

# A Socio-semiotic Approach To Meaning In Translation

Ke Ping  
Nanjing University, China

## Abstract

*This paper deals with meaning as concerned in translation in a socio-semiotic approach. In the light of Charles Morris' categorization of the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic dimensions of the sign, three groups of socio-semiotic meanings (referential, intralingual, and pragmatic) are distinguished and explicated. Under these three headings are subsumed all the significant meanings the translator may need to transfer, including those which are usually referred to as style or formal features but are ultimately reducible to intralingual and pragmatic meanings. Each of these socio-semiotic meanings may figure prominently in a specific discourse or event of communication. As comparable source and target expressions most often do not form one-to-one correspondence in the distribution of the various sorts of meanings they may carry, the translator is obliged to give precedence to the most salient or important meaning(s) in a given context while endeavouring to transfer the maximum number of meanings of the source message. The notion of equivalence in translation should therefore be a socio-semiotic one.*

To study the status of meaning is to study  
the substance and limits of translation.  
(George Steiner 1975:414).

The primary concern of the translator is to transfer the meaning of the source language message to the target language. Meaning is at once the point of departure and the end product of translation operations. It forms the central problem of translation. To the extent that translation studies rely upon the study of meaning, however, traditional researches in semantics seem to be inadequate in that their objects of investigation were confined to reference and sense and many other aspects of meaning which may figure prominently in communication were overlooked. (In phatic discourse, for instance, the social or interpersonal meaning is far more important than the literal reference of an expression.) In the present paper I intend to analyze meaning from the socio-semiotic perspective, with special reference to Chinese-English translation. My aim would be to construct a model of meaning which may encompass all the important meanings the translator may possibly encounter, and which may shed some light on the relative weight of these meanings in different contexts.

## Semiotics and Meaning

Semiotics is the scientific study of the properties of signing systems, whether natural or artificial. In its oldest sense, it refers to the study within philosophy of sign and symbol systems in general. The modern use of the word covers the investigation of patterned human communication in all its modes (auditory-vocal, visual, tactile, olfactory and gustatory). The first overall plan for semiotic research was developed by the American philosopher C. S. Peirce (1839-1914), who also adopted the very term "semiotics". It was the American logician and philosopher Charles Morris (1901-1979), however, who expounded the notion of the sign and substantially advanced the study of semiotics. Morris was the sole semiotician before Umberto Eco who presented a sound theoretical frame of study for general semiotics (Li, 1993:452). The distinctions he introduced between the three dimensions of sign relationships have become classic in semiotic study: the relationship between signs and entities in the world which they refer to or describe is semantic; that between signs themselves, syntactic; and that between signs and their users, pragmatic.

Meaning is the attribute of the sign or symbol. De Saussure's terminological distinction between the *signifiant* and the *signifié* implies that what is employed to mean and what is meant is intrinsically linked to each other. In a general semiotic sense, meaning can be regarded as the relationship between a sign and something outside itself (Uspenskij, 1977:171).

A semiotic notion of meaning is one of multiple dimensions. Corresponding to the three types of semiotic relationships Morris distinguished are three categories of socio-semiotic meaning. As the semantic relationship in Morris' scheme of sign relationships is actually limited to the referential, and the sign in the present discussion is no other than the linguistic one (phoneme, grapheme, morpheme, word, phrase, sentence, up to discourse), we will rechristen the three categories of meaning as referential meaning (RM), intralingual meaning (IM) ("Intralingual" is not to be identified with the purely linguistic use of the word, which narrowly refers to the sequential arrangement of syntax. The semiotic use of the word covers all the levels of linguistic description other than the semantic one.), and pragmatic meaning (PM).

## Three Categories of Socio-semiotic Meaning

As is familiar to the translator's experience, extralingual factors, or knowledge of our world, weighs heavily in the correct comprehension and interpretation of the source message. Translation is basically a kind of interlingual communication in different sociocultural contexts. Since language, the media in which the translator works, is the most important as well as the most typical signing system to the human race, and since the dynamics of all major linguistic relationships (especially pragmatic or social ones) fall within the domain of semiotic research, a semiotic approach to translation cannot but be a socio-semiotic one. In this regard, "semiotic" is synonymous with "socio-semiotic".

In linguistic communication, as in any other sort of communication, there are at least five essential elements involved: the Topic (the message transmitted), the Code (the system of symbols with which the message is processed and sent out), the Sender (the encoder of the message), the Receiver (the decoder of the message), and the Channel of Contact (between the Sender and the Receiver). Each of the three categories of socio-semiotic meaning is related primarily to one or more of these five elements.

