(Re)conceptualizing translation as a dynamic dialogue of constraints

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Abstract. The intersection between translation studies and semiotics has been addressed in numerous publications and approaches to researching translation. However, at least within translation studies, this intersection has been visible mainly in cases in which non-linguistic signs come into play, whereas genuine semiotic frameworks have proven to be too broad or abstract. This has led to a conceptual and ontological paradox: on the one hand, translation scholars have been struggling to move beyond linguistics, but, on the other hand, most of them still place a strong emphasis on lingual translation. As a result, 'translation' is no longer a precise term broad enough to include contemporary types of this activity. This paper is a proposal made to reconceptualize translation as a dynamic process of dialogue between relevant constraints. Situated between translation semiotics and translation studies, the theoretical model described here underlines the role of constraints as well as the universal semiotic nature of translation.

Keywords: translation model; translation semiotics; translation studies; dialogue; constraints

1. Introduction

This paper aims to offer a reconceptualization of translation and to situate the term 'translation', which may seem inadequate because of its linguistic roots, especially within the most recent post-translation turn, against the contemporary developments in translation studies. Accordingly, the paper responds to the call for recognizing the real core of translation studies, which can provide a better understanding of the discipline and its object of study (Zwischenberger 2023: 14), and to the call for reconceptualizing translation as a semiotic process (Marais 2019: 119). It addresses the problem of defining 'translation' in the light of contemporary challenges or clashes of paradigms signalled by e.g. Yves Gambier

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and Ramunė Kasperę (2021: 48), as it acknowledges the fact that translation is "more than just words" (Gottlieb 2018: 45).

To this end, the paper presents a theoretical framework in which translation is perceived as a process founded on the dialogue of constraints. It extends the scope of previous publications on translation and semiotics, especially the earlier conceptualizations founded on semiotics. The novelty of the model discussed here lies in the fact that it does not rely solely on semiotics, but instead combines semiotics-based claims (mainly from the field of semiotics of culture) and traditional concepts of translation studies. Thus, it creates a necessary rapprochement between translation semiotics and translation studies, being slanted towards the latter. Translation is presented from the point of view of a translation scholar, representing the semiotic turn, while the main focus is placed on the concept of constraints and the interaction between them. Although the term 'constraint' has been used in translation studies, it has not been addressed in a systematic and classificatory way. Instead, constraints in translation have been investigated either from a narrow perspective of a particular type of translation (e.g. the constrained nature of audiovisual translation) or from a broad perspective in which constraints are perceived as e.g. triggers of action or general material limitations imposed on energy (Marais 2023). In this paper, constraints are considered to be strictly connected with the elements that make up the process of translation, which in turn is determined by the interaction or dialogue of these constraints.

In order to (re)conceptualize translation and put forward a theoretical model, understood here as a simplified graphic representation of a particular theory, the paper first discusses the ontic conditions of translation and lists the key elements that make up the object of study, defined as the process rather than the product of translation. Then, it brings the key elements together in a graphic form of a dialogue model of translation. Towards the end, a definition of translation understood as a dynamic contextualized dialogue of constraints is presented.

It is assumed that translation as an object of study of translation studies normally includes the system of a natural language or languages.[2] However, the dialogue model can also accommodate cases of translation that involve only non-linguistic sign systems (e.g. paintings, dances or gestures).[3] Natural languages are

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[2]   See e.g. Kobus Marais (2023: 187, 190), who claims that interlingual translation will always be part of translation studies, or Bingham Zheng *et al.* (2023: 175), who lament that most translation scholars still consider interlingual translation to be their object of study.

[3]   This may be indicative of the fact that translation studies is actually part of translation semiotics, also referred to as the semiotics of translation, understood as an autonomous subdiscipline of general semiotics (see e.g. Torop 2008: 253; Hartama-Heinonen 2015: 41; Petrilli 2015: 96).

considered part of a broader semiotic reality, which helps to avoid the limiting understanding of translation proper. In addition, the universal semiotic character of the dialogue model presents the general mechanism of translation, allowing the inclusion of intralingual transfer as well. Hence, the model combines semiotics and translation studies in a way that allows for preserving the conceptual borders of both disciplines.

The potential of semiotics for translation studies has been made evident mainly within translation semiotics and semiotically-oriented translation studies. Within the former, scholars have presented conceptualizations founded predominantly on Peircean semiotics, moving far beyond linguistics, which may be the reason why (at least in this author's opinion) these frameworks are not in the mainstream of translation studies (see also Hartama-Heinonen 2015). Translation has been perceived, for example, as a unidirectional and irreversible process of semiosis or semiotranslation (Gorlée 1994), expanded to the process of creative transduction (Gorlée 2023); a special case of sign-action or T-semiosis (Stecconi 2004, 2007); an infinite deferral of signs, including also natural signs (Petrilli 2003, 2015); or a process of meaning-making common to all living organisms (Marais 2019). Alternatively, scholars have underlined the role of culture: for instance, Torop (2000), drawing upon semiotics of culture, claims that culture is in the process of "total translation", with interlinguistic, metatextual, in- and intertextual as well as extratextual processes taking place in it. Thus, he underlines the complexity of translation, which can often include a number of cultural texts. Meanwhile, Eco (2001, 2003), having elaborated on the Jakobsonian division of translation (Jakobson 1959), draws our attention to the fact that translation actually is a type of interpretation prone to manipulation. From the point of view of translation semioticians, translation is always something beyond interlingual translation: although this is a claim that cannot be refuted, it seems that the semiotic perspective may be too broad and therefore too imprecise for some translation scholars to be accepted as valid and relevant.

