Teaching Intersemiotic Meaning Construction in Design

Anne Ketola

University of Tampere, Finland

anne.ketola@uta.fi

Abstract

In this paper I examine the mechanisms of intersemiotic meaning construction that are at play when we combine messages created by words and images. In order to ex-emplify the semiotic space that can be created between the two sign systems, I pro-vide examples of picturebook transla-tion; a process in which visual semiotic elements inevitably shape the transferal of verbal semiotic elements from one language to an-other. With the help of these examples, I wish to empirically illustrate how these mechanisms unfold and demonstrate the power of the visual semiotic to the reshape our interpretation of the verbal. I argue that creating a sensibility towards intersemi-otic meaning construction ought to be an integral part of the curriculum in all fields of communica-tion, including design. Knowledge of these mechanisms provides de-signers with a tool to create powerful messages in and across semiotic modes. I con-clude my discussion by outlining insights to inform the pedagogical practice of design training.

1. Introduction

Integrating different semiotic systems into coherent entities is a core skill for everyone working with communication, including designers and translators. In this paper I set out to explore how verbal and visual semiotic elements can be combined intersemiotically. As practical examples of intersemiotic meaning construction, I examine the Finnish translations of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, written by Beatrix Potter in 1902. The book has been translated into Finnish not once but three times. What sets these translation versions apart is that each of them is based on a different set of illustrations. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* has, in fact, been re-illustrated dozens of times. Frederick Warne, the publisher of the book, failed to register the copyrights of the book in the United States in early 20th century when they first started marketing the book in the country. Anyone was therefore able to contract an illustrator, create a new set of illustrations and sell their version of the book without restrictions (Mackey 1998). As mentioned above, three of these illustration versions have been translated into Finnish: Potter's original book in 1963, a version illustrated by Cyndy Szekeres in 2003, and a slightly abridged version of the story, illustrated by Lisa McCue, in 2005.

These three translation versions offer a unique opportunity to examine the way in which visual semiotic elements may shape the translation of verbal semiotic elements from one language to another: Here we have the same verbal elements interpreted against the backdrop of different visual landscapes. Each of these visual settings places the verbal story under a slightly different light, hence resulting in different translation solution. The aim of my paper, in other words, is to demonstrate how the intersemiotic relations of the visual and the verbal may guide our interpretation of a verbal message.

My paper is structured as follows: I start the discussion by examining the interface between the fields of design and translation. I aim to justify why the examination of translation activity might be able to contribute towards the conceptualization of design activity by reviewing what has been suggested about the aspects the two communication practices have in common. I conclude this section by introducing McDonald's (2008) discussion on principles for design language translation: translation principles that may help designers communicate with their clients in meaningful and convincing ways. I then introduce examples of intersemiotic meaning construction in the Finnish translations of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and its re-illustration versions. My analysis aims to demonstrate how the visual semiotic has guided the translators' interpretation of the verbal story; in other words, how intersemiotic meaning construction is reflected in the translation solutions. In the conclusion section of my paper, I review some of the insights gained from the analysis and discuss how these insights might inform the practice of design.

2. Languages in design, languages in translation

Albeit at first glance, the practice of design and the practice of translation might appear quite distinct, the two fields have been shown to share a considerable amount of conceptual ground. The parallels between the two fields are incisively explained by Zingale (2016: 1071-72): Both practices involve the ability to express explicitly something that was obscure or lacked the possibility of being communicated before, or reformulating something that had been expressed already, in order to enhance its expressive effectiveness.

Both design and translation involve the coordination of different ways of expressing content. Dym and Brey (2001: 6-7) observe that there are several design languages, in other words, languages used to articulate design knowledge. Gibbons and Brewer (2005: 113) establish that "A design language is what designers use to communicate designs, plans, and intentions to each other and to the producers of their artifacts". These languages include verbal information, used to describe projects, objects, constraints or limitations, visual information, used to provide pictorial descriptions, as well as mathematical models and numbers (Dym & Brey 2001). Expressions in these languages may take forms such as "flowcharts, storyboard forms, scripts, diagrams, sketches, and text descriptions" (Waters & Gibbons, 2004: 66-67). Dym and Brey go on to postulate that

> We recognize that different languages may be employed, that different representations offer different insights and utility, and that it is desirable to link these different languages in order to seamlessly model a designed artifact and the design process. (2001: 8)

As the authors emphasize in the above quote, it is important to be able to integrate these languages–or semiotic systems–into coherent entities. This skill is equally important for everyone working with communication, including designers and translators. When dealing with material conveying information via various semiotic systems, translators must be able to seamlessly link the different semiotic languages into a coherent artifact–a fitting translation.