### 1. Referential Meaning (RM)

RM is chiefly connected with the Topic. Topic here should be understood in its broadest sense, since human language can be employed to talk about almost anything, universal or unique, real or imaginary. When language is used to describe, name, analyze, and criticize its own features, it carries what is often termed as "metalinguistic" meaning.

On most occasions of linguistic communication RM is the core element of a verbal message. It is also known as "conceptual meaning" or "cognitive meaning".

### 2. Intralingual Meaning (IM)

IM is related to the Code. With regard to the level of linguistic description on which it is realized, IM may be subdivided into the following:

(1) **Phonological meaning**, which is suggested by the sound of the utterance. Designated by Peter Newmark as "phonaesthetic meaning" (Picken 1989:13), phonological meaning results from the use of alliteration (e.g. "The sun sank slowly."), assonance (e.g. "Our echoes roll from soul to soul."), consonance (e.g. "The splendor falls on castle walls."), or end rhymes, e.g. W.J.B. Fletcher's rendering of the 8th-century Chinese poet Du Fu's famous lines:

Through endless Space with rustling sound  
The falling leaves are whirled around.  
Beyond my ken a yeasty sea  
The Yantsze's waves are rolling free. (Lü, 1980:123)

(2) **Graphemic meaning**, which may be found across the smallest units or forms of the writing system of a language. For example, the Chinese proverb *Bazi hai meiyou yi pie ne* "Not even the first stroke of the

character *ba* [eight] is in sight yet” is used to denote a situation wherein there has not yet been the slightest sign of the beginning of something referred to, because the Chinese character *ba* is composed of two strokes. One has to set on paper the first stroke before the whole character can be spelled out.

(3) **Morphological/lexemic meaning**, which may be foregrounded through the deliberate use of the relationships between the smallest meaningful units, either a morpheme or a word (lexeme), in a language. These two sorts of meaning are regularly discovered in plays on words such as puns (as in a classified ad: “Local carpenter seeks local dentist for trade of skills. I'll build your *bridge*, and you'll build mine”), syllepsis (e.g. “While the Vietnam vet was fighting, and *losing limb and mind*, and dying, others stayed behind to pursue education and career”), and proper names charged with implications or associations. (The name “Becky Sharp” in William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, for instance, is quite suggestive of the character of the novel's heroine; while the name of the late French president Charles de Gaulle echoes that of the ancient Celtic-speaking people—the Gauls, and the epithet of the king of the Holy Roman Empire—“Charles the Great.” (Nixon, 1982))

(4) **Syntactic meaning**, which has to do with the arrangement of morphemes and words into larger units—phrases, clauses, and sentences. The hackneyed example in journalism about what is news, “A dog bit a man” or “A man bit a dog”, well illustrates the syntactic meanings as affected by different word order.

Morphological and syntactic meanings are also known collectively as grammatical meaning. They are usually the least salient of intralingual meanings because grammatical forms are in most cases obligatorily used and hence predictable.

(5) **Discoursal meaning (textual meaning)**, which arises from the way clauses and sentences are combined to form still larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews, etc. The way clauses and sentences are connected to each other (hypotactic or paratactic), the choice of articles, pronouns, and tenses, which affects the structure of the discourse (cohesion), the relationships between utterances in a discourse (coherence), all these and more add up to the discoursal meaning of a written or spoken passage (see Coulthard 1985).

### 3. Pragmatic Meaning (PM)

Pragmatics was introduced into the study of meaning in the 1970s. Modern translation theory has come to recognize the need for pragmatic, as well as referential (semantic) and intralingual (syntactic) equivalence. Within the pragmatic category, the adequate rendering of subtle interrelations between saying things on the one hand, and knowing, believing or doubting them on the other, and of the elements in linguistic communication that are indicative of the interactions between the speaker and the receiver, are considered one of the objectives of translation (Tabakowska 1990:74).

David Crystal defined pragmatics as:

the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication. (Crystal 1985:240).

In accordance with the three focal areas of pragmatic study proposed by Crystal, PM may be divided into four subsets, i.e. expressive meaning and identificational meaning, associative meaning, social meaning, and imperative meaning.