In translation studies, the role of semiotics was highlighted when the discipline was in its academic infancy: Roman Jakobson (1959) was probably the first translation scholar to signal that translation may indeed take place between sign systems other than natural languages. Other Slavic scholars followed suit: for instance, Anton Popovič (1975), advocating his concepts of proto- and metatexts; Jiří Levý (2004[1967]), maintaining that translation is a decision process resembling a semiotic system; or Bogusław B. Lawendowski (1978), defining translation as a semiolinguistic process which may even include only non-verbal signs. The tradition was continued by descriptive translation scholars, who seem to have been influenced mainly by semiotics of culture: Itamar Even-Zohar (1979), with

his impactful polysystem theory based on the centre–periphery distinction, or the early Gideon Toury (1980, 1986), perceiving translation as an example of cross-systemic transference. Subsequently, apart from researchers with a clear semiotic focus (e.g. Douglas Robinson or Kobus Marais), translation scholars have cursorily explored semiotics, mainly in cases when the object of translation would require moving into the area of multimodality. This can be illustrated with papers discussing translating children's literature, advertisements, comic books or motion pictures.

Irrespective of these undeniable traces of semiotics in translation studies, Evangelos Kourdis and Ritva Hartama-Heinonen (2023: 148) point out that in fact "very few translation scholars appear to have a permanent interest in exploring translation with the explicit help of semiotics proper". Kourdis (2023: 217) argues that the intersection of semiotics and translation studies is mostly visible in "its [semiotics'] contribution to the formulation of a theoretical framework for audiovisual and image translation and multimodal text translation". Outside the semiotic turn, semiotics has been used mainly as a source of concepts, such as 'poly-, multi- or plurisemioticity', 'intersemiotic transfer' or 'code', which are broad enough to include the necessary non-linguistic supplement and help to conceal the focus on linguistic transfer. This may only confirm the earlier assumption that semiotically-oriented approaches do not belong to the mainstream of translation theory, which again indicates that a theoretical and methodological rapprochement is needed. The following reconceptualization of translation is hoped to bring together translation studies and (translation) semiotics.

2. Ontic conditions for translation

The source–target supermeme assumes that there are two spaces divided by some kind of border, across which the process of transfer takes place (Chesterman 1997: 7–8). Although the metaphor of carrying something (most probably the meaning of the source text) over the border and the understanding of a one-way transfer have been both criticized (e.g. in Stecconi 2007), the source–target distinction is a good point of departure for indicating the ontic conditions of translation.

In order to take place, translation requires a border separating (and simultaneously joining) two spaces between which there is a necessity to communicate some content. We can draw an analogy between these conditions and the concepts of semiosphere and semiotic border put forward by Juri Lotman (1990, 2005). Lotman defines the semiosphere as an indeterminate and dynamic space of

meaning-making, "a specific semiotic continuum" with multiple sign systems[4] forming this structure (Lotman 2005: 206). Semiosphere, according to Lotman (2005: 215, 225), resembles an organism: it is composed of various asymmetrical systems separated by multiple borders. Hence, it is internally varied and, as such, it is a space of tension, which requires information exchange.

Semiotic borders that divide the semiosphere allow for the exchange of information. Lotman (2005: 210) states that "[t]he border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa". In other words, each border is a quality that separates and joins relevant spaces according to some mechanism-based rules (see also Monticelli 2019: 393). Those internal borders, including also the ones between the centre and periphery of the semiosphere, create in fact a space of tension that requires translatability (Lotman 1997: 10). Translation is thus founded on the necessary quality of difference, but also similarity (as there must be at least some translatability).

There are at least three implications of the nature of the semiosphere and its borders for translation studies. Firstly, the semiosphere is the space of meaning-making, which means that translation, including interlingual translation, always takes place against the background of other sign systems. For this reason, no natural language is an isolated system. Secondly, the border creates two "portions" of the semiosphere, which are relevant in the case of a given translation event. Let us call these source and target sign spaces. These sign spaces are different to a certain extent, but also mutually translatable. Since there is tension between them, translation follows. Translatability assumes also untranslatability, which is another concept central to Lotman's theorizing and translation. That clearly indicates that translation is based on similarity and a necessary degree of difference (therefore, equivalence between the source and target texts should not be associated with identity or sameness). Finally, the sign space(s) of translation are separated by multiple semiotic borders existing at various levels. Lotman (1990: 138) claims:

> The notion of the boundary separating the internal space of the semiosphere from the external is just a rough primary distinction. In fact, the entire space of the semiosphere is transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts.

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[4]   The term 'sign system' is understood here as a system of signs and rules of their combination. The sign is understood in Peircean terms as a triadic relation of the representamen, object and interpretant.

This means that translation indeed takes place on levels other than only the linguistic one, as the linguistic border, that is the "translation-proper border" between the source language and the target language, is just one potential way of creating the ontic condition for translation. As a result, the linguistic border is accompanied by others, e.g. social, generic, ideological or material borders, all of which condition translation by creating a space of division and connection. What follows is some kind of multi-level mediation, which is aimed at reconciling the difference and searching for similarity.

