

A Semiotic Approach to Dimensions of Meaning in Translation*

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Abstract—This paper attempts to follow the thoughts of Saussure and Peirce, and take their thoughts as beacons to analyze the different dimensions of meaning. Signs exist for representing the objects either in reality or in imagery, and during the signifying process, two dimensions of meaning come into being, signification and significance. Signification internalized in the structure could be understood from the perspective of structuralism. In Contrast, significance is the effect of what is referred to in a synchronical dimension as meaning potential related to the outside systems, which may be further classified into three aspects: metaphorical meaning, implicature and associative meaning. Moreover, the relationship of signification and significance is dynamic, not static characterized by hierarchy, convertibility and coexistence. Moreover, this paper also discusses how to achieve equivalence based on the dimensions of meaning in an optimal way in real translation practice, which includes signification equivalence, significance equivalence and signification\significance equivalence which is an intersection sandwiched between signification and significance. Signification equivalence and significance equivalence highlight the ability of indicating and creation of signs whereas signification\significance equivalence, accompanied by the developing signifying process focuses on the pragmatic fuzziness brought by the speakers or writers on special occasion on purpose

Index Terms—meaning, signification, significance

I. INTRODUCTION

With the trend of post-modernism, deconstruction gradually proliferates into translation and rises to prominence, which poses a threat to determinacy of meaning by introducing unconsciousness and irrational thinking. Quine (1960) puts forward the notions of occasion sentence and standing sentence definable in terms of the notion of prompted assent and dissent so as to break down the traditional notions about meaning. Kristeva (1966/1986) proposes the concept of intertextuality from the perspective of semiotics, which refers to the signifying activity always dependent on the pre-existed texts in a given text. Obviously intertextuality provides an ideal experimental field for Derrida. Derrida (1978, 1981) points out that since every sign contains the “trace” of other signs, meaning could be understood as a process of referral of signifier ad infinitum with the oblivion of signified. Therefore the signifying process enters into an endless centrifugal movement, spreading from one single sign to every other one in the language system. To determine meaning, thus, becomes impossible.

There is no denying that meaning’ is the essence of translation. Without meaning, translation is nothing. The correct understanding of the meaning is the key to translation. Therefore this paper attempts to elaborate the different dimensions of meaning and guide the translation practices in an attempt to answer the basic question under the framework of semiotics: “what a sign means in essence?”, considering the essential relationship between semiotics and translation.

Semiotics, as its name implies, is the study on signs. From the standpoints of semiotics, all language is a system, consisting of coherent signs. Consequently, all texts can be described and analyzed semiotically. Such being the same case, translation, based on language, is considered as compatible with semiotics in that both are concerned with “the use, interpretation and exchange of messages or texts, --that is of signs” (Gorlée, 1994, p. 11). Translation thereby could be reduced into semiotics involving the elements of language, culture, customs and even the texts in which the original and the translation comprise of a sequence of interpretative signs, as Peirce (1991) says, “Translation is the same as sign interpretation, and sign interpretation is translation” (p.153).

II. THOUGHTS OF SEMIOTICS

As the founder of structuralism, Saussure begins his semiotics in favor of considering language as an abstract system of signs. He denies the idea that there is a transcendental presence existing before signs and puts that “Thought remains vague and chaotic by nature. There are no pre-existing concepts before the introduction of language” (Saussure, 2001, p. 111). To put it simply, no signs no meaning. According to Saussure, a sign could be defined as a two-sided psychological entity, comprising of two parts, signifier (sound pattern) and signified (meaning). The relationship

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between signifier and signified is compared to a sheet of paper, making it impossible to separate sound from meaning. Moreover, what signifier and signified construct is a form, not a substance. On the basis of the formal feature, his most prominent nature of signs, difference, is introduced, which means that language as signifying depends not upon the particular positive properties of what is uttered but upon the difference between what is uttered and what is not uttered. In the meantime a binary opposition comes into being in virtue of the paired difference. Even if the signifier changes, a sign is still capable of being endowed with meaning so long as there is difference.

