

# Jakobson and the mental phases of translation\*

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## Abstract:

Roman Jakobson has written extensively about translation. His contributions can be found in many different papers. Some of his papers don't deal explicitly with translation, but can be interesting in that perspective, too. In this paper the notion of "inner speech", used in the 1930s by Lev Vygotsky and widely known among East European scholars but not as much in the West, is examined in the light of Peircean interpretant. On this basis, one can see that the so-called "interlingual translation" process, that is considered translation proper, actually consists of more than one intersemiotic translation process. Therefore, as the second part of the paper shows, writing and reading are intersemiotic processes as well. The mental component adds and subtracts to the prototext. The metatext by definition is different from the prototext since in the process the volatilization of the prototext passes through the translator's mind before being recoded in verbal terms. There is always semiotic noise in translation.

**Key words:** inner speech, peircean interpretant, interlingual translation, intersemiotic translation, translation process.

## Resumen:

Roman Jakobson escribió intensamente sobre traducción. Su contribución en este campo se encuentra en diferentes artículos. Algunos no tratan explícitamente de traducción pero presentan interés para este campo. En este artículo se examina la noción de "habla interior" utilizada en 1930 por Lev Vygotsky y por otros conocidos académicos en Europa Oriental, pero poco en occidente; el análisis se lleva a cabo bajo la luz del interpretante peirciano. En esta perspectiva se puede observar que el proceso de la llamada "traducción interlingual", considerada como la traducción propiamente dicha, en realidad consiste en más de un proceso de traducción intersemiótica. Por esto, en la segunda parte de este artículo se presenta la lectura y la escritura también como procesos intersemióticos. El componente mental le añade y le quita al prototexto. Por definición, el metatexto es diferente del prototexto puesto que en el proceso este último pasa a través de la mente del traductor antes de ser recodificado en términos verbales. Existe siempre ruido semiótico en la traducción.

**Palabras clave:** habla interior, interpretante peirceano, traducción interlingual, traducción intersemiótica, proceso de traducción

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## 1. INTRODUCTION.

This article makes part of a research project on Jakobson and translation. Another article, "Translation as imputed similarity", was published in Tartu on *Sign Systems Studies* 36.2, 2008:315-339. In this article, I focus on the importance of Jakobson for the awareness of the mental stage in the translation process. In particular, the problem is seen in relation to the notion of "interpretant" in Peirce and to the notion of "inner speech" in Vygotsky. Its tentative conclusion is that when Jakobson spoke about the three types of translation (intra- and inter-lingual, intersemiotic), he was not referring to three different kinds of translation processes, but to the mixed nature of *every* translation process.

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## 2. INNER SPEECH

To be able to see the full extent of Jakobson's revolutionary thought, and its implications for intersemiotic translation, it is necessary to follow – through his writings – the consequences of the notion of “interpretant” as far as speech production is concerned. The interpretant, “mental sign” (Peirce: 5.476) mediating between sign and object, makes speech production a very personal matter, with implications of affective and unconscious character. From this point of view, Saussure's theory could not have been more distant from Peirce's, and from Jakobson's:

With respect to all other comparable acts, the character of the verbal act seems to Saussure “the least deliberative, the least premeditated and at the same time **the most impersonal** of all” (Jakobson 1979: 153; emphasis added).

In contrast, speech is so personal that, in its earliest occurrences, it is exclusively personal, *i.e.* devised to make communication between the child and himself possible. Without any syntactical constraints, without any linearity, and ready to follow many directions at once, the child's thought is not something alien to language, and at the same time is not outer language pronounced at mental level: it is speech with oneself, without words. Eventually, the discovery of sentences becomes an obstacle to the absolute linguistic freedom of the first months of life:

[...] the discovery of the sentence and the increasing freedom in its lexical filling out in the child's linguistic behavior is accompanied by a gradual freezing of word creation. Neologism is eclipsed by syntactic tasks. The period of freedom and productivity of words, which contrasts so strikingly with the fixed vocabulary of the adult, has been shrewdly recognized by the greatest observers of human language. [...] The American thinker Charles Sanders Peirce maintains that the child, “with his wonderful genius for language” [1.349], loses this remarkable gift as time passes (Jakobson 1979: 147).