(1) **Expressive meaning**. Expressive meaning and identificational meaning are primarily connected with the Sender. Associative meaning is linked to both the Sender and the Receiver. By expressive meaning is meant the emotional content of an expression and any identity the expression might have in terms of the personality or individual creativity of the user. The term is overlapped with “affective meaning” (the attitudinal element in an expression or the expression of attitude or “affect” in intonation), “connotative meaning” (the emotional associations and other notions or ideas suggested by, or being part of the meaning of, a linguistic unit), and “emotive meaning” (the emotional effect of an expression on the Receiver). Peter Newmark notes three characteristically expressive text-types: (a) serious imaginative literature (e.g. lyrical poetry); (b) authoritative statements (political speeches and documents, statutes and legal documents, philosophical and academic works by acknowledged authorities); (c) autobiography, essays, personal

correspondence (when these are personal effusions) (Newmark 1988:39-40).

(2) **Associative meaning** (another name for connotative meaning) refers to the associations, impressions, and reflections linguistic signs elicit in the minds of the speakers of a language.

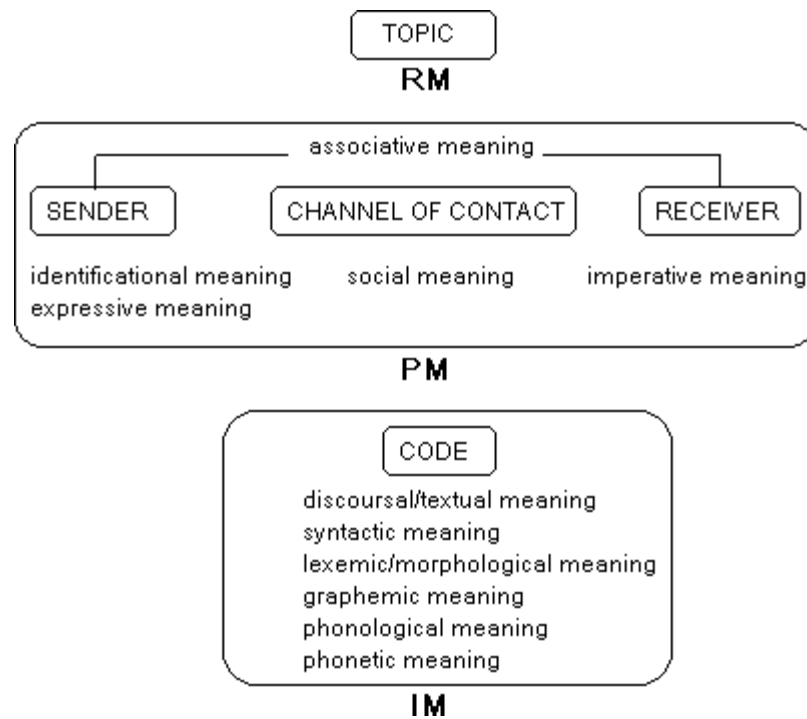
What is of particular relevance to expressive meaning and associative meaning is the figurative uses of language such as metaphor (“All the world's a stage.”), simile (“As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.”), metonymy (“White House” for “the American Presidency”), and synecdoche (“sail” for “yacht”). All these figures are characterized by the substitution of one object or idea (usually concrete) for another, or the substitution of part of an object or idea for the whole. They have as their core the associative meaning of the expression; and the process is usually expressive because descriptive expressions or images are utilized either to recreate sensory experiences so that an idea or picture may come clearer into focus (e.g. “They are now between the devil and the deep sea.”), or to pass emotional evaluations (e.g. “He is a fox.”), or both (as in the famous couplet by Ezra Pound, “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / petals on a wet, black bough.”). So far as the source language and the target language are concerned, expressions with the same RM may well have quite different expressive and/or associative meanings. For example, the ox is associated with “strong” or “stubborn” in Chinese. In English, however, these two associations are usually connected with the horse and the mule respectively. Hence, *Ta zhuangshi de xiang tou niu* (literally: “He is as strong as an ox”) is put into English as “He is as strong as a horse”; while *Ta jiang de xiang tou niu* (literally: “He is as stubborn as an ox”) is rendered as “He is as stubborn as a mule”.

(3) **Identificational meaning** refers to any element in an utterance in token of the regional, historical, and/or class background of the Sender (dialectal variations), as well as his/her sex, age, how he/she bears himself/ herself in the communication (friendly, aloof, haughty, or humble) etc. The phrase “thus saith the lord”, for example, is not just equivalent to “the lord says,” but carries with it the connotations of King James language and suggests ecclesiastical intonations (Nida and Taber 1982:94). And if a speaker of English consistently omits in speech such elements as diphthongs, the past forms of regular verbs (“He walk home.”), or the word “is” (“He running to the store,” “She in the third floor,” and “He president of the club.”), we can safely say that he has a lower-class background and is most probably a black as well.

