

# Kristeva's Impact on Translation and the Interplay of Intertextuality, Transposition and Intersemiosis

## Abstract

This essay attempts to present the impact of Kristeva's concepts of intertextuality and transposition on translation studies. The concept of intertextuality contributed significantly to the study of the concept of intersemiosis, although quite often it is difficult to distinguish the two in translation studies. Interestingly, even though intersemiosis or intersemiotic translation is the object of study in translation studies, the translation of intertextuality is a much more prominent focus for translation scholars. At the same time, intersemiosis is considered the most important subject for translation scholars and translation semioticians, who should have the first say. To sum up, Kristeva's important contribution lies in the fact that two important terms, "intertextuality" and "transposition," important terms for the study of literature, have also become objects of study in theoretical and applied translation studies.

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## Keywords

*Kristeva, intertextuality, transposition, intersemiosis, translation studies*

## Semiotics and Translation

Very early on, translation studies used semiotic terms existing in other disciplines, mainly introduced from literary translation and linguistics. Semiotics as a theory and method of cultural analysis was expected to interact with translation, a cultural activity whose roots go a long way back in history, as well as to expand its boundaries by participating in what translation studies calls the *cultural turn*.

The interdependency of translation and culture was noted by Umberto Eco, according to whom "culture continuously translates signs into signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons

[...] [and] in this way it proposes to its members an uninterrupted chain of cultural units, composing other cultural units, and thus translating and explaining them” (Eco 1976, 71). Early semiotic theorists, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Juri Lotman, Roman Jakobson, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, address the translational dimension of cultural phenomena. More specifically, Peirce argues that meaning is “the translation of a sign into another system of signs” (Peirce 1931–1958, 4:127). Lotman considers that “[t]he instrument of semiotic research is translation” (Lotman 1990, 271). Jakobson proposes a typology of translation inspired from the concept of *equivalence*, a concept of great concern to later translation scholars, arguing that “translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes” (Jakobson 1959, 233).

In the interaction between semiotics and translation, no other term has been so widely accepted by translation scholars as *intertextuality*, widely used in the study of literature before its adoption in translation studies. It even marginalized the term *intersemiosis*, associated with translation before “intertextuality.” In fact, translation scholars were not excited by the concept of intersemiosis, but welcomed intertextuality more since intertextuality was associated with the relationship between linguistic texts. Greimas and Courtés point out that “[c]overing and expanding, without contradicting it, the concept of intertextuality, was imposed over that of intersemiosis, in semiotic theory, in the name of respect for immanence” (Greimas and Courtés 1986, 119).

Although Kristeva’s work is not related to translation studies, the concepts of intertextuality and transposition, which she introduced and analyzed, became key concepts in that field. As Eco and Nergaard observe, “[t]ranslation studies is increasingly adopting an interdisciplinary approach to the study of translation as intertextual and intercultural transposition” (Eco and Nergaard 2001, 218). Both terms seem to attract the interest of translation scholars as they refer to the passage from one cultural text to another, highlighting the relationships between them.

## Intertextuality and Translation

The dimension of translation emerged in Kristeva’s work through the concept of *transformation*, i.e. the *permutation* of texts. More

specifically, Kristeva argues that “every text is the absorption and transformation of another text” (Kristeva 1969, 85).<sup>1</sup> This is a very interesting position in literature; however, it poses a few problems for translation studies, as it is very important to determine the source text in intralingual and interlingual translation.

For translation studies scholars, the concept of intertextuality was directly linked to Kristeva’s own research, later further pursued by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette (Barthes 1973; Genette 1992, 1997a, 1997b). The concept of intertextuality has been present in European thought since the 1920s, thanks to the translinguistic analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin, disseminated in France thanks to the studies of Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 1969). Acknowledging Kristeva’s contribution, Greimas and Courtés state that the pre-theoretical concept of intertextuality is part of Kristeva’s multidirectional and avant-garde vision of the Text, defined in terms of process and production (Greimas and Courtés 1986, 119–20). For Kristeva, intertextuality is “a crossing of statements taken from other texts [...] a transposition into communicative speech of previous or synchronic statements [...] which evades intersubjectivity” (1969, 378). It is worth mentioning that Kristeva draws a distinction between two types of intertextuality: *horizontal* and *vertical*. More precisely,

[the] horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and vertical axis (text-context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: namely that each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts), where at least one other word (text) can be read. In Bakhtin’s work, these two axes, which he calls *dialogue* and *ambivalence*, are not clearly distinguished. Yet, what appears as lack of rigor is, in fact, an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*. (Kristeva 1980, 66; emphasis in original)

Basil Hatim observes that “such taxonomies are of little use, say, in the practice of translating, unless related to the complex decision-making process that typifies activities such as translation”

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French are the author’s.