This clearly confirms the claim made by Ubaldo Stecconi (2007: 22–24): drawing on Peircean semiotics, he maintains that difference, similarity and mediation are "the three hallmarks of translation semiosis" and constitute the foundation of translation. To build another bridge between translation semiotics and translation studies, we can refer these hallmarks to Toury's (1995) three postulates of a translated text, i.e. the product of translation. The necessary difference epitomizes both the source–target supermeme and Toury's source text postulate (Toury 1995: 33–34). The similarity implies translatability, i.e. a specific direction, order and potentiality of translation. Toury's postulate of transfer is thus satisfied (Toury 1995: 34). Mediation means that target signs speak on behalf of source signs, which assumes resemblance between both types of texts. This resemblance in turn means that the relationship postulate is also fulfilled (Toury 1995: 35).

The ontic conditions for translation include the existence of a *border*, which creates two fundamental elements of translation, i.e. the source and target *sign spaces*. In order to conceptualize translation, we need to consider it further and indicate other elements that constitute this process.

3. Key elements of translation

If we agree that the object of study is translation, we need to indicate the elements of this object and the relations between them. For the sake of this paper, these elements represent some of the key concepts of translation studies. It is assumed that concepts should:

- reflect the reality that we want to theorize (here, the process of translation);
- be general and abstract enough to represent a potential variety of instances of this reality (ideally, be applicable across various types of translation);
- reflect ideas that have been recurrent in translation studies (aspects of translation addressed within different theoretical frameworks);
- represent relations between the elements of a system, thus explaining how it works (here, any event of translation; see Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 69).

The concepts presented below are necessary simplifications or approximations, as they represent generalized ideas and/or core features of translation. The concepts were retrieved from the analysis of subsequent turns of translation studies, with reference to central problems or research foci. Some of the most fundamental problems, derived from their potential corresponding turns,[5] may be the following:

- the linguistic turn – text, its units and equivalence;
- the pragmatic turn – context, function, target audiences;
- the cultural turn – culture, ideology, manipulation, patrons;
- the multimodal/digital/audiovisual turn – media and modes, materiality, reception;
- the semiotic turn – meaning-making, non-linguistic transfer;
- the technological turn – translation tools and resources, human-machine interaction;
- the sociological turn – the translator, habitus, the ergonomics of translating.

These can be subsequently systematized and classified under specific labels: the concept of the text is considered central, as, simply put, this is what is translated. Then, three working categories of concepts can be proposed for the sake of clarity:

- text-related concepts, including the concepts referring to the structure and form of the text described in detail in Section 3.1;
- concepts surrounding the text, i.e. context;
- the collective category of social actors, who establish the ontic conditions of translation and carry out translation.

For the sake of the argumentation, the concepts will be labelled as follows:

- *text* and the text-related concepts of the *semiotic code*, *media and modes* as well as the *linguistic message*;
- the *context of translation* and *microcontext*, *source and target sign spaces*;
- *social actors*, including the *translator*.

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5   For the sake of the argumentation, the classification of the "turns" of translation studies is adapted from Snell-Hornby (2006) and Hartama-Heinonen (2015: 41). "Turns" are understood here as lasting trends or approaches (often along with appropriate methodologies) developed within a particular theoretical paradigm (cf. Gambier, Kasperė 2021: 37, n1; see also Zwischenberger 2023: 3).

Below I present the definitions of these concepts, as used in the paper.

The 'context of translation' is defined as the global context of a particular translation event.[6] The context of translation encompasses the source and the target spaces demarcated by the relevant borders. It also integrates all of the elements that constitute the translation event – cf. Riku Haapaniemi's concept of 'the meaning-construction environment' (Haapaniemi 2024: 26). As such, the context of translation is part of the semiosphere, where the relevant semiotic exchange unfolds.

The 'microcontext' is defined as conditions directly referring to the translation event, translators and their working conditions (i.e. ergonomics), including e.g. the time and place; financial, social, personal and institutional arrangements; or available translation tools and resources.

As already indicated in the previous section, the 'sign space' means a relevant portion of the semiosphere indicated by the border(s). As such, it is internally varied, dynamic and asymmetrical.

The sign space includes its 'social actors', who are collectively defined as sign creators, users and interpreters, exercising control over the translation event to various degrees, either directly or indirectly.

The category of social actors includes naturally the 'translator', who is considered the main Peircean quasi-mind, i.e. the interpreter of a specific mental image (CP 4.536, 4.550), working towards identifying and determining the final interpretant, that is, the destined or the intended meaning during the act of translation. The translator is the central "element" of the translation event, as the main sign user, interpreter and creator. It should be noted that the label 'the translator' may in fact stand for a group of individuals, depending on the actual context of translation (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 125–126). It may also denote individuals responsible for post-editing a machine-generated text or any individual controlling machine translation. In other words, it is assumed that in a professional context, as of now, even advanced neural machine translation requires human-assisted post-editing. It is claimed here that the translator has an active role in translation, rather than a "merely instrumental" one, as maintained by Dinda Gorlée (1994: 91; see also Gorlée 2004: 127). Assuming that signs translate themselves into other signs *per se*, Gorlée argues that text-signs address the translator as living structures and the process of translation is relatively random and non-intentional. By contrast, here the translator is believed to have agency, even though this sense of control is subject to limitations (see Section 5 below).

