convention, but they do not have to be: they can be causal, or associative, or any type of relation, from highly situated to near-universal (59–60). Meaning arises from what an observer recognizes as a sign and how they engage with it. The Peircean model enables a wide definition of what a sign is and a varied understanding of what meaning can be, allowing theories of meaning-construction in translation to abandon

strict divisions between physical signs and metaphysical meanings and instead seek a viewpoint that integrates them together.

Kobus Marais's biosemiotic theory of translation builds on Peircean semiotics and on the works of other scholars, such as Merrell (2000), to construct such a viewpoint. Marais argues that translation should be reconceptualized as a process that is fundamentally semiotic, not linguistic or cultural, and that translation approaches that focus on language and culture should be embedded within the larger framework of a general theory of signs (2019, 119). According to Marais, meaning – linguistic or otherwise – should not be thought of as inhabiting stable existence by itself and therefore accessible through signs, but as something undergoing constant change and movement that is only temporarily stabilized into a certain form under certain constraints (123). This sentiment echoes the non-fragmentary worldviews discussed previously. Framed in this way, the aim of translation is “the imposition of constraints on semiotic possibilities in order to create meaningful responses” (Marais 2019, 158) – constraints imposed by engaging with and manipulating the environment in which meaning is constructed.

Douglas Robinson, another translation scholar engaging with Peircean semiotics, refers to these environmental factors with the collective term *icosis*. Icoses are the “great socioaffective ecologies of culture” (Robinson 2016, 83) that act as the “the collective or communal or cultural *guidance* of the semiotic process” (195, emphasis in original), the “cultural cradle” for semiosis (113). As defined by Robinson, the process of icosis is driven by the group's desire to present and accept its shared norms, assumptions and generalizations as truth (118). In a communication event, members of the group are guided by “icotic pressures” (83) to construct meanings that follow the group's shared expectations of what is usually meant by specific signs (194–195). Through the icotic process, subjective experiences gradually become shared views and accepted norms (201). The theory of icosis is therefore also a theory of *intersubjective* meaning-construction that presents the subjective experience of a single group member as both a development of and a factor in the shared intersubjective experience of the group as a whole. In this sense, icotic forces both propel and limit the construction of meaning: they impose constraints on semiotic possibilities, allowing meaning to stabilize into a certain form, but in doing so they also narrow down the sphere of semiotic possibilities into ones that are recognizable and acceptable to the group.

Marais's notion of meaning as a process and Robinson's concept of icosis support a material view of semiosis. A sign is not a physical conduit that allows access to metaphysical meaning because meaning does not inhabit a stable existence that could be accessed; it is actively constructed by those involved in the communication of the sign under the constraints imposed on that communication process. In fact, the constraints are what makes the construction of a specific kind of meaning possible, as they demarcate a specific sphere of semiotic possibilities for meaning-making (the production of signs) and meaning-taking (the interpreting of signs). I call this semio-material and socio-cognitive space in which specific meanings can be made and taken a *meaning-construction environment*.

The constraints that outline the meaning-construction environment can be considered to fall into two categories. On the one hand, as described in this section, the meaning derived from the sign is constrained by the icotic environment and affected by the material aspects of the sign. This could be described as *contextual* constraint.

On the other hand, the form the sign is constrained by the materiality of the medium and affected by the environment of reception: the sign must inhabit a form that is transferable by the medium utilized and recognizable by its recipients. This could be described as *co-textual* constraint, and this dimension of meaning-construction will be discussed in terms of textual theory in the next section. This distinction between co-textual and contextual factors is intended to mirror the relationship between the material and the semiotic: the intention is not to introduce a new ontological dichotomy, but to reflect the fact that some aspects of meaning-construction are motivated more by the relationship between the sign and its medium than by the way the sign facilitates semiosis. This is especially true in meaning-making that requires the communicator to engage with a specific material medium and textual environment.

Materiality and textuality: Multimodality and co-textual constraints on meaning

So far, it has been argued that the construction of meaning from semiotic signs as a process is marked by co-textual and contextual constraints, and that the context in which meaning is constructed is best described as an icotic environment. In addition to this, a comprehensive material approach requires emphasis on how signs inhabit material forms and how those forms function. In this section, I will build on the preceding discussion of the contextual factors in meaning-construction by exploring the nature of the text embedded in that context and its effects on meaning and translation.