In addition to coordinating the messages conveyed by the different semiotic systems, another core competence involved in the practice of design is the ability to transfer messages from one semiotic system to another. As Baule and Caratti (2016: 7) posit in their description of the design process, "the ability to articulate verbal meanings associated with visual design, and conversely, to interpret verbal messages in visual terms is a core skill". As discussed below, the process of conveying messages from one semiotic system to another is also involved in translation activity.

In addition to the discussion about the commonalities between translation and design presented above, a parallel has also been drawn between translation and an a sub-field of the design practice, namely the process of communication between designers and their clients. McDonald (2008) uses the metaphor of designers and their clients "speaking different languages"; in order to improve the communication process between these two parties, a process

of translation is in order. In the context of design, this entails a transfer from design languages into languages more readily accessible to the clients. McDonald describes this process as discovering the fundamental meanings of the design and finding representation methods that are best suited for conveying these meanings for the clients. As McDonald (2008: 20) also emphasizes, this type of translation often involves a transfer between visual languages and verbal languages. Discussing the transfer of meanings from one representation method to another leads us to intersemiotic translation, discussed in more detail in the following section of the paper.

Building on Massoud's (1988) guide for translation, McDonald introduces a set of principles for effective translation. He then discusses how these principles can be implemented in order to guide designers towards effectively communicating the essential qualities of a design message to their clients, and provides three principles for design language translation (2008: 23-29), which I have summarized as follows:

Separate meaning and form, in other words, the essential meaning of a design and the style and mechanics of the design language, in order to be able to describe the design in other ways.

Make the implicit explicit. The design may have aspects of meaning that are only present implicitly. Make these aspects of meaning explicit in the process of translation.

Make the translation fluent and smooth. Produce it in the form and style that match the client's own language. Examine the full effect of the final translation to ensure an elegant outcome.

In the conclusive section of my paper, I re-examine these principles in the light of intersemiotic meaning construction and offer what could be described as intersemiotically informed translation principles for design languages. Communication between designers and their clients is bound to draw on various semiotic modes. The process of translating the essential meaning of a design into another design language requires the ability to interpret inter-mode relationships.

3. Translators between word and image

Roman Jakobson's (1959/2000: 114) renowned translation typology identifies three types of translation: *intralingual translation* (interpreting verbal signs by means of other signs of the same natural language), *interlingual translation*, or translation proper (interpreting verbal signs by means of some other natural language) and *intersemiotic translation* (interpreting verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems). Even though the direction of intersemiotic translation is not reversible in Jakobson's original typology (e.g. words to images, but not the other way around), the notion of intersemiotic translation has since been broadened, for instance by Toury (1994: 1113), to involve two different sign systems, "whether one of them is verbal or not".

Intersemiotic translation, conveying information from one sign system to another, constitutes the main research interest of my paper. Translation studies have traditionally conceptualized its object of study as the transfer of

verbal signs by means of verbal signs of some other language–in Jakobson's terms, interlingual translation. Nonetheless, with the analysis presented below I wish to emphasize that the translation of multimodal material also involves the transfer of meaning from one semiotic system to another. As Petrilli (2003: 17) asserts, "In the first place, to translate is to interpret"; and translators of multimodal material interpret information coming in via different semiotic modes.

The role of the visual semiotic in translation needs to be examined from two essentially different perspectives. As Oittinen (1990: 45) writes, translators "try to make the text and illustration match each other", reflecting an intentional effort to scrutinize the visual semiotic and evaluate it in relation to the verbal in order to come up with a translation solution that accommodates to both of these sources of information. Damaskinidis (2015: 24) aptly describes:

> the translation of a multimodal text would involve examining the way the semiotic modes that compose this text are used to transfer the source text's (ST) meaning into another culture in the form of a translated target text (TT), and how the intersemiotic relations of these modes affect this process.