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[6] The distinction between the event of translation and the act of translation used in the paper follows Toury's (1995: 249) definitions: 'an act of translation' stands for processes taking place in the translator's mind, whereas 'an event of translation' represents a specific instance of translation situated in a specific context of time and space.

Since defining the concept of the text is a necessary step on the way towards defining translation (Sütiste, Torop 2007: 193; see also Holmes 1994[1988]: 100), it is discussed in more detail in the following section.

3.1. Text and text-related concepts

The understanding of the text as presented follows from the semiotic definition by Lotman, which is broad enough to include the structural, functional/situational and semantic dimensions of any cohesive composition. A 'text' is defined briefly as a semiotic fact aimed at communicating meaning in a given context (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 94).

Any text has an organized and fixed internal structure represented by a combination of signs (i.e. syntagms from a semiotic point of view; see Łotman 1984). However, this fixed structure offers only some potential meaning, which is interpreted in a particular functional/situational context, including intertextual relationships (in line with the claim that culture is a "totality of texts"; see Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978: 238). Each text is meant to signify something (Lotman 1981; Łotman 1984; Lotman 1990). It follows that the global textual meaning results from the interplay of all the signs creating the internal structure of the text, including the co-text understood as the immediate context within the text, as well as its surrounding sign space. The meaning of the text is a matter of a given point in time, which underlines the dynamic character of its interpretation and subsequent translation (see also Steiner 1975: 24).

This understanding of the text seems in line with a definition put forward by Gorlée (2004: 29–30) within translation semiotics. Referring to Peircean universal categories, Gorlée argues that, as a matter of Firstness, a text is recognized as such, which may be connected with its structural dimension. Then, it is "deictically anchored" in time and space (Secondness), which is the functional or situational dimension. Finally, the text becomes meaningful by existing in this social context (Thirdness), which may be collated with the claim that the meaning of a text is a matter of its structure and context.

Let us now look at the text-related concepts, i.e. the concepts which stand for the elements that constitute the structure of the text, namely the 'semiotic code', 'linguistic message', as well as 'media' and 'modes'.

The *semiotic code* means sign systems and conventions of their composition used in order to create the internal structure of the text (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 100).[7] The semiotic code may include the system of a natural language, which as

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7   The semiotic code is thus the language of the text. For the sake of clarity, the word 'language' is avoided, as within translation studies it may be misleadingly interpreted as a natural language.

stated in the introduction, is a frequent aspect of translation researched within translation studies, making interlingual transfer one of the main interests of scholars and practitioners. Accordingly, a text may involve the *linguistic message*, i.e. "a constitutive sign system of the semiotic code used in a specific text" expressed by means of a natural language(s) (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 275).

A text is then an organized structure founded on a semiotic code, existing in a specific context of time, space and other texts. The word 'existing' is salient, as it presupposes another aspect of the text, namely the materiality of the text. The importance of the material dimension was highlighted by Anthony Pym in the 1990s and gained overt recognition during the multimodal or audiovisual turn for obvious reasons. Pym (1992: 24) makes explicit the interconnection between the sense and form, when he writes:

> For the purposes of translation studies, the privileged object of transfer is the text, independently of whatever meaning, information, message or signification might have been attributed to that text prior to transfer. But the text must be recognized as inseparable from material support, since it is only through materiality that its transfer can become significant.

Thanks to their materiality, texts "move in time and space" against the background of socially-conditioned constraints (Pym 1992: 124).

More recently, the materiality of translation has been brought to the fore by Karin Littau (2016), who underlines that it is the precondition of understanding the intended meaning, and Haapaniemi (2024), who argues that the concept may be used to address some of the most burning issues of translation studies. He claims that not only is materiality a means of connecting various current "strands" of the discipline, but it is also a means of constraining translation by providing a framework for both the meaning-making and meaning-taking (Haapaniemi 2024: 23). Consequently, the way the text is communicated is of equal importance to its content. That is why the definition of the text includes the concepts of 'media' and 'modes'.

In this paper, the two are considered different yet correlated concepts. A 'medium' means the manner through which the text is communicated and through which it reaches the intended audience. A 'mode', on the other hand, means the materiality in which the text exists, so the resources by which the semiotic code is rendered in the text (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 102–103). In other words, the medium is related to sensory perception and includes visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory or olfactory media, whereas the mode stands for the manner of

representing the meaning in the texts, such as speech, images, orchestral music, gestures, writing, etc.

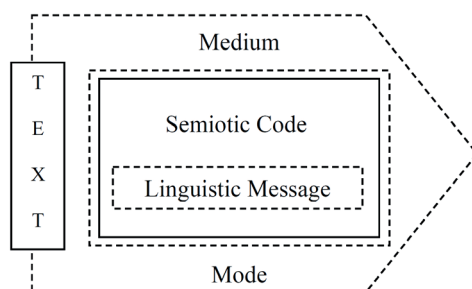The relationships between the text-related concepts are demonstrated in Fig. 1.

Figure 1. Conceptualization of the text (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 134).