If communication is about providing constraints to the sphere of meanings that can be constructed in the communicative situation, then the concrete form in which these constraints are provided can be seen as a *text*. Of course, “text” is just one of many names that this product of communicative intent could be called, and since it is commonly associated with verbal language, using it in a theoretical project that seeks to build a more generalized approach to translation might seem counterintuitive. In my view, this association actually makes it useful for the material approach: textual theory can show how different semiotic elements function together, with verbal language acting as one *textual mode* among others. The term “text” may carry some linguacentric baggage, but the principles of materiality allow for textual mechanics to be considered from a generalized semiotic perspective, as another layer of constraints on meaning-construction. As discussed previously, processes of meaning-making and meaning-taking always utilize a material medium and are profoundly affected by the realities of that medium: just as the icotic environment surrounding the text constrains both meaning-making and meaning-taking, the immediate material environment inhabited by the signs constrains the form in which the signs can be presented, which acts as a further constraint on the construction of meaning from them.

Anders Pettersson’s “cluster conception” of texts provides a venue to develop this idea further. Pettersson conceptualizes a text not as a single unified entity but as a cluster of interconnected but ontologically disparate objects and phenomena. He criticizes the “ordinary conception” of texts as unified entities for propagating theoretical misconceptions about language and meaning, such as texts “consisting” of words and “carrying” meaning, or that copies of texts act as “avatars of the same text” and give “access to the same words and same meaning” (2017, 1). A central aspect of Pettersson’s criticism

of this pattern of thought is that the ordinary conception of texts mixes together elements of different ontological status, such as physical entities and verbal structures (2). Pettersson's alternative cluster conception (Figure 2), on the other hand, makes a clear delineation between an individual *physical utterance* that acts as an exemplar of the text, the unique *complex of signs* associated with the text, and the *meaning constructed from the text* through interpretation (13). These elements reflect the forces involved in the semiotic process discussed in the previous section: the material form of the sign, the semiotic sign itself, and the icosis-based socio-cognitive construction of personal meaning.

Pettersson's ontological categorizations are perhaps stricter than non-fragmentary worldviews would normally condone, but his model is still useful in the context of the semiotic theories explored above. For one, the model makes a difference between the "physical features" of an utterance, which a sender intends to denote signs and which a recipient can recognize as signs, and the semiotic signs themselves (Pettersson 2017, 31). This reflects the relationship between materiality and meaningfulness. Signs and meaning are not strictly speaking a part of the physical form of the text: a material object cannot "include" signs or "possess" meaning, it can only include material representations of signs (31, 38, 45) – signs, that is, that are not yet connected to objects or interpretants. In order for full-fledged signs and meanings to enter the picture, the triadic sign-process must be initiated, which requires the text to be received.

Each physical exemplar of a text is a different material object and as such their individual features affect the construction of meaning from them, but the representations of signs included in them allow the recipient to identify the system of signs employed, recognize the unique complex of signs associated with the text in question, and construct their own meaning from the text (Pettersson 2017, 39–42, 45–49). These different elements of the text-cluster all manifest the process of existence in different ways: the text has its material form, but the signs involved are abstract semiotic constructs shared by a certain group of communicators, and the meanings associated with the

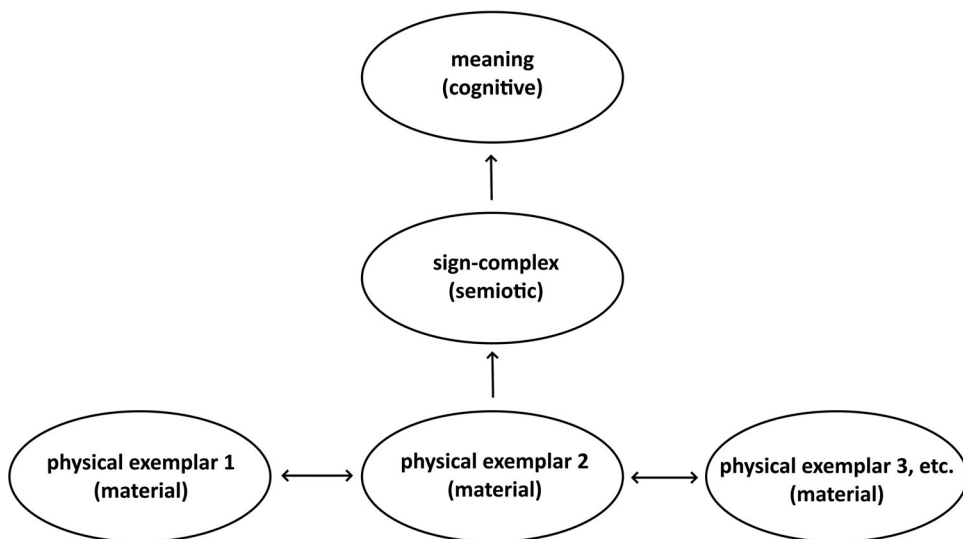


Figure 2. Pettersson's model of the text-cluster (after Pettersson 2017, 13).