(Hatim 1997, 31).<sup>2</sup> Overall, translation scholars insist that intertextuality should be acknowledged by the translator, who should translate it to achieve successful cultural communication. Thus, Lawrence Venuti argues that “[i]ntertextuality is central to the production and reception of translations [...] The creation of a receiving intertext allows a translation to be read and comprehended by translating-language readers [...] Intertextuality enables and complicates translation, preventing it from being an untroubled communication, and opening the translated text to interpretive possibilities that vary with cultural constituencies in the receiving situation” (Venuti 2009, 57). Moreover, “the intertextuality of texts enables translators to find relevant evidence and references in translation practice, but the intertextuality of texts also puts forward higher requirements for translators in terms of cultural quality” (Long and Yu 2020, 1109). In short, the translation of instances of intertextuality poses a challenge.

It is worth noting that the translation of intertextuality is not only a challenge for interlingual translation but also occupies an important place in translation studies subfields such as *adaptation* and *audiovisual translation*. Georges Bastin highlights the importance of intertextuality to adaptation, “given that the reader is assumed to compare the adapted text not only with the original but also with other adaptations and similar texts in an ongoing dialogical process” (Bastin 2021, 13). Particularly in the case of humorous communication in which adaptations or intersemiotic translations of already familiar cultural texts, such as films, theatrical plays, etc., are produced, this risk is much greater. Marta Muñoz Gil observes that “intertextuality is one of the fundamental strategies used to convey most of the parody and the satirical content [...] Intertextuality may be present either in implicit references to films or other audiovisual programmes or in references to past events, just to mention a few possibilities” (Gil 2009, 148).

The recursive and evocative aspect in the above texts, characterizing intertextuality and intersemiosis, has led several researchers to directly link the two phenomena. Panagiotis Sakellariou emphasizes the intersemiotic aspect of intertextuality since “[i]n audiovisual

<sup>2</sup> According to Honghui Zhao, “[a]pplying the concepts introduced by Kristeva and citing the work of Bakhtin, Hatim continues to distinguish between these two concepts. In horizontal intertextuality the relation between two texts is explicit, that is, a text, or extract thereof, written in reply to or development of another one, for example. In contrast, vertical intertextuality is more implicit, and may relate to writing conventions” (Zhao 2017, 121)

translation, intertextuality involves greater inter-semiotic interaction between different elements of the situation, and in that respect the translated text can be said to come closer to Kristeva's concept of a translinguistic apparatus" (Sakellariou 2021, 269). Da'an Pan argues that "[t]ranslation in terms of intertextuality and subtextuality can be called 'intersemiotic translation', to borrow Roman Jakobson's term" (Pan 2000, 58). In my opinion, translation scholars and translation semioticians should treat this connection, however justified, with caution because of the extent of intersemiotic translation, as we shall see below.

## Transposition and translation

The notion of intertextuality is closely related to that of *transposition*. Kristeva claims that "transposition is essential for intertextuality, which controls the signified process of a text" (Kristeva 1974, 340). Transposition is also associated with translation since the latter involves the exchange and permutation of signs:

We shall call *transposition* the signifying process' ability to pass from one sign system to another, to exchange and permute them; and *representability* the specific articulation of the semiotic and the thetic for a sign system. Transposition plays an essential role here inasmuch as it implies the abandonment of a former sign system, the passage to a second via an instinctual intermediary common to the two systems, and the articulation of the new system with its new representability. (Kristeva 1984, 60; emphasis in original)

When, in her later work, Kristeva analyzes the aspect of forgiveness, she states that "writing is transformation, transposition, translation" (Kristeva 1989, 217), directly relating transposition to translation. It should be noted that the term "transposition" is widely used in translation studies (both as a translation technique and as a cultural phenomenon). In this light, Dinda L. Gorlée observes that "[a]s a translation-related concept, Kristeva's transposition shows the possibility of the signifying process to transform itself and be transformed" (Gorlée 2004, 58). For Gorlée, "transposition is compatible with Bakhtin's dialogism

and akin to the earlier concept, intertextuality, as well as to Greimas' *intersémioticit *" (Gorl e 1994, 22).<sup>3</sup>

In fact, "transposition" is used by both Jakobson and Kristeva, and quite common in translation studies. In a seminal article, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Jakobson identifies *transposition* with *intersemiotic translation* or *transmutation*. More precisely, Jakobson argues that "only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another – or interlingual transposition – from one language into another – or, finally, intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting" (Jakobson 1959, 238). It is through this third category, apparently influenced by the Paris School of Semiotics, that Jakobson first links semiotics to translation.