As can be seen, the elements of the text are organized hierarchically: the linguistic message is part of a more global concept of the semiotic code, which in turn is embedded within the materiality of the medium and mode. The use of both the continuous and dashed lines is also meaningful: the continuous line around the semiotic code symbolizes the fixed structural dimension and composition.[8] The dashed lines, on the other hand, which are used around all of the concepts, indicate that there is constant dialogue between them and the surrounding context. The arrow in the figure stands for the semantic dimension of the text and its function of communicating meaning rather than for a linear sequence of signs. It is assumed that semiotically understood syntagms are building blocks of different types that remain in relationships of a linear and non-linear character. The arrow shape also highlights the inner composition of the text, indicating that there is a beginning and there is an end.

4. Dialogue model of translation

The concepts defined in the previous section are considered the elements of translation. Having defined them, we should now move on to indicating how they

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[8]   In response to the post-translation-studies assumption concerning fuzzy rather than fixed objects, e.g. source and target texts (Gentzler 2017: 230), I would say that texts are fixed composition-wise, but their interpretation, i.e. their global meaning, depends on the structural, functional/situational and semantic dimensions. Just as the interpretation of a text depends on the situational context, so does translation depend on its constraint-determined context.

are related to one another. First of all, let us turn to Lotman and his perspective on translation. He states that the main mechanism of translation is dialogue, which seems a natural result of the existence of tension and a wish to resolve it (Lotman 1990: 143). The model presented is no exception. Translation is conceptualized as being founded on *dialogue* that brings in contact two sign spaces, creating the context of translation. Further on, the context of translation is construed as the space of dialogue, as all the elements of translation are in a dialogical relationship. The relationships between these elements are presented in Fig. 2.

The model exemplifies a causal and nexus model (Chesterman 2000), since the focus is put on the mechanism of translation and relationships between its elements, which are interrelated, socially conditioned and meaningful.
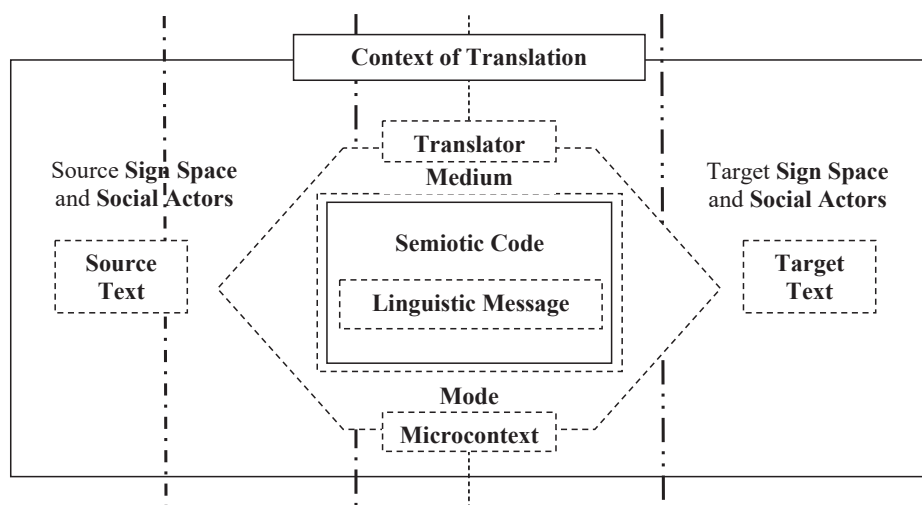

Figure 2. The dialogue model of translation (based on Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 137).

The model in Fig. 2 draws on the semiotics-based model presented in earlier papers (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2020, 2021), but includes some refinements.[9] The main

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9   The model is also based on the main tenets standing behind any communication model, as translation is considered an act of communication. Hence, any theory of translation should be founded on the theory of semantic communication, as stated by George Steiner (1975: 279). In general, any model of communication should include three types of entities (Elleström 2018: 277): the thing that is communicated, the spaces between which this communication takes place, and the intermediate stage, which provides space for the actual dialogue or exchange of information. In the model presented in the paper, the thing that is communicated is the

difference lies in the application of multiple semiotic borders, marked graphically with the vertical dashed lines of various types. The quality of dialogue is indicated with the dashed lines: on this account, all the elements included in the model contribute to the meaning-making process. Thus, the model represents a space-oriented and dynamic framework which includes various aspects of the translation event, such as the temporal, social or technical ones.

The rectangular shape represents the context of translation. It is demarcated with a continuous line to differentiate it from the potentially infinite semiosphere. Inside the context, there are elements deemed relevant (by social actors) to a specific translation event. The reciprocal relation between the source and the target sign spaces as well as their texts is signalled by the hexagon-shaped symbol. Thanks to that, the model avoids the misleading and problematic metaphor of 'carrying something over', but instead underlines the contact and mixing of the sign spaces.

As made clear by the model, the meaning-making contact exists not only between texts or the sign spaces, but also between the elements of translation generally. In other words, each element becomes significant and builds the context of translation. The dialogue is made possible thanks to the vertical border(s) requiring semiotic exchange and the elements being part of the context of translation. This means that translation unfolds as a result of a specific semiotic framework, which explains why there can be so many rewritings or versions of one source text. It is also indicative of the significance of all the elements, including social, material, personal or ideological aspects.