There is a huge part of language that most linguists never considered, and this is speech genesis (if we do not take into account Chomsky's unfortunate trial concerning ‘deep structures’, that failed precisely because it tried to follow Saussure's “impersonal” imprint). With the aid of Peirce's basic triad, which forces any debate on language to consider the mental (personal) passage of thought and speech production, and using his main tripartition of signs, it is easier to see the difference between the view of speech as loudspeaker and the view of speech as translation. As Jakobson himself says:

The classification of human sign systems must resort to several criteria as, for instance: the relation between the *signans* and *signatum* (in accordance with Peirce's triadic division of signs into indices, icons, and symbols with the transitional varieties); discrimination between sign production and mere semiotic display of ready-made objects (Jakobson 1967: 661).

Semiotic display of ready-made objects can be either indexical (I show you something by indicating it with my finger) or iconic, like in Swift's paradox of men going around with objects on their back to communicate. Swift's satire, usually considered directed against his own English dominant culture, can be actualized as being directed against

the dominant culture in linguistics neglecting the actual sign formation implied in verbal speech, and mental speech. This induces Jakobson to devise a new linguistic category, beyond interpersonal communication: intrapersonal communication.

[...] difference between merely bodily and instrumental production of signs; distinction between pure and applied semiotic structures; visual or auditory, spatial or temporal semiosis; homogeneous and syncretic formations; various relations between the addresser and the addressee, in particular intrapersonal, interpersonal or pluripersonal communication (Jakobson 1967: 661).

Jakobson has the advantage of being an émigré, of being used to adapting to new cultural and linguistic media. His position is ideal for a syncretic view of research efforts in the West and in Eastern Europe: while many fellow linguists in the United States in the Sixties are under the spell of generative grammar, he has the opportunity to read Slavic (in this case above all Russian) contributions. His fervid mind can make connections between Peirce and Vygotsky:

Language is a vehicle not only for interpersonal, but also for intrapersonal communication. This field, for a long time scarcely explored or even totally ignored, faces us now, especially after such magnificent reconnaissances as those of L. S. Vygotsky and A. N. Sokolov, with an imminent request for investigating the internalization of speech and the varied facets of inner language which anticipates, programs and closes our delivered utterances and in general guides our internal and external behavior, and which shapes the silent retorts of the tacit auditor (Jakobson 1968a: 697).

Such a neglecting is not a historically constant phenomenon: in the Middle Ages there were times when internal speech was addressed to by scholars like Aquinas and Occam:

[...] attention to internal speech, termed *verbum mentis sive interius* by Thomas Aquinas, *sermo interior* by Occam, for whom *triplex est terminus: scriptus, prolatus, and conceptus*, more exactly defined as *intentio* and as *pars propositionis mentalis*. Later this vital aspect of language remained underrated or unnoticed for a long span of time (Jakobson 1968: 192).

The fact that words are a question of giving substance to more volatile thoughts – something argued in a (comparatively) very recent time by Vygotsky – is attested by the very existence of words like “substantive”, originating from such a concretization process. The dialectics between mind and verbal speech is thus seen as a swinging between volatilization and concretization.

[...] a substantive does not name a substance but shows only that the given *conceptus mentis* is represented like a substance (*per modum substantiae*) yet could be actually represented by any other part of speech (*idem conceptus mentis per omnes partes orationis potest significari*), and on the other hand, everything, whether an actual entity or a negation or a pure figment, in its linguistic expression may obtain *modum significandi essentialem nominis*. Hence all such words become genuine substantives, irrespective of their lexical meaning (*significata lectionum*) (Jakobson 1968: 193).