Though Saussure's theory is helpful in understanding the dialectical relationship between sign and meaning in the structure of semantic field, he fails to appreciate the signs in relation to the empirical world. In view of this, it is natural to introduce Peirce's empirical semiotics. Peirce gives his definition of signs as follows,

A sign, or representamen, is something which stands for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stand for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (Peirce, 1991, p. 227)

According to Peirce, everything in the world is a sign. "There is nothing but signs" (Gorlée, 1994, p. 50). Signs exist for standing for objects either in reality or in imagery, so without representation we have no signs. But that is not enough. Without the subjective consciousness participating, a sign does not exist. It is the interpretant, as a key element, that links objects and signs together. In other words, signs act upon interpretant which serves as the end of the transaction. Therefore the necessary and sufficient condition for a sign to act as a sign is to establish a relation to the outside world and produce a mental entity in mind at the same time. This interpretative process is called a triadic sign-action in which a sign-object-interpretant chain comes into being. Therefore the fundamental characteristic of Peirce's semiotics is not signs, but the sign-action.

In summary, essential to Saussure, the application of linguistic structure, as a system of expressing ideas, which is closed off the external elements, is favored. Nevertheless, the sign theory of Saussure fails to grasp the full meaning of signs, with the elimination of referential notion of signs. By contrast, Peirce's concept of signs is wholly an affair of externality, existing in the relation of standing for others in reality. Moreover, the theory of the unlimitedness, put forward by Peirce, emphasizes that a sign signifies another indefinitely with attention on evolving and dynamic signifying process.

III. DIMENSIONS OF MEANING

Rooted in the thoughts of Saussure and Peirce, we turn to the toughest question, i.e. what a sign means in essence. In Peirce's opinion, meaning of signs in the empirical world derives from the interpretive processes during which a thing is acted as a sign if and only if it meets two requirements: It serves as a representation of the outside world; and then it can only signify if it is construed and/or interpreted. And during the signifying process, two dimensions of meaning come into being, signification and significance. First signs are employed to designate the outside world by the subjective interpreters, resulting in semantic contents. Then what is signified gradually becomes entrenched to be a fixed interpretant which was called signification through the process of ontogenesis and phylogenesis. Since the signifying process is recursive in general, with the signs operating backward, the signification being the first plane is supposed to produce a new interpretant, named significance.

A. Signification

Actually the analysis of aforementioned discussion presents us with a scientific approach to signs. Signification internalized in the structure always remains clear-cut and perspicuous. It operates in a computational manner in that a sign is always what it is by virtue of what it is not. This demonstrates that signification essentially is a formal concept. Take a simple case for example. Someone asks what it is when pointing to a yellow *beizi* on the table. The answer is definitely *beizi*. Now the question is why the listener does not answer "this is yellow", "this is a column", or "this is beautiful" in terms of the color, shape and quality of the object. In a more clearly explicable sense, signification is an abstracted formal concept. The word "abstraction" implies that to understand signification means grasping the essence of meaning in the structure.

Even though signification may be analyzed from the perspective of structuralism, it does not mean it derives from structure. Rather it is simply determined by structure made up of two relations, syntagmatic and paradigmatic. First of all signs are arranged one after another in a sequential order in which the latter sign is able to gain its own value in contrast with what precedes. Then they act upon each other and form a combination. In the meanwhile signs, on the vertical axis, are probable to be associated. This vertical dimension is the domain of paradigms, determined by the grammatical rules. Only the same classes of speech are able to be put into the same grammatical plot. It should be noticed that the relations constructed by structure, only determine how signs function, independent of meaning.

B. Significance

In contrast to signification, significance is the effect of what is referred to in a synchronical dimension as meaning potential related to the outside systems, like social, economic and cultural systems. It is primarily concerned with

breaking up and dislocating familiar sign-structures and relationship between signs, and more importantly cover all possible meanings of signs in the light of these new systems. According to function of signs, we may further classify significance into three aspects: metaphorical meaning, in which the motivation of a sign is activated to produce a certain interpretant; and implicature, referring to the communicative intention in certain contexts; associative meaning which means the different mental images and emotive responses a sign stimulated or evoked accordingly in the cognitive mind.