(4) **Social meaning** (sometimes used interchangeably with “interpersonal meaning” or “situational meaning”) depends specifically on the Channel of Contact. It is that aspect of meaning which is related to the establishment and maintaining of social relations. It occurs with phatic forms of discourse (“Nice day, isn't it?”); forms of address, which plays an important role in determining the relative degree of power and solidarity between the participants of a communicative act (e.g. the *vous/tu* contrast in French); and register, that is, the “vertical” level of formality of an expression or a discourse (frozen, formal, consultative, casual, or intimate? Cf. “police/cop/bobby”; “Please, come in.”/ “Come in.”/ “Come in, will you?”/ “Get the hell in here!”).

(5) **Imperative meaning**, which is oriented towards the Receiver, refers to the Sender's intention to alter the behaviour or mental state of the Receiver and is typically communicated in such efforts as ordering, urging, persuading, and begging. “It's hot in here”, therefore, may mean “Could you turn on the air-conditioning?” A cinema patron saying “I can't see the screen” to the person seated in front of him, for example, is not merely stating something objectively, but is requesting that person to take off his hat or sit lower in his seat.

The above discussion about different types of socio-semiotic meaning may be summarized in the following diagram (Figure 1):



*Figure 1. A socio-semiotic model of meaning*

## The socio-semiotic Model of Meaning and Translation

The socio-semiotic model of meaning formulated above is particularly appropriate for translation in that it incorporates the maximum number of meanings the translator may possibly have to deal with. Under it may be subsumed comparatively more homogeneous meanings such as connotative meaning (=associative meaning), situational meaning (=social meaning) and metalinguistic meaning, and such more complicated meanings as aesthetic meaning or poetic meaning (which may be disintegrated into expressive meaning, intralingual meaning, and often imperative meaning as well). The model even takes account of style in its broadest sense (features of situationally distinctive uses of language, that is, the variations of regional, social, and historical dialects; or even such intralingual peculiarities as plays on words, acrostic poems, and rhythmic units.) as well as in its strict linguistic sense (relations among the participants in a language activity, chiefly level of formality). It reduces this somewhat elusive notion to identificational, social, and intralingual meanings for transference. The descriptive and explanatory power of the model for translational research is indisputable.

A few lines here may be in order to illustrate the relative weight of different meanings of a linguistic sign in a specific context. RM, PM, and IM are all parts of an organic whole. They combine to make up the total meaning of an expression or a discourse.

All linguistic items have IM since linguistic signs by definition function within the structure of interrelated units of a language. Almost all expressions also have RM. And quite frequently words, phrases, sentences, etc. are charged with PM, because people comment as well as state, use language to do things as well as to communicate information. On the other hand, the three categories of socio-semiotic meaning differ in their relative degree of prominence in different contexts. In technical contexts (typically, science and academic writings), RM is almost exclusively important. In general or "institutional" contexts (Newmark 1988:207) (typically, news report, publicity material, official guides, handbooks, instruction manuals, etc.), PM as well as RM may be important. And in literary contexts, a high degree of foregrounded PM and IM may be registered. If the translator succeeds in transferring to the target audience all the overt and covert meanings of an expression or a discourse, so be good, for in that case complete equivalence between the source and target texts is achieved. However, so ideal a situation does not occur very often, since the spectrum of socio-semiotic meanings connected with a sign in one language rarely forms a one-to-one correspondence to that of a comparable sign in another language. Difficulties with translation result exactly from such incorrespondence between source and target forms in meaning. The translator is constantly obliged to make decisions as to what aspect(s) of the meaning a sign bears should be unconditionally and unequivocally put across to the receiver,

and what aspect(s) may be given secondary attention. Apparently, while striving to communicate the maximum number of meanings an expression or discourse carries in a given context, the translator should give priority to the most prominent or important one(s) among them, ensuring its/their correct transference in whatsoever circumstances and, if no other alternative is available, at the expense of the other meanings of the sign. Without this prerequisite the “faithfulness” in translation is out of the question.