Jakobson's original investigation into the sources of literature on inner speech takes him to the Czech linguist Bernard Bolzano, whose important work is not well known, probably because it does not fit into any "school" whatsoever. And it is really a loss, because Bolzano's thought is really interesting:

[Bolzano] adds lucid footnotes on the important distinction to be made between signs [*Zeichen*] and indices [*Kennzeichen*] which are devoid of an addresser, and finally on another pressing theme, the question of the relationship between interpersonal (*an Andere*) and internal (*Sprechen mit sich selbst*) communication (Jakobson 1974: 203).

In Peirce's theory, a sign (any percept) produces in the interpreter an interpretant that leads him to an object. Such an object can be a real, tangible object (something), or can be just a thought. In the latter case, the initial sign is the source of thought, since any thought can, on its turn, become the sign of a further triad. This occurs even when reflection concerns language itself: metalanguage and metathought.

The progress of a child's language depends on his ability to develop a metalanguage, that is, to compare verbal signs and to talk about language. Metalanguage as a part of language is, again, a structural trait that has no analogues in other signs systems. The founder of the Moscow linguistic school, F. F. Fortunatov (1848-1914), stressed that "the phenomena of language themselves appertain to the phenomena of thought" (Jakobson 1972: 90-1).

The ability to think, and the ability to think about thought; the ability to speak/write, and the ability to speak/write about language. All this is possible because it is possible to use inner speech. But if interpretants are the medium between signs and objects, and are what makes thoughts possible, then inner speech (endophasia) is made of interpretants.

Thus, for instance, inner speech, keenly conceived by Peirce as an "internal dialogue"<sup>1</sup>, is a cardinal factor in the network of language and serves as a connection with the self's past and future (Jakobson 1967: 662-3).

Outer language is not something that, once learnt, supplants inner language: rather, it is a powerful means to complete one's management of one's mental and linguistic resources. The constant translation between verbal speech and inner (mental) speech, in both directions, characterizes all our life, as it was brilliantly inferred by Freud.

Interpersonal communication, which is one of the indispensable preconditions for the infant's access to speech, is gradually supplemented by an internalization of language. Inner speech, one's dialogue with oneself, is a powerful superstructure on our verbal intercourse. As the study of language disturbances shows, impairments of inner speech take a conspicuous place among verbal disorders. A lesser dependence on the environmental censorship contributes to the active role of inner speech in the rise and shaping of new ideas (Jakobson 1972: 91).

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<sup>1</sup> Though I was not able to find the exact quote in Peirce, in 4.6 he states: "thinking always proceeds in the form of a dialogue – a dialogue between different phases of the ego"; in 5.506 "our own thinking is carried on as a dialogue" and in 6.481: "meditation takes the form of a dialogue". B. O.

There is a deep level of thought, sometimes unconscious, often aconscious, in which nonverbal language proceeds at a very high speed (when we think, we think much faster than when we speak). On this level, the ordinary problems of communication, the six functions outlined by Jakobson, are in a very particular situation, and some of them do not hold any longer:

inner speech condenses the addresser and addressee into one person, and the elliptic forms of intrapersonal communication are far from being confined to verbal signs alone (Jakobson 1968a: 702).

Since addresser and addressee are the same person, the only variable in this peculiar (and mostly widespread) kind of communication is time. The example of the knot on a handkerchief is valuable also to explain the working of semiosis in general, the concatenation of thoughts, between an earlier and a later self:

The mnemonic knot on a handkerchief made by Russians to remind themselves to accomplish an urgent matter is a typical example of an inner communication between the earlier and later self (Jakobson 1968a: 702).

Since in this particular case sender and receiver coincide, there is no question of contextualization of meaning (the context is shared by definition), there is no need to explicate the subject, neither in the grammatical nor in the semantic sense, there is no need to choose a medium, or to assure a contact. All energy can be concentrated on the translation of signs into other signs.

The equivalence relation that under various names – transformation, transference, translation and transposition – has since the interwar era been gradually approached by linguists at different ends of the world proves to be the mainspring of language. In the light of this relation several controversial questions of verbal communication may receive a more exact and explicit treatment (Jakobson 1972: 91).