However, as Oittinen (ibid.) continues, translators have also "internalized the images from their reading". For this reason, the visual semiotic may also affect the translation process in ways that are not entirely intentional. This is one of the main arguments of my paper and, I believe, the most important insight my research has to offer for the practice of design training. The interpretation of multimodal messages involves instinctive parsing of different semiotics. It is often challenging–if not impossible–for us to disambiguate what our interpretation of multimodal artifacts consist of. Creating a sensibility to recognize these mechanisms is essential in all training involving communication.

4. Data analysis: Intersemiotic meaning construction in action

In this section of the paper, I introduce three examples of intersemiotic meaning construction in the Finnish translations of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and its re-illustration versions (for more examples, see Ketola 2016b). My analysis aims to demonstrate how the visual semiotic has guided the translators' interpretation of the verbal story; in other words, how the intersemiotic meaning construction is reflected in the translation solutions. Translation in these examples has obviously been interlingual: the verbal signs of the translation are based on a verbal sign of the original text. However, translation in these examples has also been intersemiotic: the verbal signs have been adapted and adjusted by extracting details from the visual signs. With each example, I first provide a sentence from the verbal story, from which I have highlighted in italics elements I wish the reader to pay special attention to. The two first example sentences are accompanied by sketches which represent the corresponding information in the different illustration versions.

Example 1. *An old mouse* **was running in and out over the stone door-step, carrying peas and beans to her family in the wood.**
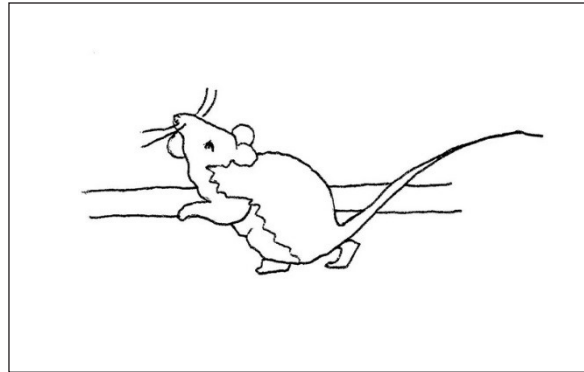

Figure 1. Mouse in Potter's illustration.

Example sentence 1 describes a mouse who Peter Rabbit encounters during his adventure in Mr. McGregor's garden. The translations of the verbal element *old mouse* in the above example offer an example of how intersemiotic mechanisms have affected the translators' choices in two of the illustration versions (this scene has been omitted, both verbally and visually, in McCue's illustration version). Potter's original illustration version (represented by the sketch in figure 1) presents a realistic-looking, gray mouse with a green pea in its mouth. The translator has transferred the source text information into Finnish as *old gray mouse* ("vanha harmaa hiiri"). One could claim that the visual semiotic elements have shaped the way in which the verbal elements are conveyed from one language to another: the color of the mouse–only represented in the visual semiotic in the source text–has been transferred into the verbal semiotic in the target language.
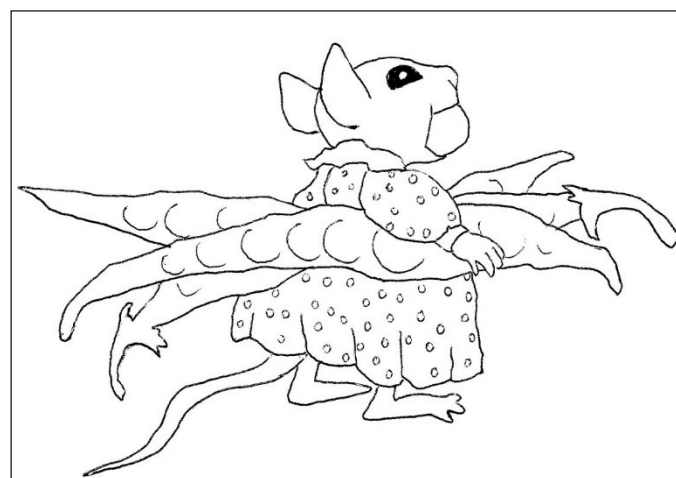

Figure 2. Mouse in Szekeres' illustration.