The notion of the context here is important. In fact, it is the final criterion according to which the “most prominent or important” meaning(s) of a linguistic sign is/are determined. For example, the Chinese unit of linear measure *cun* (one tenth of a Chinese yard) roughly equals 3.3 centimetres. Its English counterpart “inch”, however, is only 2.54 centimetres. Suppose what is being translated is a tailor's book, *cun* can never be put into English as “inch”; otherwise the clothes made by the tailor will have little chance of fitting the customer. In this context (a tailor's book), the most important meaning of the word *cun* is its RM. The preciseness of the concept in the target text is of paramount importance. In the Chinese proverb *Yi cun guangyin yi cun jin* (literally: “A *cun* of time is a *cun* of gold.”), however, the most salient meaning of the word *cun* is its PM since in this context the word is used as a figure to suggest smallness in quantity, and, as we mentioned earlier, the figure has as its basis the expressive and/or associative meaning(s) it carries. The referential correctness of the symbol *cun* is by no means significant in this case. Hence the translator may justifiably replace it with the PM-equivalent and readily understood English term “inch” in his translation. In the resulting version “An inch of time is an inch of gold.”, the source item's PM is adequately transferred and in a lucid and idiomatic way at that.

The analysis made above suggests that meaning is heterogeneous instead of homogeneous. Equivalence in translation is to be sought after on all the three levels of meaning. The concept of meaning is a socio-semiotic one, so should be the notion of translational equivalence.

## References

- Coulthard, M. 1985. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. 2nd ed. London: Longman. 212pp.  
 Crystal, David. 1985. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. xi+340PP.  
 Li, Youzhen. 1993. *Lilun Fuhaoxue (An Introduction to Theoretical Semiotics)*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing House. vii+719pp.  
 Lü, Shuxiang. 1980. *Zhongshi Yingyi Bilu (Chinese Poetry into English: A Comparative Study)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education. 214pp.  
 Morris, Charles. 1938. *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. Chicago: Chicago University press.  
 Newmark, Peter. 1988. *A Textbook of Translation*. London: Prentice Hall. xii+292pp.  
 Nida and Taber. 1982. *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: Brill. viii+218pp.  
 Nixon, Richard. 1982. *Leaders*. New York: Warner Communications. 370pp.  
 Picken, Catriona (ed.) 1989. *The Translator's Handbook*. 2nd ed. London: Aslib, The Association for Information Management.  
 Steiner, George. 1975. *After Babel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 570pp.  
 Tabakowska, Elzbieta. 1990. “Linguistic Polyphony as A Problem in Translation.” in *Translation History and Culture*. Eds. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere. London: Pinter.  
 Uspenskij, B. 1977. “Semiotics of Art.” in *Soviet Semiotics*. Ed. & trans. Daniel Lucid. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

French Translation of the Abstract by SYSTRAN (via ALTAVISTA):

Cet article traite la signification comme concernée dans la traduction dans une approche socio-sémiotique. À la lumière de la catégorisation de Charles Morris du sémantique, les dimensions syntactiques et pragmatiques du signe, trois groupes de significations socio-sémiotiques (référentiel, intralingual, et pragmatique) sont distinguées et explicited. Sous ces trois rubriques sont englobées toutes les significations significatives que le traducteur peut devoir transférer, y compris ceux qui désigné habituellement sous le nom du modèle ou des dispositifs formels mais sont finalement réductibles aux significations intralingual et pragmatiques. Chacune de ces significations socio-sémiotiques peut figurer en évidence dans un discours ou un événement spécifique de transmission. \*\*time-out\*\* comme comparable source et cible expression plus souvent non former linéaire correspondance dans distribution divers tri signification pouvoir porter, traducteur obliger pour donner priorité plus saillant ou important meaning(s) dans un donner contexte tandis que essayer pour transférer maximum nombre signification source message. La notion de l'équivalence dans la traduction devrait donc être socio-sémiotique.

## About the Author

Ke Ping was born in Nanjing, China and was educated at Nanjing University, where he read English Language and Literature and obtained his M.A. in 1987. From 1987 to 1990 he was Assistant Lecturer and then Lecturer in English and English-Chinese Translation at Beijing (Peking) University. Since 1990 he has been teaching and doing research at Nanjing University. In 1993-94 he studied linguistics at the University of Cambridge as a Visiting Scholar. He has published about 20 papers in the fields of English literature, linguistics and translation theory. His book *A Textbook of English-Chinese and Chinese-English Translation* (Beijing: Beijing University Press. 1991, 1993.), which adopts a socio-semiotic approach to translation and represents a major effort toward systematizing translation studies, has been well received in his country. He is now Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at Nanjing University.