Common sense suggested that thoughts are made of words, and even dreams are made of verbal sentences. People usually say something like “During my stay in Tartu, I started to dream in Estonian”, as if dreams were not made of multimedia material (acoustic, tactile, smells, affects, emotions, images, and so on). Nevertheless, closer attention proves that it is the other way round. Verbal (outer) language, or esophasia, is just a secondary product of inner speech. While inner speech can exist without verbalization, verbalization cannot exist without inner speech, without thought.

This is why the first attempts to speak, in childhood, are translations (initially, bad translations) of inner speech, which exists already: it is the child’s ability to connect percepts to their – causal or temporal – consequences:

At first, each statement consists solely of a holophrase, a one-word sentence, to use an inexact expression which anticipates the future concepts of the word and the sentence and brings them into the discussion prematurely. In the state which follows, the holophrastic unity expands to comprise a second constituent. Thus, the first grammatical divisions arise simultaneously, on the one hand word and

word-structure, on the other hand the main-word (open class) and the marked accessory-word (“pivot”, according to the terminology of Martin Braine), e.g. *it ball, more ball, there ball, little ball*. Many observers have tried to find predication already in this stage, but the interpretation of such structures as individual, situationally-conditioned predicates represents a superfluous extension of the meaning of the term “predicate” (Jakobson 1975a: 145).

Predication is at first absent because it is the main feature of inner speech, and there is not yet enough awareness to be able to use predication because other persons may not understand what is implicit for the child, may not share the same cultural implicity. Toddlers speak badly (or speak freely, according to the points of view) because they are not yet good translators of their inner speech into verbal speech. Nobody taught them speech: they learnt it by imitation. All rules, or regularities, they have understood through intuition, but they are not aware of knowing them, or of their existence. Which is not possible to occur with languages learnt consciously, at school:

The buildup of the first language implies an aptitude for metalingual operations, and no familiarization with further languages is possible without the development of this aptitude (Jakobson 1956: 121).

The incessant workings of our mind describe the path of a shuttle between sign and object. Meanings are not ascribable to objects, but to their mental signs. You cannot know the taste of some kind of food if you never tasted it, but you can know of the existence of such a food if you know its name.

The meaning of the words *cheese, apple, nectar, acquaintance, but, mere*, and of any word or phrase whatsoever is definitely a linguistic or – to be more precise and less narrow – a semiotic fact. Against those who assign meaning (*signatum*) not to the sign, but to the thing itself, the simplest and truest argument would be that nobody has ever smelled or tasted the meaning of *cheese* or of *apple*. There is no *signatum* without *signum* (Jakobson 1959a: 260).

This polemical passage of Jakobson’s reminds us that we have not said anything about the non-arbitrary relationship between signs, for which I refer the readers to my article *Jakobson: translation as imputed similarity*.

### 3. WRITING AND READING AS INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION

One of the aims of my article *Jakobson and Cinderella’s parable of translation* is to understand the full sense of the famous Jakobsonian division in three types of translation. To get to that point, it is necessary to see the importance of the mental phase of all verbal operations. This implies a broad view of the relations of semiotics, and linguistics, with psychology. In 1967, Jakobson expounded his view of the subjects around which it should be possible, and necessary, to cultivate shared interdisciplinary interests:

Among the relevant questions, partly discussed by psychologists and partly awaiting an answer, one may cite speech programming and speech perception

(Jakobson 1967: 671).

Note that Jakobson speaks of “speech perception”, the first stage of decoding, both of written and of oral text. An object is perceived, and in a first phase it is not clear what kind of object it is. Then the perceiver realizes – from the graphical or acoustic form – that it must be text in some language. Then, if it is a language that he partially knows, text decoding may start.

[...] the perceiver’s attention and fatigue, redundancy as an antidote to psychological noise, immediate memory and simultaneous synthesis [...] (Jakobson 1967: 671).

