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# Semiosis and intersemiotic translation

**Abstract:** This paper explores Victoria Welby’s fundamental assumption of meaning process (“semiosis” *sensu* Peirce) as translation, and some implications for the development of a general model of intersemiotic translation.

**Keywords:** translation model; semiosis; Victoria Welby; C. S. Peirce

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## 1 Introduction

According to Victoria Welby, semiosis and translation are inseparable phenomena:

*In What is Meaning?*, Welby described translation as “inter-translation,” a method of interpretation and understanding. And given that translative processes are structural to sign processes as they develop across systemic and typological boundaries, and that meaning is generated in the relation among signs, from a signifi- cal perspective, theory of translation and theory of sign and meaning are interconnected. (Petrilli 2009: 517)

In another passage: “Translation is therefore no less than a condition for understanding and interpretation of signifying behavior generally . . .” (Petrilli 2009: 518).

The consequences of this conception have not been explored in several areas of research (e.g., *translation studies*, *intermediality*, *interart studies*). This fundamental relation (semiosis-translation) has guided our research to the development of a general model of intersemiotic translation phenomena.<sup>1</sup> We have based our investigation on Peirce’s theory of sign (see Queiroz and Aguiar in press; Aguiar and Queiroz 2010a, 2010b). The Peircean approach to the semiotic process

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<sup>1</sup> Jakobson defines intersemiotic translation (IT) as a “transmutation or interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 2000 [1959]). We have assumed a broader sense of this notion including several sign systems and processes (see also Goriée 2005; Plaza 1987). Beyond that, we consider IT a semiosis process, as any translation process (see Aguiar and Queiroz 2010a).

(semiosis) is related to formal attempts to describe cognitive processes in general. His framework provides a pragmatic model of semiosis and a conception of mind as a sign-interpretation process. Here we start summarizing Peirce's model of semiosis and his fundamental typology of signs, from which we derive a model of translation with direct application to intersemiotic translation phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Peirce's theory of sign: Some basic notions

It is very well known that Peirce's semiotics is grounded on a list of logical-phenomenological categories – Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness – which corresponds to an exhaustive system of hierarchically organized classes of relations (see Houser 1997). This system makes up the formal foundation of his model of semiosis and of his classifications of signs (Murphey 1993: 303–306). According to Peirce's model, any description of semiosis involves a relational complex constituted by three terms *irreducibly* connected – Sign, Object, and Interpretant (S-O-I). The *irreducibility* indicates a logical property of this complex: the sign process must be regarded as associated to the *interpretant*, as an ongoing process of interpretation (see Hausman 1993: 9), and it is not decomposable into any simpler relation.

A sign is anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which [it] itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on ad infinitum. (CP 2.303)

A sign is also pragmatically defined as a medium for the communication to the interpretant of a *form* embodied in the object, so as to constrain, in general, the interpreter's behavior –

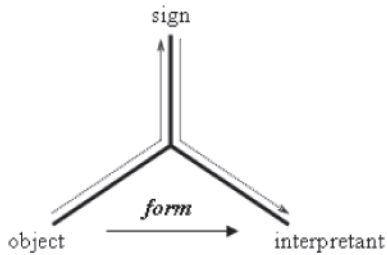
... a Sign may be defined as a Medium for the communication of a Form ... As a medium, the Sign is essentially in a triadic relation, to its Object which determines it, and to its Interpretant which it determines ... That which is communicated from the Object through the Sign to the Interpretant is a Form; that is to say, it is nothing like an existent, but is a power, is the fact that something would happen under certain conditions. (MS 793: 1–3)

The object of sign communication is a habit (a regularity, or a “pattern of constraints”) embodied as a constraining factor of interpretative behavior – a logi-

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<sup>2</sup> The application of Peircean triadic model of semiosis to translator/translated/interpreter relation was initially proposed by Steconni (1999), and more recently developed by Hodgson (2007). Gorié (1994, 2007), Damiani (2008), and Jeha (1997) are among the authors who consider appropriate Peircean approach to translation studies in general.

cally “would be” fact of response (see Queiroz and El-Hani 2006). *Form* is defined as having the “being of predicate” (*EP 2: 544*) and it is also pragmatically formulated as a “conditional proposition” stating that certain things would happen under specific circumstances (*EP 2: 388*).



