

Preface

On the paths of translation semiotics with Peeter Torop

*“Humanities and social sciences as feedback sciences
have a mission to ensure a culture’s ability to
understand itself. Without self-understanding, culture
would lack identity, and without identity it is hard to
create dialogue with the surrounding world, other
cultures – to be at the same time both capable of
dialogue as well as mentally independent.”*
(Torop 2011: 8¹)

The present special issue of *Sign Systems Studies*, “Semiotics of Translation and Cultural Mediation”, brings together a collection of papers written on translational and mediational aspects of various cultural phenomena and on semiotic and cultural aspects of translation. Most of the articles are based on presentations delivered at the conference “Culture in Mediation: Total Translation, Complementary Perspectives” dedicated to Peeter Torop’s 60th birthday in November 2010.

Peeter Torop has been Professor of Semiotics of Culture at the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia since 1998. In the years 1997–2006 he also served as the Head of the Department. Over the years he has supervised close to 40 Master’s and Doctoral dissertations and held lecture courses in subjects such as semiotics of translation, semiotic modelling, semiotics of literature, interdisciplinary analysis of culture, and numerous others.

Peeter Torop is a scholar of depth and reach. Similarly to his long-time research interest Fyodor Dostoyevsky who feared profanation and oversimplification, Peeter Torop has on occasion revealed that the one thing he dreads is the devaluation of demanding intellectual effort and the possibility of high

¹ Here and in the following, the quotations from Peeter Torop’s writings in Estonian and Russian have been translated by me – E. S.

quality being attributed to phenomena that in actuality do not possess it. Peeter Torop himself is a researcher in the word's true meaning, a scholar who loves to delve into his object of investigation, to live among the authors and texts he studies. By today's count, his work as a mediator of knowledge has produced close to 300 publications, their topics ranging from Estonian translation history to explaining the legacy of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics, from nuances in understanding Dostoyevsky to examining political issues in present-day Estonia and making sense of our contemporary multi-, inter-, transmedial, etc. world. Half of Torop's publications have been written in Estonian, the other half is comprised mostly of Russian- or English-language publications. Since 1970, he has published around 60 articles in Estonian newspapers, which gives testimony to Peeter Torop's concern for Estonian culture and his readiness to participate in its internal communication as well as in communication with other cultures. Some examples of his topics that show the scope of his interests and fields of competence can be listed as follows: "Translated poetry: translator and poet" (1985); "Love and mercy" (1987, afterword to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*); "Literature in film" (1989a); "The memory of science" (1993); "Butterfly in storm" (on the translation of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, 2000c); "Reading of the Internet" (2001b); "At the sources of Russian terrorism" (2001e); "Simplified Estonia" (2002b); "Eco's epiphany in fog" (2004); "Bilingual Estonia" (2005b); "Multimediality" (2008b); "Theatre festival as cultural autocommunication" (2009c); "National film and culture" (2012).

Over the years, some subject matters have recurrently captured Peeter Torop's attention. One of the most persistent topics has been that of interrelations between Translation and Culture: in Torop's bibliography we can find the first co-occurrence of these words already in 1979 in the title of his article "Культура и перевод" ("Culture and translation", Torop 1979a), while the most recent example is his 2011 volume in Estonian by a similar title *Tõlge ja kultuur* (*Translation and culture*, Torop 2011b). Translation as a central cultural mechanism in communication with other cultures as well as in auto-communication occupies a special place in Torop's interest sphere. He has dedicated considerable attention to questions related to translation history, including the complex issue of methodology of composing translation history (Torop 1979b, 1989b, 2011a; Torop, Osimo 2010).

Peeter Torop has also been a long-time mediator of the legacy of the Tartu–Moscow Semiotic School (e.g. Torop 1992, 1998b, 1999a, 2000d, 2000e,

2005c; Kull, Salupere, Torop, Lotman 2011) and specifically of Juri Lotman (e.g. Torop 1982, 1989c, 1991, 1993a, 2001c, 2002a, 2006, 2008a, 2009a, 2009b). As one among Juri Lotman's and Zara Mints's students and colleagues who were drawn together by the couple's charismatic commitment to their academic work, Peeter Torop has expressed his feeling of responsibility for continuing their work and handing down to the next generation of younger colleagues (in the Tartu School, 'colleagues' have included and continue to include students) his teachers' attitude towards their subject matter and their work (Torop 1999b: 365). On many occasions, Peeter Torop has emphasized that Juri Lotman set the measure for everybody around him with his high ethical standards and academic integrity, qualities that are no less relevant in today's academic and everyday life than they were at the time of Juri Lotman (Torop 1999c).