text are all mental constructs of individuals involved in the communication event (49). Or, if rephrased in terms used previously, the subjective cognitive process of meaning-construction is based on the intersubjective icotic process, which in turn involves shared conventions concerning abstract signs communicated via material representations in material media. For the sake of simplicity, I use the term “material text” in this article to refer to the material form of the text and the material representations of the signs it contains, with the understanding that the entirety of the text-cluster as it functions in communication and meaning-construction also contains other elements.

It is also worth considering how the different elements that factor into the text-cluster function in the communication event, which involves both the production and the reception of the text, or meaning-making and meaning-taking. Making a similar distinction to Merrell, Pettersson differentiates between the roles of the sender and the recipient of the text (2017, 45). In a communication event, the sender or meaning-maker compiles a sign-complex that is intended to constrain the recipient’s meaning-taking in a certain way and presents a material representation of the sign-complex via a material medium (34–37). The recipient or meaning-taker then constructs their own meaning from the sign-complex based on its material representation (38, 45–49). Semiotic signs must be utilized since meaning, being a cognitive construct, cannot be transmitted as such and must instead be constructed by the recipient from the signs. However, semiotic signs are abstract concepts that cannot be transmitted as such either: they must, in turn, be represented by material forms transmitted over material media.

Pettersson’s multi-ontological view of textuality, when combined with a material approach to meaning-construction, reveals an interesting difference between how the sign-complex, the material text, and the meaning associated with them relate to each other at different ends of the communication process. The process of meaning-making, undertaken by the sender, involves the compilation of a semiotic sign-complex and its distribution in material form, while in the process of meaning-taking the recipient receives and interprets the material text as a whole. The sender therefore compiles the sign-complex to be received and interpreted alongside a specific *material co-text* and within a specific *icotic context*. This means that if translation is to be understood as textual communication, it is necessary to account for the ways in which the sign-complex compiled by the sender acts in combination with the other material aspects of the text.

Theories of *multimodality* explore just such questions. The concept of multimodality is based on the idea that forms of expression in a communicative situation never occur alone: modes of communication are always accompanied by other modes, and meaning is constructed from their combination rather than just from the expressions themselves (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala 2017, 8, 17). All textual modes are necessarily material and semiotic: the way in which they inhabit material existence enables them to be perceived and experienced, and by being perceived and experienced they initiate semiosis (113). The modes’ material nature determines what kinds of expressions can be made in the mode for semiotic purposes, and their semiotic nature determines which elements of the mode form meaningful expressions (113–114). The material positioning of different modes and expressions establishes further connections between them. How the recipient interprets the relevance of the varying textual modes and their relationships is based on the specific medium being used: the recipient recognizes that certain forms of expression are more or less relevant in certain media based on

conventions related to that medium. The medium therefore affects both the material and the semiotic aspects of the textual modes: it determines which modes and which expressions are likely to apply to the communicative situation at hand as well as the ways in which they are likely to be interpreted (123).

This framing of how multimodality works reflects Littau's notion that media set the framework within which meaning becomes possible (2016, 83). The material nature of the medium enables signs to be received and for meaning to be interpreted from them. Furthermore, the material objects and phenomena involved act as textual modes themselves and contribute to the overall process of interpretation (Armstrong 2016, 102–103; Coldiron 2016, 97), with their semiotic relevance determined in part by the conventions of the medium. Since materiality is what enables signs to be transmitted, materiality also sets limits on what forms the signs can take; and, since the semiotic process is fundamentally affected by the material form in which the signs are presented, materiality also sets limits on what meanings they can communicate. Rephrased in Pettersson's terms, the material text represents the individual material form of the text in a specific communicative situation, and as such it includes a material representation of the sign-complex associated with the text. These representations are a material aspect of the textual mode, while the signs that recipients identify from them are a semiotic aspect.