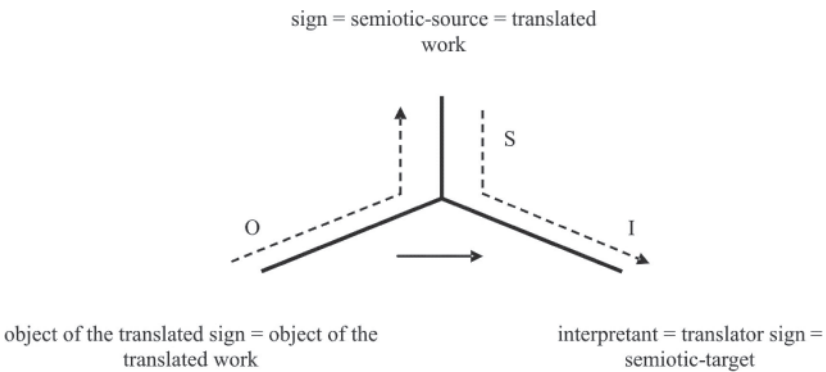
**Fig. 1:** Semiosis as a relation between three irreducibly connected terms (sign-object-interpretant, S-O-I). This triadic relationship communicates a form from the object to the interpretant through the sign (symbolized by the horizontal arrow). The other two arrows indicate that the form is conveyed from the object to the interpretant through a determination of the sign by the object, and a determination of the interpretant by the sign

Sign-mediated processes show a notable variety. There are three fundamental kinds of signs underlying meaning processes – icons, indexes, and symbols (*CP 2.275*). Icons are signs that stand for their objects through similarity or resemblance, no matter if they show any spatiotemporal physical correlation with an existent object (*CP 2.276*). In this case, a sign refers to an object in virtue of a certain quality that sign and object share. Indexes are signs that refer to an object due to a direct physical connection between them. Since in this case the sign should be determined by the object, for instance, through a causal relationship, both must exist as actual events. This is an important feature distinguishing iconic from indexical sign-mediated processes. Finally, symbols are signs that are related to their object through a determinative relation of law, rule or convention. A symbol becomes a sign of some object merely or mainly by the fact that it is used and understood as such.

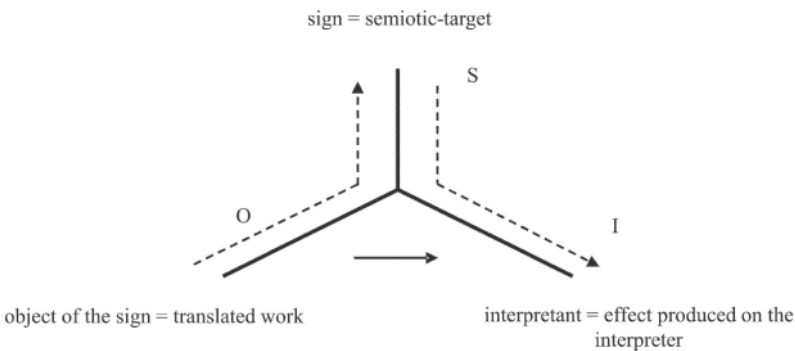
Generally speaking, an iconic sign communicates a habit embodied in an object to the interpretant as a result of a certain quality that the sign and the object share. Differently, an indexical sign communicates a habit embodied in an object to the interpretant as a result of a direct physical connection between sign and object. In symbolic sign process, the form which is communicated from the object to the interpretant through the sign is a lawful relationship between a given kind of sign and a given type of object (see Queiroz and El-Hani 2006).