In the translation of Szekeres' illustration version (represented by the sketch in figure 2), the visual semiotic has affected the translation process in an alternative way, relating to the way in which the gender of the character is represented. Potter's own illustration depicts a realistic-looking animal, representing a species with no visible physiological differences between males and females of the same species. In other words, in Potter's original story, the gender of the mouse is only reflected by the possessive adjective her. Yet, the gender of the character has been intensified in the intersemiotic process of re-illustrating the story. Szekeres' illustration version depicts the character as pronouncedly female: it is wearing an old-fashioned, red dress with puff sleeves and a neat white collar. It is much more caricature-like than the mouse in Potter's original illustration, starting from the fact that it is standing in clearly upright position and it is carrying pea pods with its paws as if they were human hands. The new visual depiction of the character could be suggested to have influenced the translator of this illustration version: *old mouse* has been translated as *grandmother mouse* ("hiirimuori"). Intersemiotic meaning construction in the re-illustration version of the story has intensified the gender of the character to the extent that the gender has also been intensified in the translation.

Example 2. He *slipped* underneath the gate, and was safe at last in the wood outside the garden.
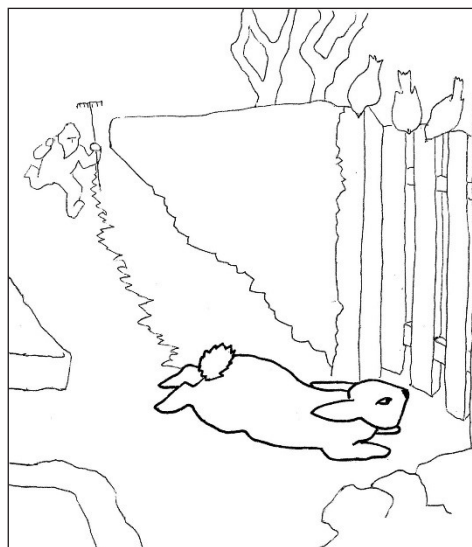

Figure 3. Peter and the gate in Potter's illustration.

Example 2 presents a phrase from the end of the story: Peter Rabbit exists the garden by slipping under the gate of Mr. McGregor's property. This action of slipping under the gate has been depicted differently in the three illustration versions and, consequently, the verb describing the action has taken on

differing meanings in the translation process. In Potter's illustration (sketch in figure 3), Peter Rabbit appears to be about to dive under the gate. Its body position emphasizes great speed, and even though the actual passing under the gate is not depicted in the illustration, there would appear to be enough space under the gate for the animal to swoop under it. In the translation of this illustration version, the verb *to slip* has been translated as "pujahtaa", which is the closest natural equivalent the Finnish language has for *slip*. The translation solution hence echoes the idea of moving from one place to another smoothly and with ease.
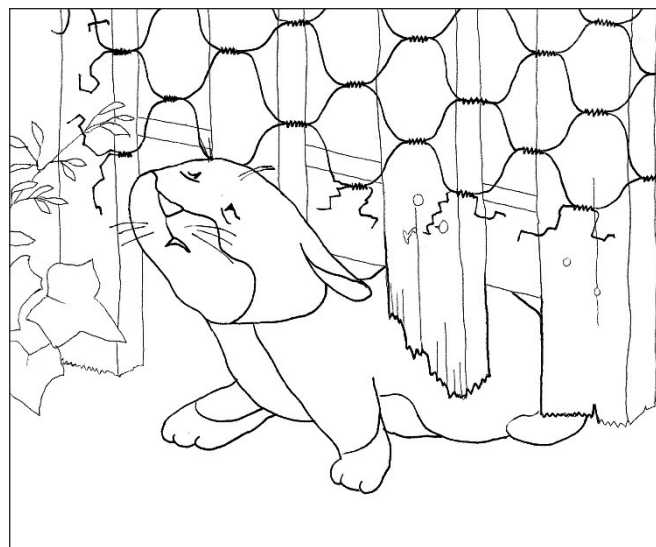

Figure 4. Peter and the gate in McCue's illustration.