The material and semiotic features of the sign-complex are utterly interdependent and in constant interaction, and they are therefore subject to the same influences: co-textual factors arising from other textual modes that affect what forms the signs can be presented in and what meanings can be constructed from them, and contextual factors arising from the icotic environment in which the text is received that affect what kinds of signs the text is taken to represent and what the signs are understood to convey. These phenomena are varied and complex by nature, but if multi-ontological and multimodal textual theories are combined with the semiotic theories explored in the previous section, they can all be analysed from the shared point of view of materiality (Figure 3). A text, then, is “a materially constrained and, thus, structured instance in the never-ending semiotic process” that exists “by virtue of the ability of human beings to materialize meaning into form” (Marais 2019, 125). It is a combination of the semiotic possibilities enabled by a specific material medium and the material forms required by a specific sign-complex. These possibilities and requirements are, in turn, determined by the specific icotic context.

Rephrased again in terms used by Peirce, the icotic context surrounding the text could be seen as the sphere of objects conceivable to the recipient of the text as they connect the signs they perceive in the text to their objects, creating interpretants. Pettersson's multi-ontological model of the text invites comparisons to Peirce's model of the sign not just by its tripartite nature but by the relationships between its parts. A text cannot be just a physical copy, or a compilation of signs, or meaning existing in the mind of its sender or recipient. A text necessarily involves all three, just like a sign is necessarily connected with an object and an interpretant; the three elements are conceptually distinct but functionally inseparable.

Translation as meaning-construction under co-textual and contextual constraints

A material approach to semiosis and textuality gives translation studies a theoretical basis that allows for material forms, semiotic signs, and cognitive meanings to be considered

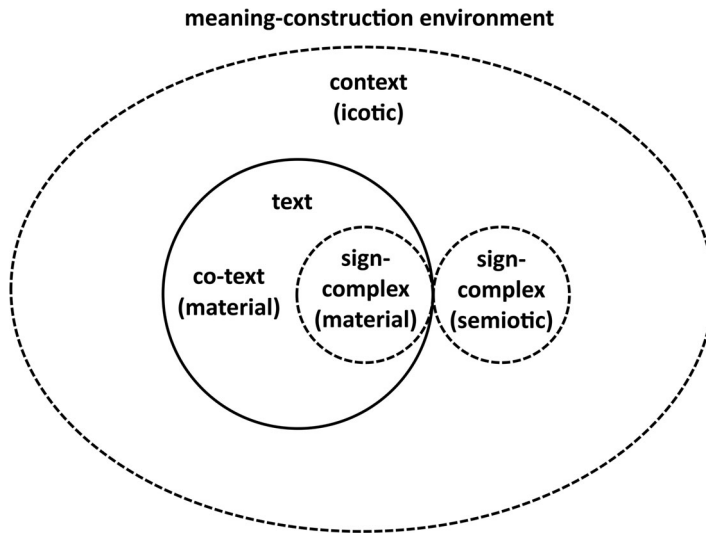


Figure 3. The text-cluster reframed in the terms of multimodality and icosis.

under a shared framework while still allowing clear distinctions to be made between them. This is reflected in the two key notions that have so far been built on the basic principles of materiality. Firstly, semiosis is a constant process that is only momentarily stabilized into meaning through the active construction of meaning under material constraints and icotic pressures. Secondly, if the materially-stabilized product of this semiotic activity is seen as a text, the production of a text involves the compilation of a sign-complex to be communicated among other textual modes (meaning-making), while the reception of a text involves identifying semiotic sign-complexes from the material text, assessing the relevance of different textual modes, and interpreting meaning from them (meaning-taking).

The notion of translation brings an added complication to this conceptualization of textual meaning-making and -taking. The translator inhabits a dual role in the process of textual communication: they are simultaneously the recipient of the original text and the sender of its translated version, a meaning-taker and a meaning-maker. When talking about translation, the interpreting and compiling of signs can therefore be collectively referred to as “meaning-construction”, since translation necessarily involves both the interpretation of an original and the production of a derivative work.