### 3 Triadic translation model

An important consequence related to our premises, as specified above, indicates that translation is a triadic (S-O-I) relation, not a dyadic-bilateral one. We propose two competing models. (i) The sign is the semiotic source (translated work); the object of the translated sign is the object of the semiotic-source and the interpretant (produced effect) is the semiotic-target (translator sign; Figure 2). (ii) The sign is the semiotic-target (translator sign); the object of the sign is the semiotic-source (translated work) and the interpretant is the effect produced on the interpreter (interpretant; Figure 3).



**Fig. 2:** Triadic relation in which the sign is the translated work, the object of the sign is the object of the work, and the interpretant is the translator sign



**Fig. 3:** Triadic relation in which the sign is the target, the object of the sign is the translated work, and the interpretant is the interpreter

In an effort toward a better explanation of the models, we exemplify them with an intersemiotic translation from literature to dance. In this example, the choreographer Paula Carneiro Dias based her work, “Para o herói: experimentos sem nenhum caráter – corpo s/ papel,”<sup>3</sup> on a very famous Brazilian modernist novel: *Macunaíma* by Mário de Andrade.

Regarding *Macunaíma*, Candido and Castello assert that:

The book’s composition relies on indigenous legends (especially those from Amazon collected and published by the German ethnologist Koch-Grünberg), and the [sic] quotidian Brazilian life; it is a mixture of legends and popular traditions. The space and time are arbitrary, the fantastic assumes a pedestrian role and the mythology lyricism is fused, step by step, with the national joke, play, “malandragem,” which *Macunaíma* embodies (he is “the hero without a character”). (Candido and Castello 1997: 112)

Born in the heart of the jungle, *Macunaíma* is a complex of contradictory traits, and can, at will, magically change his age, his race, and his geographic location, to suit his purposes and overcome obstacles. Dramatizing aspects of Brazilian culture, *Macunaíma* undergoes sometimes hilarious, sometimes grotesque transformations until his final annihilation as the Great Bear constellation in the heavens.

Obviously there are several ways to translate *Macunaíma* into dance. Paula Dias focuses on specific properties of the novel, related to its current scholar interpretation. The novel’s hero represents the modernist movement of anthropophagy, meaning an opportunistic Brazilian artist choosing his/her cultural menu. The dancer recreates the anthropophagous act turning the modernist devouring metaphor into a concrete and material act of rolling on fragments of *Macunaíma*, printing the text on her naked body (see Figure 4).

According to the first model, the *sign-object-interpretant* (S-O-I) triad corresponds to the triadic relation: novel (S) – novel object (O) – dance choreography (I). In this case, the sign is *Macunaíma*, the novel; the object is the object of the novel that, in a very simplified definition, is the journey of a “hero without a character”; and the interpretant is the choreography “Para o herói: experimentos sem nenhum caráter – corpo s/ papel” (Figure 5). According to the second model, the S-O-I triad corresponds to the dance choreography (S) – novel (O) – effect on the

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3 The title of the dance work can be translated as: “For the hero: Experiments without character – body over paper.”