Jakobson's use of "transposition" suggests an openness to include all the transmutations of semiotic systems, not all necessarily linguistic, in translation phenomena. In this situation, the concept of transposition may prove useful, a possibility highlighted also by other researchers. Britt W. Svenhard argues that, "when extending Jakobson's principle to include the translation of any system of signs into any other system, Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality and her term transposition may be applied" (Svenhard 2021, 408).

In his seminal 1959 work, Jakobson uses intersemiotic translation or transmutation as an umbrella term for transposition. However, Nicola Dusi considers transposition as an umbrella term for all intersemiotic phenomena:<sup>4</sup>

it can be proposed that all cases of "intersemiotic translation," "transmutation" or "adaptation" should be grouped together in the sphere of transposition, irrespective of whether they are audiovisual, musical, theatrical, performative, and so on. [...] The term "transposition," on the other hand, by virtue of the prefix "trans," involves a going beyond (as in "transgress") and a transferral (as in "transfuse"), drawing attention to the notion of moving beyond

<sup>3</sup> A decade later Gorl e reiterated this position, stating that "Julia Kristeva introduced into this body of thought the notion of transposition, a notion that crosses Saussure's division between signifier and signified and approaches Greimas' 'intersemioticity'" (Gorl e 2004, 57).

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Jo o Queiroz, Ana Paula Vitorio and Ana Luiza Fernandes observe that "[i]n interarts and in intermediality studies, intersemiotic translation is described as medial transposition" (Queiroz, Vitorio and Fernandes 2022, 231).

the original text, passing through it, in other words, multiplying its semantic potential. (Dusi, 2015, 202–3)

This can be better understood since “[t]ransposition corresponds to an extremely rich and varied field of writing practices, or more exactly of rewriting among translation” (Limat-Letellier and Miguet-Ollagnier 1998, 39). The term “transposition” seems to better describe the passage from one cultural text to another, and this may be one reason why it is preferred by literary scholars. Translation is defined as the transposition of a *prototext* into a *metatext*<sup>5</sup> linking two more or less similar textocultural worlds (Osimo 2011).

## Intersemiosis in translation

Intersemiotic translation was proposed as a type of translation by Jakobson. As a structuralist linguist and semiotician, Jakobson considers the linguistic system necessary in intersemiotic translation and argues that “[i]ntersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 1959, 233). His examples range from verbal art to music, dance, cinema, and painting. In these examples, he not only speaks of intersemiotic translation and transmutation, but uses a third term as well, transposition. Jakobson always considers language as the primary semiotic system, the basic scientific position of the Paris School of Semiotics with which he was affiliated. Thus, Jakobson never discusses the issue of intersemiotic translation without language as one of the two poles in the translation process.

It is worth mentioning that Jakobson proposed the three terms to describe the interpretation of verbal signs by nonverbal signs (Jakobson 1959). However, nowadays, semioticians accept that intersemiotic translation may occur among nonverbal messages (e.g. Lawendowski 1978; Sonesson 1996; Torop 2000; Fabbri 2008; Kourdis

<sup>5</sup> The two terms are related to the intersemiotic environment and to the act of translation. As Peeter Torop claims, “if we start from the already created text that switches into the intersemiotic space of culture it, as a prototext, becomes a foundation for an infinite number of metatexts; it creates intertextual and other connections and loses its ontological boundaries in the end. [...] Evaluating a text from the side of reception we can, on the one hand, estimate the translatability of a text into other texts and into other sign systems by the comparison of the prototext and metatext” (Torop 2004, 63).

and Yoka 2014). This position is aptly expressed by Susan Petrilli, who states that “translative processes may be internal to the same language; they may occur from verbal sign systems to nonverbal sign systems and vice versa; or among nonverbal sign systems” (Petrilli 2003, 18). Absence of the language system makes the translation between iconic messages, also known as *intericonicity*, part of intersemiotic translation, or transmutation, or transposition. Indeed, it provides an opportunity for semioticians to undertake further categorizations of this cultural phenomenon. Within this framework, Göran Sonesson claims that “we will have to take into account the possibility of *intrapictorial translation* (e.g., exchanging one drawing for another) and *interpictorial translation* (e.g., substituting a photograph for a drawing)” (Sonesson 1996, 10; emphasis in original).