As a scholar of Russian literature by his academic background, Peeter Torop has acted as a valuable mediator of Russian literature for the Estonian students and reading public. His lectures on Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov are recalled with admiration by his former students even from the days when he still was a novice lecturer. Dostoyevsky has been Torop's focus of research in Russian literature and it is to Dostoyevsky that he has devoted the largest number of his publications on Russian literature, among these an influential monograph *Достоевский: история и идеология* (1997, *Dostoyevsky: History and Ideology*).

Torop has acted as mediator of Russian literature not only as a scholar and lecturer but, so far rather exceptionally for him, also as a translator. In 1981, a compilation of fragments from Dostoyevsky's non-belletristic legacy was published in Estonian translation (Dostojevski 1981). This collection was composed and translated by Peeter Torop himself, and perhaps it is not wholly wrong to surmise that the exceptionality of this work in his bibliography casts some light on Peeter Torop's own personality, on the topics that are important to him.

Peeter Torop is also one of the few persistent explicit spokespersons for translation semiotics today. Translation semiotics is not a full-fledged discipline yet, being still in the state of becoming (Torop 2008c: 253). Considerable mutual influences between semiotics and studies of translation have in fact existed for several decades: some semiotic ideas have infiltrated translation studies and become axiomatic knowledge (see, e.g. Jakobson 1966[1959]), while translation, mainly used as a metaphor, has proved its explanatory power

in semiotics on many occasions (e.g. Lotman 2000[1990]; Petrilli 2003a; Ponzio 2003). Essay collections or special issues of journals² have been published that bring together translation and semiotics and give an idea which authors are considered relevant or responsible for such fusion. For instance, in his review of *Translation Translation*, a “mainly semiotic miscellany” (Chesterman 2004: 359) compiled and edited by Susan Petrilli in 2003 and containing 36 essays, Andrew Chesterman lists the most frequently occurring names: Bakhtin, Bassnett, Benjamin, Bhabha, Borges, Derrida, Gorfée, Jakobson, Lefevere, Lotman, Peirce, Toury and Venuti (*ibid.*). This list indicates not only the book’s focus, but also a possible (certainly not a definitive) circle of people relevant for translation semiotics. In his paper discussing the reasons why semiotics would be good for translation studies, Ubaldo Stecconi names five persons whom he considers to have made a “promising start for translation semiotics”: Jakobson, van Kesteren, Toury, Deledalle-Rhodes, and Gorfée (Stecconi 2007: 16–17). To these authors Stecconi then adds five more who have made “interesting contributions to the field”: Torop, Petrilli, Eco, Nergaard, and Cosculluela (Stecconi 2007: 17).

Several of the above-mentioned scholars have accumulated significant numbers of renderings and followers. Roman Jakobson is perhaps the best known founding father of translation semiotics, first and foremost owing to his seminal article “On linguistic aspects of translation” (1966[1959]) that has provided food for thought for many later theoreticians (e.g. Steiner 1998[1975]; Derrida 1985; Toury 1986; Eco 2001; Petrilli 2003a). Another, more distant forefather of translation semiotics, is Charles Sanders Peirce, whose influence is evident and acknowledged also in the above-mentioned article of Roman Jakobson. Although Jakobson borrows essentially a single element from Peirce’s system – the idea of interpretant and the accompanying concept of unlimited semiosis –, many later scholars have employed Peirce’s thought much more extensively in explaining and substantiating translational phenomena. Dinda L. Gorfée, an expert in Peirce and one of the leading figures of translation semiotics today, has developed the concept of semiotranslation, which the author herself has characterized as follows: “[Semiotranslation] is a unidirectional, future-oriented, cumulative, and irreversible process, a growing network which should not be pictured as a single line emanating from a source text toward a designated target text” (Gorfée 2004: 103–104).

² E.g. Petrilli 2003b; *Applied Semiotics / Sémiotique Appliquée* 9(24), 2010; *Sign Systems Studies* 36(2), 2008; *Semiotica* 163(1/4), 2007.