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|-----------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) 赴汤蹈火 | go through water and fire | (signification) |
| | take all risks | (metaphorical meaning) |
| (2) Say Cheese* | 说奶酪 (Shuo nai lao) | (signification) |
| | 笑一笑 (smile) | (implicature) |

The signs of “water” and “fire” act as the motivation to produce metaphorical meaning, “take all risks”. When someone shouts “say cheese”, his real intention is to remind the people who are taking photos to smile rather than say cheese. If the signification (Shuo nai lao) is chosen, the readers will fail to capture the real communicative purpose of speakers. It should be pointed out that metaphorical meaning and implicature based on signification could be fixed relatively within a certain context. On the contrary, associative meaning is de-contextualized, which possibly has something to do with the social and cultural environment. Take the sign *dog* as an example. In the foreign country, on mention of dog, people are likely to associate it with “loyalty”, while in China some phrases with dog may denote the derogatory associations, like “狗仗人势”(Be bully under the protection of a powerful person), “狗眼看人低”(Judge people by wealth and power), “狗急跳墙”(a desperate dog tries to jump over the wall) and so on. Thus associative meaning may vary according to different people, time and place.

C. *The Relationship between Signification and Significance*

1. Hierarchy

First of all, what signification and significance establish is a hierarchical continuity. The former is the basis or pre-requisite, out of which significance develops. In other words, significance places on a higher level than signification. Next we attempt to expound signification and significance more specifically with the following examples.

- (3) It is a fox.
 (4) He is a fox.
 (5) She will fox him. (Nida and Taber, 1969, p. 57)

In sentence (3) the sign it is used to signify an object, a kind of animal in reality, thus producing signification. The subject is replaced by pronoun he in sentence (4). However it is unable to establish a correspondence between a fox and a person in terms of signification. Therefore, we have to resort to a higher level of meaning. The signifier and signification on the first level combine to produce a new lexeme (signifier\significance), in which signifier plays a role as a mediator. Though the signifier of signification and the signifier of significance share the same morphological form, they are heterogeneous in essence. The most significant attribute of fox, cunning, is activated as motivation to generate significance on a higher level to express the real intention of the speaker.

Nevertheless this does not mean the end of signs interpretation. For Peirce, signs are equipped with an unfailing habit, during which signs realize dramatically increasing growth. No matter how many interpretants have been produced, there is always another interpretant to translate the previous one. Developing out of the second level, the signifier of fox combines significance together to refer to an action or event to deceive or fool sb. Thus we can see that any sign could be translated into other signs in which sign is more fully developed. In the case (5) the developed sign tends to be interpreted to fit a particular situation.

2. Convertibility

However, it does not mean that the hierarchical relationship of signification and significance always remains stable and fixed. Under certain circumstances, they are susceptible to convert to each other. Once significance is conventionalized in a synchronical system, it would be degraded into signification. For instance, in example (4), with the time going, this significance “cunning” is gradually entrenched to be a fixed interpretant in view of social conventions and cultural customs. In this way, significance is degraded into signification, just as bees stands for hard-working and pig for foolish.

3. Coexistence

In addition, signification and significance always coexist to show the continuity and coherence of signs. Both co-exist in one sign in a relationship of foreground and background. Given certain context significance, the “more developed” sign, is likely to be foregrounded with signification temporarily treated as a background. This is the same the other way round. Signification is also supposed to be the focus against the background significance. Plus, a special case indeed exists with attention on the intersection of signification and significance and pun is a good example in which neither signification nor significance is construed as default value while instead both “stand out” in this context. In this case, signification establishes an optimal conceptual blending relevant to significance.

IV. MEANING EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION

Based on what has been discussed above, this chapter attempts to explore the equivalence in model of the semiotics. It should be pointed out that there is no absolute equivalence strictly speaking, in view of distinct culture factors and language idiosyncrasies. As Jakobson (1959) points out “there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code units” (p. 114), “equivalence” in essence is a relative concept, bearing a functional relationship between the original and the translation. “Functional” means what translation needs to realize is equivalence in terms of value or function, in terms of communicative validity and effects. Translation, like semiotics, is processed by the same principle of communication, just as Nida and Taber (1969) put forwards the famous conception of “dynamic equivalence”. As far as Nida is concerned, the first and foremost task for translation is to achieve similar communicative effects as the original does. Therefore what translation is supposed to achieve is the tension between inequivalence and equivalence.