### Intertextual or intersemiotic translation?

It was argued above that intertextuality, although introduced later in the field, has had more impact on translation studies than intersemiosis. At the same time, there appears to be a tendency to use the two terms interchangeably, which creates confusion as both intertextuality<sup>6</sup> and intersemiosis, as cultural phenomena, are linked to other texts. A problem arises when intertextuality is used outside of the linguistic text and, in particular, when addressing iconic texts (metatexts).

According to Hatim, intertextuality “is an all-pervasive textual phenomenon which, especially when opaque, can be an important source of ambiguity in texts and thus a particularly problematic area in translation” (Hatim 1997, 29). Intertextuality, however, can involve either complete texts or parts of them, without thereby being necessarily held by the question of the source text. For intersemiosis as a cultural phenomenon characterized by a translational dimension, identifying the source text (prototext) is important, and usually these texts are cultural texts deeply rooted in a shared cultural memory. As both link cognitive cultural texts, I claim that anything intersemiotic is always intertextual; however, the converse is not necessarily true. This is because intersemiosis is associated with transmuting the informational load,

<sup>6</sup> Zhao agrees that “[a]s [i]ntertextuality can be discussed at different levels, it may cause confusion” (Zhao 2017, 126).



whereas intertextuality can involve simply an allusion or a connection to a very small part of the informational load of the original source.

Another problem is that a special case of intersemiosis, intericonicity, is also confused with intertextuality. Intericonicity is too often defined as the *intertextuality of images* or *visual intertextuality*. Thus, Thierry Groensteen claims that intericonicity is the persistent and highly dynamic visual intertextuality that pervades a text and activates another process that slows down reading (Groensteen 2017). Anne-Marie Houdebine argues that “the notion of intertextuality has been extended to relations between discourses (intersubjectivity) or between iconic (intericonicity) and media texts (intermediality)” (Houdebine 2009, 213). Yves Quairiaux claims that “the notion of intericonicity relays that of intertextuality to explore the manifest or secret relationships between images” (Quairiaux 2001). The above positions seems to be answered by Beatriz Hoster, María José Lobato Suero and Alberto Manuel Ruiz Campos who claim that,

[w]hile “intertextuality” initially refers to literary works only, the notion has been expanded to refer to artistic allusions in other media and art forms as well. In order to develop more distinctive frameworks, art historians have advocated using the term “interpictoriality” (some have even suggested “intericonicity”) instead [...] This notion refers to the process of an image referring to another image, whether painting, an illustration in a book, or a movie. (Hoster, Lobato Suero and Ruiz Campos 2017, 93)

Similarly, for Claire Omhovere, “[i]nter-iconicity is modelled on the concept of intertextuality as initially defined by Julia Kristeva and later elaborated by Gérard Genette” (Omhovere 2017, 147). Several translation semioticians consider intericonicity to be a special case of intersemiotic translation,<sup>7</sup> based on the fact that intersemiotic translation can be realized without the use of the linguistic semiotic system. Below, I provide two examples to define the boundary between intertextuality and intericonicity as a special case of intersemiosis. I argue that if we approach these two cultural phenomena from the viewpoint of information, we can understand the difference between them more easily.

<sup>7</sup> See Kourdis and Yoka 2014.

The first example involves a snapshot of a television commercial by the Greek telecommunications company Cosmote (fig. 1), which shows four men on a zebra crossing in Athens, talking on their mobile phones in Athens, talking on their mobile phones. The image recalls the picture on the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album cover, in which George Harrison, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, and John Lennon are seen striding across the road outside EMI studios in St John's Wood – probably the most iconic photo of the band (fig.2). However, the Greek snapshot clearly does not take place in London nor does it depict the Beatles, so the two iconic texts do not share the same informational load. This is an instance of intertextuality. On the other hand, the postage stamp issued in 2007 (fig. 3) and the 2020 animation (fig. 4), although they belong to different semiotic systems from the album cover, share the same informational load and can be viewed as an intersemiotic translation, more specifically an intericonic one.