“Simultaneous synthesis”: what is it? It is the temporary decoding and organization of sense from a stretch of text in order to make possible further and more complete decoding. But what are the parts involved? Only the self: the self of time T1 and the self of time T2. It is a sort of simultaneous interpretation for the self T2. What are the languages involved? The language of the prototext is the natural language of the text to be decoded. But the language of the metatext must be the mental inner language of the individual: it must be much faster than natural language (so that the synthesis is ready before the line of the text goes on), and it must be understandable by the individual only in a ready-to-use form: intersemiotic translation.

[...] retention and oblivion of verbal information [...] (Jakobson 1967: 671).

In what form verbal information is retained? Is it a mental photocopy of the text? Do we remember every single word of what we have read, or do we remember the overall sense – sense from our individual point of view – of what we have read? Since the latter is true, it is evident that we do not store in our memory words (sometimes we even do that, but only when we need to do so, and that is the exception confirming the rule), but thoughts that are the result of the translation of words in our mental language: interpre-  
tants.

[...] generative and perceptive memory for the verbal code, interiorization of speech, the role of different mental types in language learning, the interconnection of speechless status and language acquisition with different grades of intellectual development, and, on the other hand, relations between verbal impairments and intellectual deficits, or, finally, the significance of language for cognitive operations as compared with the prelingual status (Jakobson 1967: 671).

When the child is not able to use verbal language, he just uses other semiotic means to decode reality. When he associates the satisfaction of hunger with the images of his mother’s unbuttoning her shirt – and this may happen many months before the ability to decode verbal language appears – and decides not to cry anymore when he sees such an action by his mother, the toddler is using his inner speech to communicate with himself.

Jakobson devoted many efforts to the study of aphasia: he was strongly convinced that it was a good non-invasive empirical means to see – as in the lab – the correlations between the different types of brain impairments and the different semiotic impairments. Describing the results of his studies in an article devoted to “Aphasia as a linguistic top-

ic” (1955), he identifies the naming of an object that is in one’s mind (in this case, because it has been observed) with intersemiotic translation.

[in aphasia] also the capacity for intersemiotic translation, i.e., transposition from one sign system to another, is missing. Therefore, the patient finds it hard to name an object shown to him in a picture or pointed to by the examiner (Jakobson 1955: 235).

The object is the first prototext: the patient sees the prototext and forms a thought about it: this thought is the mental metatext of the first prototext. Hence his difficulties in translating from his mental inner language into his natural verbal language.

sign	interpretant	object	= sign	interpretant	object
first prototext	translatant of the first prototext	first metatext	= second prototext	translatant of the second prototext	second metatext
object seen	emotions associated with the thing	thought of the object seen	= thought of the object seen	emotions associated with the thought of the object seen	verbal description of the object seen
thing	inner speech	inner speech	= inner speech	inner speech	verbal speech

The situation described by Jakobson corresponds therefore to two consecutive intersemiotic translation processes. For this reason, speaking is equalized with intersemiotic translation.

Jakobson’s studies on aphasia would have important consequences for the study of meaning formation, too. The discovery of the two different semiotic abilities (paradigmatic and syntagmatic) associated to the two brain hemispheres was a fundamental breakthrough in science.

Such an aphasic [who is affected by similarity disorder] can neither switch from a word to its synonyms or circumlocutions, nor to its heteronyms, i.e. equivalent expressions in other languages. Loss of bilingualism and confinement to a single dialectal variety of a single language is a symptomatic manifestation of this disorder (Jakobson 1956a: 244).

The understanding of the relation between interlingual translation (words in other languages), intralingual translation (paraphrases in the same language) and intersemiotic translation (naming an object) derives from the study of aphasia.

Such an understanding explains, among other things, the functioning of psychotherapy as a series of intersemiotic translation processes occurring between therapist and patient.

One of the typical examples of the psychological preoccupation with performances and performers is the psychoanalytic endeavor to disclose the *privata privatissima* of language by provoking the verbalization of un verbalized, subli-



minal experiences, the exteriorization of inner speech, and both theory and therapeutics may find a stimulation in Lacan's attempts to revise and reinterpret the correlation between *signans* and *signatum* in the mental and verbal experience of the patient. If linguistics guides the analyst, the latter's thoughts on the "supremacy of the *signans*" may, in turn, deepen the linguist's insight into the twofold nature of verbal structures (Jakobson 1967: 672).