In McCue's re-illustration version (sketch in figure 4), the action of slipping has taken on new interpretations. Even the gate itself is depicted differently: It has dangerously pointing steel wires and rusty nails protruding from it, and the edges of the boards of the gate are rough and sharp. In the illustration, the rabbit is in the midst of going under it. The animal appears to be somewhat stuck under the barrier and it is pulling itself forward with its front paws. The distressed look on its face reflects the effort its takes to complete the operation. The illustrator's interpretation of the story is likely to have influenced the translator's interpretation of the depicted action. In the translation of this illustration version, the verb *to slip* has been conveyed into Finnish as "pujottautua"; the Finnish verb does not really have an adequate English backtranslation, but it refers to passing through something with difficulty.

In Szekeres' illustration version, Peter Rabbit has already gone under the gate and is already back on his feet, "safe at last in the wood outside the garden". In other words, the actual slipping under the gate is only expressed in the verbal semiotic; the action is not intersemiotically enhanced. The verb has been translated as "livahtaa", which is another close natural equivalent for *slip* and a near-synonym for the translation solution employed by the translator of Potter's original illustration version. It could be suggested that since the visual

semiotic did not offer information that could modify the translator's interpretation of the verbal element, the verbal information has been conveyed to the target language somewhat literally.

Example 3. A white cat was *staring* at some goldfish.

The translations of the phrase presented in Example 3 also reflect how the depiction of action may be intersemiotically enhanced. The phrase describes how a cat looks at goldfish. In the verbal semiotic, the action is represented with the verb *to stare*. Again, the three illustration versions depict the scene in different ways. McCue's illustration presents a fluffy, green-eyed cat who is looking down at a fish in a pond, with a large smile on its face. One could suggest the intersemiotic representation of the action of staring in this example is not that threatening: the cat is looking at the fish, but it is smiling. The translator of this illustration version has conveyed the action into Finnish as *observing* ("tarkkailla"). Generally speaking, observing is less intense than staring; it conveys less information about the intensions and motives behind the action.

However, in Potter's and Szekeres' illustration versions, the intensity of the stare is presented as much more pronounced. In Szekeres' visual depiction of the scene, the cat is leaning down towards the pond in which the fish are swimming. It has huge, bright yellow eyes which are nailed to the pond. In Potter's illustration version the cat is looking down; the expression on its face is therefore barely visible. Yet, its body language is tense. Its upper body is leaning forward vigilantly. Its tail appears to be twitching slightly, indicating an intense focus. The action of staring, in the translations of both of these versions, has been described as *prowling* ("vaania"). The solutions conveys the idea of hunting for prey. The two translation solutions, observing and prowling, convey a significantly different sense of action for the Finnish audience.

All in all, it seems that the re-illustrators have changed the overall atmosphere of the story considerably. The process of re-illustration–which is, obviously, another example of intersemiotic translation–has added new layers of meaning which have guided the translators' interpretation of the original verbal stories. The receivers of the translations, the Finnish picturebook audience, base their interpretations on the interpretations of the translators. The aim of my analysis has been to demonstrate that the translation process of an illustrated text is not entirely interlingual activity, but includes a layer of intersemiotic translation as well: moving from the visual to the verbal, in other words, adapting and adjusting verbal signs with details extracted from the visual signs. All of this emphasizes the power of the visual semiotic to guide our interpretation of the verbal, and vice versa.

In all of these examples, the messages conveyed by the two modes are somewhat aligned. What I mean by this is that the perspectives offered by the modes are different but they do not contradict each other. An important aspect of multimodal meaning construction is that the modes are interpreted in relation to each other even if their messages are not as aligned as in these examples; if, for instance, there are instances of contradiction between the modes (for empirical support, see Ketola 2016a). This notion is extremely

relevant for professionals working in all fields of communication. Co-articulating the contradiction of modes offers us a tool to create, for instance, humour or irony; it can make us question what we are seeing and reading and offer contrasting and even shocking viewpoints into our subject.

5. Conclusions: New translation principles for design

In this conclusion section of my paper I review some of the insights which stem from the examination of intersemiotic meaning construction in the translation of multimodal material and discuss how these insights might inform the practice of design. In particular, I take on to further develop McDonald's proposition about translation principles which may be used to instruct designers towards improved communication with their clients, and offer what could be referred to as intersemiotically informed translation principles for design languages. In order to be able to discuss the principles in a slightly more concrete way, I offer examples from a particular instance of designer-client communication, namely describing a visual design via verbal language. The principles are proposed, however, to also account for other type of communication and other types of operations across modes.