Even though signification and significance cannot be separated from each other, the focus may change a little to some degree. In view of different focuses of the dimensions of meaning, equivalence in translation is further classified into three layers, consisting of signification equivalence, significance equivalence and signification/significance equivalence. Signification equivalence embodies the characteristics of indexical signs, putting the original and the translation in contact. Moreover it involves two-sided experiences of linguistic polarity in which the signs cross over the boundaries to interact and conflict, change and resistance to change. In contrast to the former, significance equivalence is neither concerned about the sign itself, nor the object represented. Instead it highlights the ability of creation of signs on the abstract level—that is standing more than one fashion for something else. Since every sign faces many possibilities to be interpreted, the interaction between sign and interpreters is likely to generate thousands of interpretations with the dynamic motion of signifying process, as Peirce argues (1991) “The idea of a general involves the idea of possible variations which no multitude of existent things could exhaust” (p.159).

A. *Signification Equivalence*

On this level, signification is acquired because a sign establishes a real existential connection with its object by the indexical function of signs. Therefore signification equivalence is made between the original and the translation in terms of the standing-for relation. Here the relationship between sign and signification should be understood from the following three aspects.

To begin with, a sign and its signification keep a one-to-one correspondence. Cross-systemic transfer takes place, but always one substitution. For example, Mary(玛丽), Australia(澳大利亚), September(九月), radar(雷达) and so on. However, we certainly cannot expect a perfect match between languages in that translation does not happen in a vacuum. In different languages, the semantic area of signs is usually not identical. What it is represented in one language may be defaulted in another language, in view of language idiosyncrasy and cultural difference. A good example is the translation of signification of “sister” in English. Actually no one word may cover its full meaning, including both “姐姐” and “妹妹” in Chinese. Therefore the signification of a sign in SL may not have direct correspondence in TL in view of lexical gap. However, signification could be made more explicit by use of “classifiers” plus signs such as “the little” or “the elder”.

Secondly, one sign in the source language may correspond with many significations in target language. For example, the sign “门” could be represented by “door”, “gate” or “entrance” at the same time, which establishes a one-to-many relationship. In this case, the choice of signification should resort to the specific context rather than mechanical equivalence on the sentential or textual level. Actually this reflects the essential function of index, as Peirce holds index is a hard fact, “an occurrence...something that actually takes place” (Gorlée, 1994, p. 41). This can be illustrated by following example.

(6) 望 月

自君之出矣，不富理残机。

思君如满月，夜夜减清辉。

Since you sir, went away,

I have not returned to tend my fading loom;

For thinking of you, I am like the moon at the full,

That nightly wanes and loses its bright splendor.

Robert Kotewell & Norman Smith (Chu Zhida, 2003, p. 44)

The version cited is considered as an unsatisfactory one in that the sign “残” is still translated into “fading” word-for-word. However, what “fading” refers to has quietly deviated from its original. To some degree, “残” under the newly-contextualized appearance means, unfinished not broken. As we can see, the literal rendering of a sign is likely to result in the misunderstanding of the receptors. As regards to the applicable version, it is suggested that “残” should be interpreted into “weaving loom” because “weave” means making cloth and present participle implies the action is not finished yet. Therefore great importance should be attached to the relationship between sign and signification especially when it is pertinent to a special context during the translating activity.

Last but not the least, the function of referring has ascended to a general principle in our model, namely indicating principle. In the sign-object relation, indexical sign is caused or influenced by the object. So does translation. The original is always the active element determining the translation, and translation is the passive element. Therefore

signification equivalence requires translation to converge to the original in every aspect of relativity as much as possible.

B. Significance Equivalence

However it does not mean translation comes to an end, because even if signification equivalence is achieved, once signs are set into motion, they direct towards the creation of equivalence, leaving a great room of liberty and freedom. Significance equivalence is made possible by the conventional signs but never static. It is primarily concerned with breaking up and dislocating familiar sign-structures and relationship between signs, and more importantly cover all possible meanings of signs in the light of the new system.