In this way, the elements of the model shape the semiotic framework. They provide relevant information, working both as help (e.g. a clear translation brief, a comprehensive translation memory or informative visuals) and hindrance (e.g. spatial and temporal limitations in audiovisual translation, prosody and vowel qualities in singable translation or the profile of the target audience in any translation). In other words, they narrow down or limit the number of possible solutions, controlling translation. Even though translators wield agency, they are situated within a particular semiotic framework, in which they need to utilize, translate and combine meanings coming from those various elements. That is why each element of translation, including the translator, works as a constraint, both positive and negative. There is a constant interaction between these elements, which emphasizes the dynamic and relational nature of translation.

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meaning of the source text, the two spaces are the source and target sign spaces and the intermediate stage is the dynamic context of translation.

Since the elements of translation are in constant dialogue, so are the constraints resulting from them, which means that the dialogue of constraints may be considered a common mechanism across various translation events.

5. Dialogue of constraints

The problem of constraints in translation studies has been addressed from a number of vantage points: scholars would focus mainly on the social nature of constraints (e.g. Toury's classification of norms or André Lefevere's concepts of poetics and patronage) or their limiting powers (e.g. as claimed by Andrew Chesterman or audiovisual translation scholars). However, despite their mostly negative connotations, constraints are considered to be positive as they define the context of translation. The positive role of constraints was implied already in the linguistic turn by Levý (2004[1967]). Recently, the question of constraints has been addressed by, *inter alia*, Tomáš Duběda (2024), who applies a constraint-based framework to assess the accuracy of translation equivalents in legal translation, or Haapaniemi (2024: 23), who argues that materiality constraints of two types restrict both meaning-making and meaning-taking.

Another promising take on constraints has been presented by Marais (2023). The author underlines the role of constraints and maintains that translation should be conceptualized in terms of the latter (Marais 2023: 191). The point of departure is the work of Terrence Deacon and his perspective on constraints.

Referring to the Peircean triad of icon–index–symbol, Deacon (1997) considers language to be unique to humans because of its highly symbolic nature. He rejects the postulate of a culturally-constructed convention or an innate mechanism that should be responsible for acquiring language, i.e. the Chomskian universal grammar, as he believes that undeniable language universals reflect relevant semiotic constraints (see also Deacon 2003: 112). Deacon claims that constraints arise from the symbolic nature of language communication, i.e. "the symbolic use of tokens is constrained both by each token's use and by the use of other tokens with respect to which it is defined" (Deacon 1997: 100). In other words, there are both "intrinsic constraints" operating within a syntagm of symbols, as well as "external" constraints, which operate between the symbol and the object it refers to (see also Deacon 2011: 193). Constraints are the driving force behind the emergence of meaningful language, also because they impose some adaptation demands on human brains. In his later work, Deacon (2011) uses the concept of constraints in a more general sense as a 'condition for the emergence of work and socio-cultural reality in general'. Constraints are needed

to create a meaningful form, habit or order from disorder "via the expenditure of energy" (Deacon 2011: 479). Constraints are perceived both as "what is not" and as what "could have been" (Deacon 2011: 191–192), which means that they create a framework of choice or specific conditions, limiting the potential variation.

Marais follows the claim according to which semiosis, and by definition translation, means action and work, which needs energy. This energy has to be somehow "harnessed", i.e. constrained. He also agrees with the double perspective on constraints: constraints are both what is given and what could have been given (the so-called "absential", Marais 2023: 181), hence it is crucial to take into account both the given reality and absence. What is translated is constraints rather than the pure matter-energy. Marais underlines also the role of the translator, who controls the action.

The model in the paper is based on similar presuppositions, i.e. constraints are the determining factors of translation; they restrict the context of translation and as a result the number of potential meanings or solutions (see Deacon 2011: 203); they are socially-conditioned (imposed mainly by social actors creating specific conventions); they are both positive and negative; they are utilized by translators. The concept of constraint becomes then a salient analytical tool, since the reconstruction of the context of translation may provide much insight into the decision process. That is why the concept of constraint needs to be examined in a more systematic and detailed fashion.

The following typology of constraints presents nine types, as each constraint presented in Table 1 is derived from the elements listed in Sections 3 and 4. Constraints are defined as "objective and formal as well as subjective impediments, both extra- and intratextual" (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 153).

Table 1. Translation elements and their corresponding constraints.

Element of translation	Type of constraint
source sign space and social actors	meta-translational
source text	ST-specific
semiotic code	system-based
medium and mode	medium-specific
linguistic message	translation problems
microcontext	context-specific
target text	ideology-based
target sign space and social actors	audience-related/social
translator	psychological/cognitive

The terms in the table are labels used within the theoretical framework of the paper and should be referred to their immediate elements, even though at points the label has been abbreviated or slightly modified (e.g. in the case of the medium-specific or the system-based constraints). In some cases, the label indicates the main operative dimension of the constraint: this can be illustrated with the labels 'ideology-based constraint' or 'psychological/cognitive constraint', which highlight the impact of different sets of beliefs and norms or the role of personal traits and mental processes, respectively.

All of the constraints exist in a functional space of relevant signs, are in a dialogical relationship and form a hierarchically organized system. In other words, whereas the dialogue of constraints is a universal feature of translation, the scale of potency or importance of particular constraints depends on the actual context of translation. For instance, in the case of singable translation, one of the most potent constraints would be the medium-specific and the meta-translational one, as the goal will consist in creating a performable target song. In the case of literary translation, though, it may be the source-text-specific or system-based constraint, as the focus may be placed on the text, its global meaning and distinctive artistic codes. Irrespective of their actual potency, all the constraints operate in each translation event.