One way to start investigating how this combination of roles works in practice is by thinking of translation as material text transfer (e.g. Pym 1992). Anthony Pym’s conceptualization of translation and localization as the material distribution of texts (2004) puts special emphasis on the material nature of the process of communicating meaning through translation. Pym’s work has also been utilized in previous research on translation and materiality (Haapaniemi and Laakkonen 2019, 64–65). If Pym’s framing is rephrased in Merrell’s terms, translation involves taking meaning from a source text and making meaning in the form of a target text located in a certain environment, which is defined by the “*quantity* of distribution and the degrees of linguistic and cultural diversity that create *resistance* to that distribution” (Pym 2004, 11, original emphasis). If a

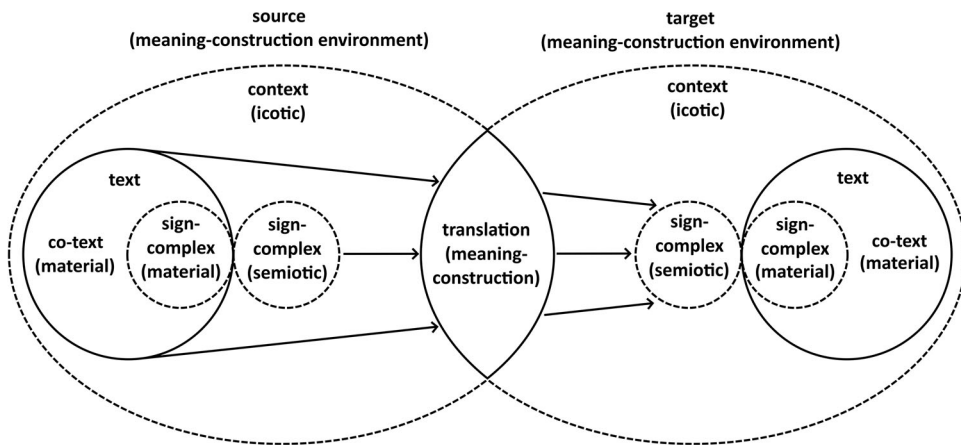


Figure 4. Translation as a material process of meaning-construction under co-textual and contextual constraints.

text is seen as the combination of the semiotic possibilities of a specific medium and the material forms of a specific sign-complex, then Pym's notion of quantity can be seen as the force that limits the composition of the material forms of the signs, while linguistic and cultural resistance is what limits the semiotic possibilities of the text as a whole.

To start unpacking these concepts from the latter, the notion of lingua-cultural resistance could be seen as a language- and culture-centred framing of the same phenomenon that Robinson recognizes on a more general level as icosis. The icotic pressures noted by Robinson would include the differences in the shared ways of thinking and speaking between the group for which the original text was created and the group for which the translation is created, as well as the different "socioaffective ecologies" involved in those groups that require different approaches to facilitate semiosis as intended (Robinson 2016, 83). The notion of quantity, however, is something more closely related to the structure of the translation being created. In effect, it is the form that the translation is expected to occupy as part of the wider text and within its wider context of reception (Pym 2004, 87–88). Materiality determines the range of expressions available for semiotic purposes in each textual mode (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala 2017, 113–114), which means that quantity is the central vector by which the other modes of the text restrict the form of the mode in which the translator operates. The material form of the sign-complex produced by the translator must therefore fit in with its material co-text. At the same time, the semiotic aspect of the sign-complex must fit in with its icotic context: the sign-complex must be compiled such that when it is received in the intended icotic context as part of a material text, it enables recipients to construct the relevant meanings the translator has derived from the source text. Viewed in this way, meaning-making as part of the production of a material target text involves two constraining forces: icotic pressures that set conditions on semiotic content, and quantitative pressures that set conditions on structural form.

When the relationships between the distinct-but-inseparable textual elements involved in semiosis are explicated like this, translation appears as an *asymmetrical* process (Figure 4). The translator's meaning-taking involves the material text as a

whole, but the product of the translator's meaning-making is a sign-complex, not a material object. As such, its communication to a recipient must involve a material medium. The semiotic sign-complex must therefore be formulated so as to fit into a certain textual space and a certain semiotic space, as determined by the material co-text and the icotic context. This model is comparable in structure to other models of the translation process, such as Andrew Chesterman's causal model (2017, 129), but the multi-ontological notion of textuality employed in this model allows an added layer of nuance related to the intricate interplay of the material and semiotic dimensions of the sign and how the co-textual and contextual elements involved affect both. In this way, this model also elaborates on the notion of *skopos* (Reiß and Vermeer 2013) by making an explicit distinction between co-text and context as they determine the function of the translation. In addition, by utilizing concepts like "sign-complex" and "icotic context", this model avoids defining translation solely in terms of narrower concepts like "language" and "culture" while still allowing for translation to be studied in those terms when necessary.