During the never-ending signifying process, new interpretant based on signification is constantly put forth, which could be called significance including metaphorical meaning, implicature and associative meaning. It has pointed out that influenced by cultural and language differences, sign and signification cannot keep a one-to-one correspondence. If sign equivalence is achieved only for signification's sake, it will result in "fake equivalence". In this case, signification and formal meaning are temporarily treated as a default value and a great prominence will be given to significance, which is manifested by the "more developed" signs.

Whereas the iconic sign and the object represented share some similarities in certain aspects, the characteristic of the object acts as the motivation to stimulate metaphorical meaning. For example, "烟花" in a poetic sentence of "古人西辞黄鹤楼，烟花三月下扬州" written by famous Chinese poet Li Bai does not mean "fireworks" any more. Instead it is compared to the state of catkin flying in the wind and actually refers to the enchanting spring. Hence Thus the signs "烟花" is activated to denote the metaphorical meaning hidden beneath. (Chu Zhida, 2003, p. 30) From the perspective of semiotics, the primary sign has been interpreted into a higher level. In other words, signs have realized their growth or development. Suppose translation still limits to signification equivalence mechanically, which will result in invalidity of translation and misunderstanding of the readers. The following is an example of translating implicature of signs.

(7) Let's strengthen three P's: perception, persistence and power in language and working efficiency. (Hou Guojin, 2004, p. 71)

Under such circumstances, a translator should convey the real communicative purpose of speakers, so as to ensure the similar communicative function of signs in the target text, if necessary, at the sacrifice of signification. The instance is suggested to be translated into "让我们在语言和工作效率上加强三个力:眼力、韧力以及权力" in order to keep the characteristics of alliteration in the original.

In contrast to metaphorical meaning and implicature, associative meaning possibly has something to do with the aesthetic value of signs. Take the translation of the names of a film like "Waterloo Bridge" for example. As we all know, this bridge was built in Thames in honor of the victory of Waterloo War over Napoleon. Though the signification of Waterloo Bridge refers to "滑铁卢桥", such version cannot be justified insomuch as it will probably mislead receptors to associate this film with a war movie happened in Waterloo or a documentary about Waterloo War. And there is no aesthetic feeling at all. However, those who have watched this movie must know that actually this movie depicts a touching love story in which a beautiful actress gets to know a young military officer in Waterloo Bridge and at last dies for love there.

Correspondingly, there are many similar fairy tales in Chinese history such as "鹊桥相会" between cowboy and Vega and "蓝桥相会" in Lan Tian, Shan'xi. In order to let the readers in Chinese respond to the original sign in the similar manner as the receptors in English, the version is changed into "蓝桥遗梦" so as to express associative meaning faithful to the original. In this way, misunderstandings brought by cultural differences and historical backgrounds can be avoided and aesthetic effects associated with the name of the film can be created.

From the examples illustrated above, it should be seen that significance equivalence involves increased information. A sign interprets the previous sign and new interpretant including metaphorical meaning, implicature or associative meaning logically follows. Therefore the growth of knowledge is accompanied by the unlimited signifying process, and the ultimate goal of translation is to achieve total knowledge of the meaning of signs.

C. Signification\Significance Equivalence

In addition to signification equivalence and significance equivalence, we attempt to introduce signification\significance equivalence to show the continuity and coherence of signs, focusing on the intersection of signification and significance.



Figure1



Figure2



Figure3



Figure4

As these figures show, the relationship between signification and significance may be divided into four kinds: if

significance contains signification in figure 1, the usual practice is to convey significance at the sacrifice of signification. Compared with this, the translator should make a choice between signification and significance when both are totally severed in figure 2; However the situation is quite different in figure 3 and 4 in which the two circles have a tangent or intersect each other, producing a common point or conceptual blending. Therefore both signification and significance should be taken into consideration. The general principle is that the more the optimal conceptual blending, the better the translation is.

As a matter of fact, figure 1 and 2 just elaborate the awkward strategies used in the process of puns translation, which is far from satisfaction. Figure 1 is “compensation”, in which some footnotes and annotation would be added on the basis of conveyance of signification. Take the following example for instance.

(8) 鸳鸯笑道：“鲍二家的，老祖宗又拉上赵二家的。”贾母也笑道：“可是，我哪记得什么抱着背着的……”

杨译本：Amid general laughter Yuan-yang put in, “Pao Erh’s wife, not Chao Erh’s wife, Old Ancestress.” “That’s right.” The old lady smiled. “How do you expect me to remember their names, whether they mean ‘carried in the arms or on the back’? *...”