The form of translation semiotics that Peeter Torop has been advancing stems to a significant extent from the tradition of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics. In fact, semiotics of culture has been present in the mainstream of translation studies since the 1970s–80s. Juri Lotman’s ideas have resonated well with the work of translation scholars such as Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury who, similarly to Lotman, drew considerable inspiration from Russian Formalism. Even-Zohar has discussed translation phenomena as they operate in wider contexts forming heterogeneous ‘polysystems’; Toury has advanced Descriptive Translation Studies and proposed the concept of ‘norm’ to be used with regard to translational behaviour in culture. Toury (1986) also wrote an entry on translation for the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* edited by Thomas A. Sebeok that was probably the first systematic discussion of the interrelations between translation and semiotics.³

As a field of research striving to become established as a discipline on its own, semiotics of translation has been quite likely most advocated for by Peeter Torop who has on many occasions explained the interrelations between semiotics, especially semiotics of culture, and translation studies (e.g. Torop 1994, 1998a, 2000a, f, 2001a, 2005a, 2007a, b, 2008c, 2010, 2011b; Sütiste, Torop 2007). In his original contribution to the study of translation, Peeter Torop has proposed the concept of *total translation* that, first, means the widening of the circle of issues and phenomena included in the subject area of translation studies, and, second, symbolizes the search for an “understanding methodology”, or in other words, attempts to methodologically translate the experience of various disciplines into one unitary interdisciplinarity (Torop 1995: 10).

In his writings Torop has suggested that the main object of translation studies should be the translation process (Torop 2008d: 377). Translation process can be reconstructed on the basis of two texts: the input (source) text and the output (target) text. The comparison of the two has enabled Torop to build a universal taxonomy of translation process that is devised so as to be able to account for any kind of translation, in principle (Torop 1995: 12). At the same time Torop has considered it necessary to allow for various kinds of translational semiosis and therefore within the framework of total translation he distinguishes between textual translation, metatextual translation, in- and intertextual translation, and extratextual translation (Torop 1995: 12–13). In

³ More recently, an article on translation for a semiotics handbook (edited by Roland Posner a.o.) has been contributed by José Lambert and Clem Robyns (2004).

building his theory, Torop has borne in mind that it would take into account not only the interlingual aspect of translation, but also intralingual, inter-semiotic as well as intertextual, interdiscursive and intermedial aspects (Torop 2000a). Torop's views and their evolution have been summarized in his books *Тотальный перевод* (*Total Translation*, 1995; in Italian translation as *La traduzione totale*, Torop 2000b, 2nd ed. Torop 2010), *Kultuurimärgid* (*Signs of Culture*, Torop 1999b) and *Tõlge ja kultuur* (*Translation and Culture*, 2011b).

Despite the promising perspectives, translation semiotics has so far remained a rather marginal enterprise both with regard to translation studies and semiotics in general, and the path of combining the study of translation with semiotics has been undertaken only by a select few (cf. Hartama-Heinonen, this volume). One explanation for this may be that while it is quite easy to see the obvious convergences in translation and sign action, it takes considerable erudition and a broad field of vision to construe the historical as well as contemporary rhizomatic relations between the two spheres. Perhaps in order to make semiotics more visible within translation studies it needs to be better translated for this discipline, as for instance Ubaldo Stecconi has done (e.g. Stecconi 2007). There is no doubt Peeter Torop himself deserves to be more extensively translated – both in terms of his writings such as his seminal work *Тотальный перевод* (1995) as well as in terms of interpreting his contribution to the study of translation (cf. Osimo, this volume).

In the present collection, Peeter Torop directs his attention to the broader phenomenon of mediation and formulates five theses of semiotics of mediation. In other essays of this special issue, translation and mediation are viewed from a variety of perspectives and the usage of the respective concepts tends to be rather broad as well as intuitive in the sense that the two fields are usually not strictly separated. In many articles, translation is understood in a fairly traditional sense, meaning transfer between various natural languages but also involving transfer between cultures (Terje Loogus), literatures (Anneli Mihkelev) or their subforms such as poetry (Maria-Kristiina Lotman). The mediational nature of literary intertexts is discussed in Katalin Kroó's article. Dinda Gorlée complements the traditional understanding of translation with a semiotic commentary, while Daniele Monticelli, Winfried Nöth, Ritva Hartama-Heinonen and Tomi Huttunen write about translation and mediation as predominantly deep-structure semiotic phenomena. Ileana Almeida and Julieta Haidar in their article construe translation foremost as cultural transfer; Aare Pilv, Ekaterina Velmezova and Harri Veivo write about transfers between

various discourses, such as factual and fictional discourses (Pilv), discourse of humanities and K. Vaginov's novels (Velmezova), and different poetic discourses in Finnish poetry (Veivo). The articles of this collection follow the spirit of the Tartu School, focusing on topics related to semiotic mechanisms at work in culture. 60 years is said to be a young age for a humanities scholar, and it is certainly a young age for an academic discipline – thus we may hope for the unfolding of interesting developments in semiotics of translation and mediation together with Peeter Torop.⁴

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