The final point demonstrates another feature of the constraints: namely, there are no clear-cut borders between them (which results from the general fuzziness of any border) and, as such, they permeate and influence one another, creating either a balanced compromise or a deliberate conflict within the closed space of the context of translation. For these reasons, if we want to understand a particular translation event, we should most likely attempt at reconstructing the whole framework of constraints, rather than focus on a detailed analysis of single aspects (unless the aim is problem-restricted research).

Each constraint may be associated with its "operational" dimension, i.e. ideas or aspects of translation that have been addressed within translation studies and (translation) semiotics, including the concept of intertextuality, artistic codes or paratext. Table 2 presents a tentative list of these operational dimensions.

Table 2. Examples of operational dimensions of constraints (based on Rędzioch-Korkuz 2021: 171).

Type of constraint	Operational dimension
meta-translational	**The overall shape of translation, including:** preliminary and initial norms translation *skopos* intentions and expectations of social actors translation strategy potential hypotexts
ST-specific	**Global meaning of the ST, including:** theme and content text function polysystem position intertextuality and epitext
system-based	**The sign systems involved and relationships between them, including:** generic features composition and artistic codes multimodality and polysemioticity
medium-specific	**The physical form of the ST, including:** media and modes visual alignment and peritext paper, format, colours, etc. formal aspects, e.g. rhymes, verse, staging etc.
translation problems	**Linguistic text-based constraints, e.g.:** structural differences between SL and TL language variety culture-specific items language taboo
context-specific	**The microcontext of translation, including:** time and space deadlines translation aids and resources work conditions collaboration and authorship
ideology-based	**The filter of the target space, including:** censoring and manipulation intended polysystem and function of the TT power relations patronage, regime and poetics
audience-related/social	**The profile of target social actors, including:** relevant features of social actors expectations and intentions socially-validated norms
psychological/cognitive	**The active role of translators and their universe of discourse, including:** competences and experience moods and feelings idiosyncrasies and individual poetics

This general overview presents only some potential problems that are attended to during translation, and hence does not exhaust the list of all possibilities. However, it may provide proof for supporting the previous claims: there is clear interaction between the constraints and this interaction is dynamic and dialectical. For instance, the meta-translational constraint, which includes expectations of social actors, is the constraint that integrates the source and the target spaces, since the expectations of the commissioner (partially representing the source side) should be reconciled with or should correspond to the ones of the target audience. The ST-specific constraint is seen through the prism of e.g. the ideology-based one, etc. Again, this proves the power of the border, which does not divide, but above all joins different, yet similar, spaces.

This dynamic dialogue of constraints is considered a universal mechanism of translation, with constraints being helpful, as they provide a viable framework for translational actions. As highlighted by Levý (2004[1967]: 149), constraints define the paradigm of choice and instructions, thus reducing the number of possibilities. Constraints work as resources providing significant clues and controlling translation, "harnessing" the energy created within the context of translation.

Naturally, the question how translators approach the nexus of constraints is open, since, as already signalled, the dialogue of constraints may be interpreted with the aim of creating a reconciling balance or, on the contrary, with the aim of creating a clash or conflict of these constraints. In both cases, the process will yield substantially different products that will in turn have contrasting post-translation effects (e.g. in terms of their reception, compliance with acceptance norms or target audience's expectations). It follows that good knowledge and analysis of constraints can help understand the general mechanism of translation, which is founded on the dialogue of constraints.

So what is translation? The following definition may not put an end to the ongoing task of defining the object of study, but it may accommodate "new" types of translational activities under the label 'translation', as it exemplifies an open definition. Indeed, Tymoczko (2005: 1086) once argued that the only solution to the problem of defining translation is an open definition, i.e. a definition that includes various cases, "even if not all translation processes and products share a common core of specific features". She goes on, pointing out that although the concept should be broad, it is necessary to indicate "some borders or boundaries or limits for the inquiry about translation, even if these borders do not form a closed figure" (Tymoczko 2005: 1086). Surely, borders are not fixed, but the argument about there being no need for a common core is rejected. In my definition, the common core of any translation is the universal mechanism of the dialogue of constraints.

Following the argumentation presented so far, we can summarize the most important findings and confirm the claim that translation is founded on the qualities of difference, similarity and dialogue, all of which are created by semiotic borders. The event of translation involves its constituent elements, which are interrelated and create the context of translation. Translation is then situational: it involves relevant portions of the semiosphere and unfolds in time and space. The context of translation integrates all the elements and creates the space of dialogue, which is defined by their corresponding constraints. The target text, considered the product of translation, is a result of this dialogue and mediation of meaning, which encompasses necessary modifications in the substance and materiality of the semiotic code, medium and mode, and the linguistic message. Simply put, *translation is a process based on the dialogue of constraints*. It is a process of mediation determined by relevant constraints and unfolding within the space of dialogue between them.

This space of dialogue is created by the context of translation which includes various sign systems and multiple borders. This in turn confirms the fact well known to (translation) semioticians, but accepted by translation scholars with reservation: translation is a semiotic, rather than a purely linguistic process. If we agree that texts are semiotic facts, since the materiality is as important as the linguistic layer, then we need to agree that translation is also a semiotic fact. Not only today in the paradigm of the digital word and multimodality is translation something more than just words; on the contrary, translation has always involved the universal semiotic mechanism of meaning-making. According to Peirce (CP 2.228), signs become meaningful only when they are translated into other, often more advanced signs. Translation is exactly that: a process of expressing specific signs by means of other signs, unfolding in a constrained context.