Together, a multi-ontological and multimodal concept of the text and an asymmetrical conceptualization of the translation process allow a comprehensive but structured view of the different material and semiotic factors determining textual communication and of the varied forms of non-linguistic meaning involved. This is a widely applicable but highly generalized model of translation: either end of the process can involve anything that functions as a sign in the Peircean sense. This means that, for example, no fundamental distinction needs to be made between interlingual ("translation proper"), intralingual and intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 1959), since they all involve the same meaning-making and meaning-taking phenomena as they manifest in textual communication.

Conclusion: Towards a comprehensive material approach to translation

Materiality provides a useful framework for translation studies because it recognizes both the fundamental connections and the practical distinctions between the material, semiotic, and socio-cognitive dimensions of textual communication. For one, this allows traditional language- and culture-based approaches to translation to be connected with more generalized reconceptualizations of translation as a phenomenon. With a material approach, research perspectives focusing on language and culture are still possible when warranted, but research involving other types of meaning-construction does not need to take place within a language-centric framework. Instead, new approaches can gain from existing insights on translation as linguacentric theory and methodology are recontextualized in a general semiotic framework. Similarly, materiality connects traditional approaches to a more comprehensive philosophy of meaning while enabling them to retain the advantages of specialization. In a sense, materiality provides TS with a philosophically sustainable way of working with verbal language and human culture by redefining and recontextualising their operating principles in terms of general-level semiotics.

Materiality also shows that the study of translation has something to offer to textual theory and to semiotics. The translator – being simultaneously a recipient and sender of a text, both meaning-taker and meaning-maker – has a unique perspective on

textual communication: they receive and interpret the source text as a whole, but they communicate that interpretation forward by compiling a new complex of signs to be included in a target text, which is then received as a whole by the target audience. Translation therefore requires semiotic and textual theories that allow for some distinction between the text as a whole and a specific semiotic sign-complex related to it but that still do not contradict the non-fragmentary worldview represented by materiality. The theories utilized in this article provide some examples of such approaches, but there is much demand for further analysis.

In fact, what the material approach to TS needs next is for it to be applied in actual case studies. Some preliminary attempts have already been made on the subject of song translation (Haapaniemi and Laakkonen 2019), and the discussions in this article suggest many further venues of inquiry. For one, the concept of materiality should be tested in the context of extremely language-centric translation tasks, such as professional translation environments where translators routinely work with digital texts whose co-text and context are obscured. If the material approach is truly applicable to all texts, then it should also be able to offer new insights even in cases where a non-linguacentric approach seems counterintuitive. In contrast, the concept of the material text should also be tested in the context of multimodality, where a wealth of specialized translation theories already exists. Materiality should allow for these specialized models to be recontextualized in terms of general translation and textual theory. Furthermore, materiality is a clear concern for cognitive approaches to TS – for example, there are parallels between materiality and the extended mind hypothesis as it applies to translation (e.g. Risku and Rogl 2021, 490–491) – but discussion on the actual cognitive implications of the semiotics of materiality has so far been limited. Any future discussion of materiality would therefore do well to utilize concepts of extended cognition, just as cognitive approaches might benefit from integrating material principles.

The material approach has much to contribute to TS in general. If traditional translation concepts can be linked to a semiotic reconceptualization of translation while also acknowledging the material realities involved, TS can perhaps better respond to the calls for an outward turn (Bassnett and Johnston 2019; Zwischenberger 2019), adopt a transdisciplinary “post-TS” attitude (Gentzler 2017), and extend its theoretical influence to a wide range of other fields. A material approach would allow TS to benefit from its long history of language-based expertise as well as broaden its definition of the fundamental phenomenon of translation to also apply to the varied kinds of transformative processes studied in other fields. In fact, while materiality has much to offer in terms of theoretical discussion and practical analysis within the field, perhaps it is in its outwards-facing identity where TS could benefit from a material approach the most. As noted by Piotr Blumczynski (2016), reflecting on translation inescapably means reflecting on much larger issues, which is why the study of translation “takes us into a surprisingly broad range of territories and confronts us with the most fundamental of questions” (ix). This makes TS uniquely situated as an academic discipline to overcome the epistemological prejudices that complicate the study of the entanglement of matter and meaning both in the natural sciences and in the humanities. With a comprehensive material approach, translation studies could stand as an example – both to the rest of academia and to the wide world beyond – of how the historical barriers between the two domains can effectively be torn down.

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