Jakobson names Lacan, whose fame was at its apex in 1967, but of course his precursor was Freud, who in many different writings often explicitly spoke about "translation" (*Übersetzung*) in describing the relationship between dream content and dream description, or between unconscious material and its verbalization.

The relationship between the verbal pattern and the other types of signs may be taken as a starting principle for their grouping. One variety of semiotic systems consists of diverse substitutes for spoken language (Jakobson 1967: 658).

**Spoken** language is considered the first to be acquired and, hence, the "prototext" of any further variety of verbal language. **Written** language would thus be an intersemiotic (the change of code is evident in the fact that, instead of sounds, graphic signs are used) translation. That it is a translation and, as such, subject to the individual's interpretation, is clear from the fact the "orthography" is not at all taken for granted: once the general regularities of the transcription of a given language are exposed, single individuals, if not corrected by the teacher often give their personal interpretation to written actualization. On the other hand, when transcribing a language that is normally written with an alphabet different from the one of the transcriber's mother tongue, there are many possible versions, all usually different from the one obtained by transliteration. Therefore, in this case, too, it is a game in which the initial input is fixed, but possible outcomes are many.

Such is writing, which is – both ontogenetically and phylogenetically – a secondary and optional acquisition as compared with the all-human oral speech, although sometimes the graphic and phonic aspects of language are taken by scholars for two tantamount "substances" (Jakobson 1967: 658).

One could add that translation from oral to written speech is possible also in the other way round, i.e. from written to oral. Think, for example, of a poem that is to be read out loudly to an audience. The written text (prototext) is something fixed, but the possible versions (metatexts) of the oral text are as many as there are possibilities of voice timbre, intonations, pauses, speed, or slowness of reading and so on. It is a case similar to music score, where, however, there is no indication whatsoever as to pitch, pauses, length and so on. The only indication is implicit, culture-specific, and it is given by the way of declamation that is canonical in a given context.

However, in the relation between graphic and phonological entities, the former always functions as a *signans* and the latter as a *signatum* (Jakobson 1967: 658).

By calling the written prototext a *signans*, i.e. a sign, and the oral metatext a *signatum*, i.e. an object, Jakobson implies the presence in between of an interpretant; of a mental

sign or translantant that, in the mind of a given performer, connects graphemes with phonemes, including all the unwritten details of the performance.

From a historical point of view – just think of folk tales, for example – the prototext is always oral, of course.

The most important transposition into another medium is writing, which insures a greater stability and an accessibility to addressees distant in space and or time [...] the graphemic aspect of language displays remarkable degrees of relative autonomy [...] the history of two chief linguistic varieties, speech and letters, is rich in dialectical tensions and alternations of mutual repulsions and attractions (Jakobson 1968a: 706).

Such a possibility – and practice – of back and forth translation from oral to written speech and from written to oral speech has as a result – as all kinds of translation, due to the mathematical law of communication concerning loss – a continuous transformation of the text, which provides for the evolution of meaning. Meaning is thus seen as (mental) misunderstanding.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

If we agree that writing and reading, listening and speaking are intersemiotic translation processes, then some consequences necessarily follow. First of all, Jakobson (1959) was partially misunderstood by scholars who interpreted its tripartition of translation processes as a partition. If writing and reading are translation processes, then of course interlingual translation consists of a number of interrelated intersemiotic translation processes, and in intralingual translation processes as well, if we call this way the revision work of the translator. The three types of translation are, therefore, three aspects of one and the same process.

Moreover, if we agree that such an approach is made easier to people having Vygotsky in their cultural background, we could explain why Slavic translation scholars tend to have a different view of the translation process as compared to their Western-European colleagues. With such an approach in mind, the need for interdisciplinary cooperation with psychologists and brain scientists becomes more and more urgent and interesting.

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