Fig 1: Caption from Cosmote TV spot (2022)



Fig. 2: The Beatles' walking photo across a pedestrian crossing in London (1969)



Fig.3: Royal Mail stamps (2007)



Fig. 4: Animation by Joe Gast (2020)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://bit.ly/3yGB8FE> (accessed March 13, 2024).

The second example comes from the 2015 refugee crisis: the two-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi, drowned on September 2, 2015 in the Mediterranean along with his mother and brother. The photo of the dead body recovered by Turkish police (fig. 5) made global headlines. To commemorate Aylan Kurdi, a few days later, on September 7, thirty people lay face down on a beach in Rabat, Morocco, in an attempt to recreate the harrowing scene (fig. 6).<sup>9</sup> The people sought to evoke the event, despite the numerous dissimilarities at the level of informational load (most of the people involved were adults, in Turkey and not in Morocco, thirty in number, not refugees but beachgoers, etc.). The semiotic systems relied upon were color and posture. Some wore the same combination of clothes – a red shirt and blue trousers – and stayed in position for about twenty minutes.



Fig. 5: The photo of drowned Aylan Kurdi



Fig. 6: Beachgoers commemorate Aylan Kurdi

On the other hand, transmuting the initial photo into a work of art made of sand (fig. 7)<sup>10</sup> or into a 120-square-meter mural (fig. 8),<sup>11</sup> by Justus Becker and Oğuz Şen in Frankfurt on March 9, 2016, were examples of the intersemiotic translation of the same informational load into different sign systems. Sand sculptures and murals belong to different semiotic systems from photography, since they have their own expression and structure.

These examples may all well be approached in the light of Jakobson's creative transposition or Kristeva's permutation of signs. In both cases we are talking about a transfer of information into a different medium

<sup>9</sup> See <https://bit.ly/3wsf2Uw> (accessed March 13, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> See <https://bit.ly/3LpAvTp> (accessed March 13, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> See <https://bit.ly/3Pxmiay> (accessed March 13, 2024).

or semiotic system, a kind of transformation possessing a translational dimension.



**Fig. 7:** Sand art showing Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi



**Fig. 8:** Mural of Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi  
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## Conclusions

The two phenomena, intertextuality and transposition or intersemiosis, which are common in everyday cultural communication, are closely related; however, we should distinguish them. Intertextuality and transposition or intersemiosis share the following characteristics:

- they are cultural semiotic phenomena
- they characterize the translation process as serial phenomena
- they refer to prior cultural texts
- they constitute a cognitive process
- they are based on shared cultural knowledge

Nevertheless, even though they recall other (previously created) cultural texts, the two do not necessarily share the same information. In my view, any intersemiotic translation has an intertextual relationship with its source text, but not every intertextual relationship is intersemiotic. This constitutes an essential difference between the two phenomena.

It is no surprise that intertextuality, “as an instrument of analysis [...] has not been systematically elaborated; rather, it has remained an underdeveloped category covering heterogeneous phenomena” (Sakellariou 2020, 270). It is quite typical that many translation scholars confuse the semiotic phenomena of intertextuality and transposition or intersemiosis, finding it difficult to discern their boundaries. They also

seem to have a better understanding of the concept of intertextuality, even though intersemiosis or transposition predates intertextuality.

In intertextuality there is a link (allusion, enthymeme, etc.) between texts that is not always obvious. The notion of intersubjectivity, to which Kristeva refers (Kristeva 1969), is not typical of intersemiosis, since the source and target texts are usually part of a shared cultural background. In addition, in the case of intersemiosis we speak of the transmutation/transposition of the informational load of the text. This procedure can be studied employing concepts such as *similarity*, *substitution*, or *reproduction* between two texts. These are translation concepts as well.

A high degree of subjectivity is involved in intertextuality. Recalling another cultural text, in whole or in part, requires extensive cultural knowledge, conditioned by the duration of the interpreter's contact with the intertext and, of course, by the personal experiences of the interpreter. In intersemiosis, however, which acknowledges the informational load of a cultural text, subjectivity is much diminished as it involves a greater extent of shared cultural knowledge. This is because the cultural texts being transmuted are recognizable texts, inscribed in so-called common cultural memory.

Kristeva's important contribution lies in the fact that "intertextuality" and "transposition," important terms for literature, have also become part of the research of theoretical and applied translation studies. They are also directly or indirectly linked to intersemiosis and its typologies, thus allowing the comprehension of the transmutation of cultural phenomena, that is, cultural communication.

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