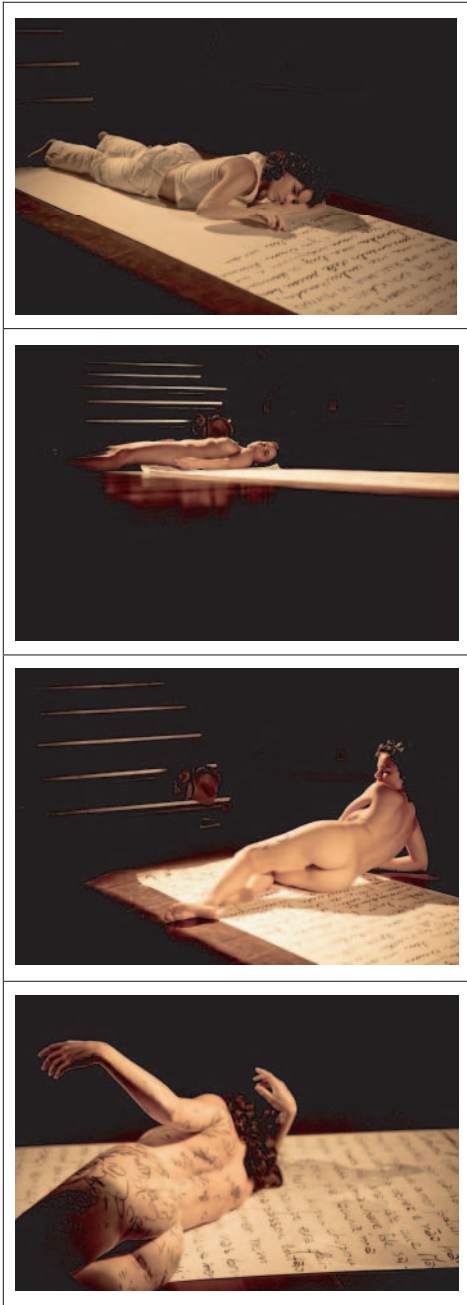
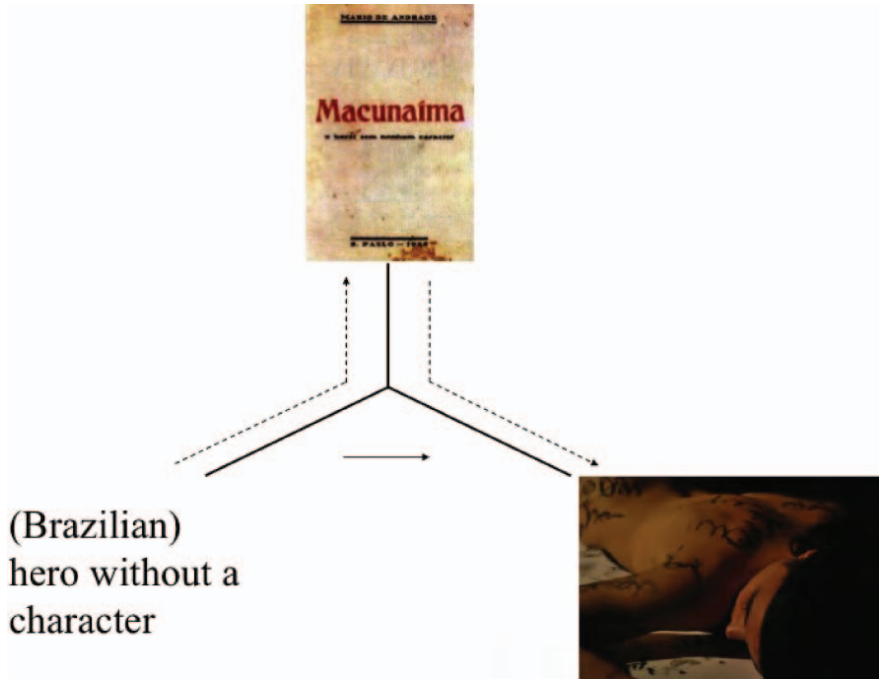