*The surname bao(鲍) has the same pronunciation as bao(抱) meaning “to carry in the arms,” which is contrasted with bei(背)—“to carry on the back...””(Xia Tingde, 2004, p.135-154)

It can be seen that in this case Yang’s version gives up the figure of speech in the original and turns to explain the similarity of them in phonetics in the footnotes. Figure 2 called “paraphrase” emphasizes the expression of significance in neglect of signification. Take *The Dream of Red Mansion* for example, most of people’s names are meaningful, embodying some implicit information such as the characters’ status, personality, fate and so on. For example, “霍启” suggests that the disasters of Zeng family should be followed one by one. And the name of a salve-girl of “娇杏” imitates the sound of “侥幸”. David Hawks takes advantage of way of paraphrase and translates them into *Calamity* and *Luck* respectively.

As far as author is concerned, both strategies cannot be justified. The former is unable to produce the similar aesthetic effect as the original text does while the latter fails to deliver signification. But the basic problem of translation is what the translator should do when he cannot possibly preserve the same features of the original. As a matter of fact, translation is not equal to its original in all aspects. A good translation cannot represent all the same characteristics of the original. No translation can. However the general principle of translation is supposed to represent and re-present characteristics of the original, with as little damage as possible. If signs in SL do not necessarily have one correspondence in TL on the same level, it is necessary to resort to other levels, such as phonetic and content level, creating an analogous pun. Translation can and may be as what the original is in this regard. The following example is a best case to justify this.

(9) (宝玉)：“小耗现形笑道：‘我说你们没见世面，只认得这果子是香芋，却不知盐课林老爷的小姐才是真正的香芋呢。’”

杨译本：“‘You ignorant lot!’ retorted the little mouse, resuming her original form. ‘You only know what sweet taros are, but don’t know that the daughter of Salt Commissioner Lin is sweeter than any taro.’”*

*This is an untranslatable pun. The yu in Tai-yu’s name has the same sound as yu meaning “Taro”.

Hawks 译本：‘The little mouse resumed his own shape and smiled at them pityingly. “You have seen too little of the world to understand. The daughter of our respected Salt Commissioner Lin is also a sweet potato. She is the sweetest sweet potato of them all.”’ (Wei Fang, 2004, p.107-121)

This paragraph is concerned about how to translate a phonetic pun. Obviously Bao Yu here takes advantages of the partial tone between “香芋” and “香玉” to play jokes on Dai Yu. We may sense that the main character Bao Yu is portrayed in a vivid and lovely way in which the pun plays an indispensable part. Bearing in mind the intranslatability of puns, Yang thereby only translates signification of “芋” and appends a footnote to explain that Yu shares the same sound as “Taro”. Without doubt the readers in TL will fail to appreciate the humorous and lovely characteristics of Bao Yu.

Compared with the version of Yang, Hawks adopts a cleverer tactic to avoid the trouble brought by the phonetic pun in pursuit of signification/significance equivalence. In English “potato” is compared to person and “sweet” describes the beautiful and pretty character of the person. As a result, signification (芋) establishes an optimal conceptual blending relevant to significance (玉). Therefore the version “sweetest sweet potato” aims at acquiring an optimal conceptual blending of signification and significance. Though the formal meaning in TL is not the exactly same as in SL, but the imbalance caused by the veto of phonetics is supposed to be compensated by means of content of signs, so as to make the original text keep equilibrium within. A text is thus checked and balanced.

V. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, Saussure’s and Peirce’s semiotics provide us with a theoretical approach to understanding of meaning in a dialectical way. In translation in order to achieve equivalence, the different dimensions are taken into account, including signification equivalence, significance equivalence and signification/significance equivalence. Signification equivalence and significance equivalence highlight the ability of indicating and creation of signs.

Moreover, the introduction of signification\significance equivalence makes the translation into a dynamic event, accompanied by the developing signifying process. All in all, translation is considered as a dynamic and dialectical process in which value or function of signs in the source language are transferred, represented and transformed into the target language, approximate to the original as much as possible.

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