5.1. Separate meaning and form.

Separate the essential, overall meaning of the design and the languages and their expressions that may be used to describe it. In other words, consider and compare various ways of describing the essence of the design. Weigh up these options against each other by considering the overall effect of combining the description with the design. The analysis of an already finished verbal description of a visual design also requires a separation between meaning and form: the overall meaning of the multimodal whole and the mechanics of the various design languages used to create it. Such an analysis requires an effort to dissect the components that contributed towards the overall interpretation of a multimodal whole.

5.2. Make the implicit explicit.

Analyze a visual design for details you wish your client to pay specific attention to and make these details verbally explicit for your client. This equals enhancing the details multimodally, since they will then be available for your client both verbally and visually. Remember, however, that not everything in a visual design needs to be verbalized in order for your client to be able to comprehend it. Guide your client's attention by verbalizing what you wish to foreground.

5.3. Make the translation fluent and smooth.

Examine the full effect the different modes create together. Make sure that the messages conveyed by the different modes flow together fluently. When verbally describing a visual design, be critical to your choices of words and

evaluate each one in relation to the multimodal whole; think about how the verbal description you create will guide the way in which the client will examine your visual design. Keep in mind, however, that combining different modes also offers an opportunity to create alternative perspectives into your subject. Your translation from the visual to the verbal can be the complete opposite of "fluent and smooth" if that is the overall message you wish to convey.

References

Baule, Giovanni; Caratti, Elena
2016   *Towards Translation Design A New Paradigm for Design Research*, in *Proceedings of DRS 2016,* Brighton, pp. 1047-1067.

Damaskinidis, George
2015   *Mediating between verbal and visual semiotic elements in the translation of English multimodal texts into Greek*, "Punctum", 1 (2), pp. 22-38.

Gibbons, Andrew S.; Brewer, Erin K.
2005   "Elementary principles of design languages and design notation systems for instructional design", in Spector J. M., Ohrazda, C., Van Schaack A. and Wiley D. A. (editors), *Innovations in instructional technology: Essays in honor of M. David Merrill*, Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 111-130.

Jakobson, Roman
2000   "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", in Venuti, L. (editor), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, pp. 113–118. (Reprinted from Brower R. A. (editor), *On Translation*, 1959, Harvard University Press, pp. 232–239.)

Ketola, Anne
2016a   *An Illustrated Technical Text in Translation. Choice Network Analysis as a Tool for Depicting Word-Image Interaction*, "trans-kom", 9 (1), pp. 79-97.
2016b   *Translating picturebooks: Re-examining interlingual and intersemiotic translation* , in *Proceedings of DRS 2016,* Brighton, pp. 1179-1190.

Mackey, Margaret
1998   *The Case of Peter Rabbit: Changing Conditions of Literature for Children*, New York, Garland.

Massoud, Mary M.F.
1988   *Translate to communicate: A guide for translators*, Elgin, David C. Cook Foundation.

McDonald, Jason K.
2008   "Translate to Communicate: Facilitating Client Understanding of Design Languages", in Botturi L. and Stubbs S.T. (editors), *Handbook of Visual Languages for Instructional Design: Theories and Practices*, Hershey, Information Science Reference, pp. 18-32.

Oittinen, Riitta
1990   *The Dialogic Relation between Text and Illustration: A Translatological View*, "TEXTconTEXT", 5, 1990, pp. 40-52.

Petrilli, Susan
2003   "Translation and Semiosis", in Petrilli S. (editor), *Translation, Translation*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, pp. 17-37.

Toury, Gideon
1994   "Translation. A Cultural-Semiotic Perspective", in Sebeok T. (editor), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 1111-1124.

Waters, Sandie H.; Gibbons, Andrew. S.
2004   *Design languages, notation systems, and instructional technology: A case study*, "Educational Technology Research and Development", 52 (2), pp. 57-68.

Zingale, Salvatore
2016   *Design as translation activity: a semiotic overview*, in *Proceedings of DRS 2016*, Brighton, pp. 1061-1072.