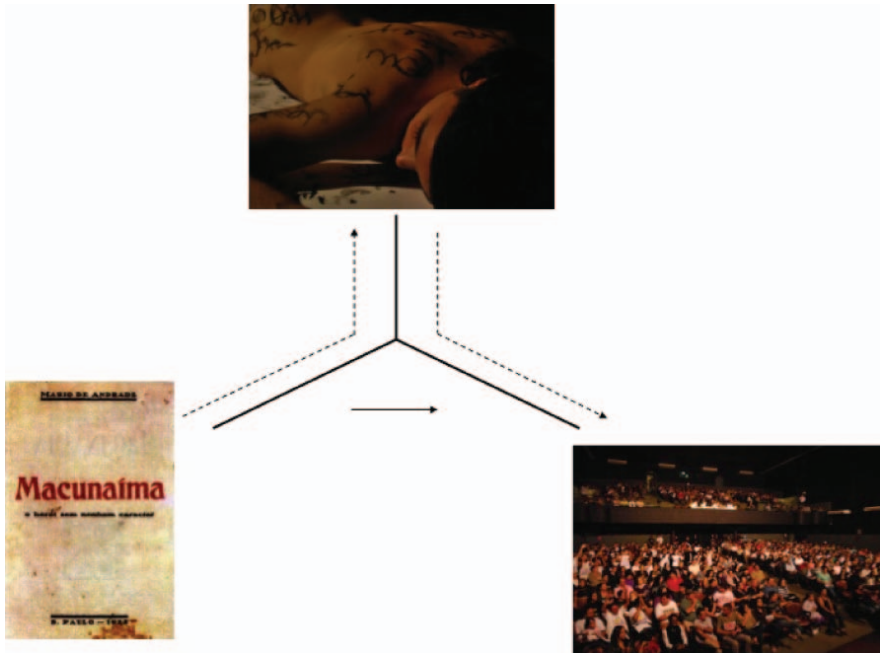
Fig. 4: Fragment of Macunaíma “printed” on Paula Dias (photos by Tiago Lima)



**Fig. 5:** Triadic relation in which the sign is the semiotic source (*Macunaíma* novel), the object of the sign is the object of the literary work (a fictional hero without a character), and the interpretant is the semiotic target (the dance choreography)

audience (I). Hence, the sign is the choreography “Para o herói . . .”; the object is *Macunaíma*, and the interpretant is the effect of the choreography on its audience (Figure 6).

According to the process described, the “form” communicated from the object to the effect (interpretant) and produced by means of the sign is different in each version. We could say that the second model is more adequate to describe this case, since the choreography selected the interpretative components of the novel, which are part of the material and structure of the novel, and not of its objects. In other words, the object of the sign (dance) is not the object of the novel, but the novel itself.



**Fig. 6:** Triadic relation in which the sign is the semiotic target (the dance choreography), the object of the sign is the semiotic source (Macunaíma novel), and the interpretant is the effect produced on the interpreter (on the audience of the choreography)

## 4 Conclusion

As we know, the relations of determination provide the way the elements in a triad are arranged in semiosis. According to Peirce, the Interpretant is determined by the Object through the mediation of the Sign (I is determined by O through S) (*MS 318*: 81). This is a result of two determinative relations: the determination of the Sign by the Object relatively to the Interpretant (O determines S in relation to I), and the determination of the Interpretant by the Sign in relation to the Object (S determines I relatively to O; De Tienne 1992). According to the models we have provided: (i) The dance is determined by the book regarding the effect produced on the viewer, and determines this effect in reference to the book, subsequently producing the effect to be determined by the book through the mediation of dance. In this case, what is communicated from the book to the effect on the viewer is the fact that something would happen under certain conditions. Alternatively, (ii) the book is determined by the legends in relation to the dance, and



determines the dance in reference to the legends, subsequently producing the dance to be determined by the legends through the mediation of the book. In this case, what is communicated from legends to dance through the book is the fact that something would happen under certain conditions.

According to our arguments, an approach to the intersemiotic translation phenomena cannot be viable if dissociated from a general theory of sign, which should provide (i) a model of semiotic processes and (ii) a classification of semi-otic morphological variety. There are several consequences derived from Peirce's theory of sign, and based on Welby's fundamental assumption. We have explored some of these consequences, especially when related to Peirce's theory of the sign. Peirce's model of semiosis describes a phenomenon as essentially triadic, dynamic, interpreter-dependent, and materially extended (embodied; Queiroz and Merrell 2006).

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