6. Final remarks

Seen from the perspective of semiotics as a contextualized dialogue founded on similarity and difference, translation may indeed be a very broad term, teetering on the brink of being too ambiguous and thus meaning nothing. For these reasons, as a translation scholar, I would put a cautious emphasis on natural languages or the linguistic message. In the introduction to the special issue of *Translation Studies* devoted to reconceptualizing translation, Zheng *et al.* (2023: 170) ask several pertinent questions:

> […] how epistemologically justified is the dominant focus on lingual translation? Can one learn more about the phenomenon of translation if one takes into account non-lingual types of translation (Blumczynski 2023)? Would that shift in focus (from *lingual* translation to *translation* per se) result in the need to redraw the boundary of TS[10] as a discipline and its relationship with other disciplines dealing with various kinds of translation?

I would say that the lingual focus is mainly a matter of the roots of translation studies, the background of most translation scholars and the literary translation bias. This lingual focus may be part of translation studies for a long time to come. However, combining tenets of translation semiotics with this lingual focus does not have to mean redrawing any conceptual borders, but rather accepting the natural matter of course, and enriching the existing body of knowledge. Instead of shifting conceptual borders or proclaiming the death of the discipline (e.g. with the advent of post-translation studies), I suggest finding a middle ground between translation studies and (translation) semiotics, perceiving linguistic communication in its natural semiotic context and taking advantage of a holistic approach to translation.

Translation, irrespective whether done between natural languages, within one natural language or between non-linguistic sign systems, is rooted in semiotics and guaranteed by *inter alia* the existence of Lotmanian semiotic borders, the Peircean doctrine of signs as well as his universal categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. Translation is a matter of dialogue between its elements, or rather their corresponding constraints. These represent all sign systems relevant to a particular context.

The model presented in the paper straddles both translation studies and translation semiotics. It provides a more comprehensive understanding of translation for translation scholars, highlighting the common mechanism typical of this semiotic activity and proving once again that translation goes beyond linguistics. It also shows a perspective of a translation scholar by presenting the conceptual and terminological legacy of translation studies, which, hopefully, will inform further research in translation semiotics.

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[10]   Translation studies.

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(Re)konceptualizacja pojęcia przekładu,
czyli przekład jako dynamiczny proces dialogu między ograniczeniami

Związki między przekładoznawstwem a semiotyką wydają się kwestią oczywistą, co potwierdzają liczne publikacje naukowe czy podejścia do badań nad przekładem. Pomimo tego w przekładoznawstwie semiotyka to przede wszystkim źródło pojęć przydatnych głównie w przypadku, gdy istotnym elementem tłumaczenia są znaki niejęzykowe. Wyjście poza te typowe ramy prowadzi nierzadko do powstania koncepcji, które mogą okazać się zbyt szerokie i abstrakcyjne, zwłaszcza dla przekładoznawców. Mamy zatem do czynienia z pewnym paradoksem, zarówno konceptualnym, jak i ontologicznym: z jednej strony przekładoznawcy usiłują wyjść poza granice językoznawstwa, jednak z drugiej – większość z nich wciąż ogranicza się wyłącznie do analizy na poziomie języków naturalnych. W rezultacie rozumienie przekładu nie jest precyzyjne na tyle, żeby objąć różne typy tłumaczenia, z którymi spotykamy się współcześnie. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę rekonceptualizacji pojęcia „przekład", który rozumiany jest jako dynamiczny proces dialogu między ograniczeniami. Tym samym artykuł czerpie zarówno z semiotyki tłumaczenia, jak i z przekładoznawstwa, a zaproponowany model teoretyczny podkreśla rolę ograniczeń oraz uniwersalny i semiotyczny charakter przekładu.

Tõlke (re)kontseptualiseerimine piirangute dünaamilise dialoogina

Tõlkeuuringute ja semiootika kattuvusvälja on käsitletud arvukates väljaannetes ning tõlketeaduslikes lähenemistes. Ent vähemalt tõlkeuuringute vallas on seda kattuvust olnud märgata peamiselt juhtudel, kui mängu tulevad mittekeelelised märgid, samas kui ehedalt semiootilised raamistused on osutunud liiga laiadeks või abstraktseteks. See on viinud välja kontseptuaalse ja ontoloogilise paradoksini: ühest küljest on tõlketeadlased üritanud keeleteadusest kaugemale liikuda, teisalt aga rõhutab enamus ikka veel tugevasti keelelist tõlget. Selle tulemusena ei ole "tõlge" enam täpne termin, mis oleks piisavalt avar, hõlmamaks selle tegevuse nüüdisaegseid tüüpe. Käesolevas artiklis pannakse ette kontseptualiseerida tõlge ümber dünaamilise dialoogilise protsessina relevantsete piirangute vahel. Artiklis kirjeldatav teoreetiline mudel, mis asub tõlkesemiootika ja tõlketeaduse vahel, toob esile nii piirangute rolli kui ka tõlke universaalse semiootilise olemuse.