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**Rethinking Cultural Terminology  
Translation**

Jakobson's triadic division of translation revisited

**Abstract:** Jakobson's article "On linguistic aspects of translation" proposes a tripartite division of translation as intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic, which offers a panorama of a semiotic approach to translation, especially to what is translation in a multileveled sense. Subsequent scholars develop the two implicit ideas in his article, named by the author as "translation as sign transformation" and "translation as sign interpretation." While further widening the scope and enriching the perspective of Jakobson's typology, current literature remains purely theoretical in essence. As a particular research area, cultural terminology translation could serve as the axis linking theory and practice, which becomes the primary concern for this paper. Grounded on a review of Jakobson's division and related literature in translation semiotics, this study proposes a multileveled understanding of cultural terminology translation based on some concrete cases. Cultural terminology translation is regarded as "sign transformation" and "sign interpretation." As sign transformation, it concerns the transformation of conceptual, linguistic, and cultural signs, while as sign interpretation, it goes from intralingual to interlingual to intersemiotic interpretation. This research concludes that cultural terminology translation is a complex sign activity calling for further investigations.

**Keywords:** interlingual; intersemiotic; intralingual; Jakobson; translation semiotics; tripartite division of translation

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# 1 Introduction

It is acknowledged that Jakobson's "On linguistic aspects of translation" marks a signal achievement in translation studies. Written in 1959, this essay questions the empiricist view on untranslatability by introducing a semiotic perspective. Furthermore, the well-known categorization of translation as "intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic" finds its root in the text. In academia, this classification is so fundamental that it has been taken up in a wide range of authoritative reference works for translation studies, semiotics, and linguistics in the West (Jia 2017: 32).

Although Jakobson's division leaves a heritage for translation studies in the sense that it breaks the ice of focusing on interlingual translation and expands our horizon as to the nature of translation, the interdisciplinary study of cultural terminology translation bears no sign of accepting its influence. Terminology translation is predominantly defined as the practice of pursuing conceptual equivalents at the lexical level between language pairs (Wei 2018a: 263), which falls mainly into the realm of interlingual translation. The multileveled nature of cultural terminology translation and its particularities as a branch of translation have not been fully addressed.

This paper reviews Jakobson's tripartite division of translation with reference to relevant scholarly discussions, stating that intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation could be viewed as categories of translation ("sign transformation") as well as modes of semiotic interpretation (or "sign interpretation"). It then turns to state its application in cultural terminology translation in Chinese–English contexts. Translation cases taken from Chinese philosophy, art, and other disciplines serve as concrete examples. It aims to partially reveal the complexity of "what is terminology translation" (Wei 2018a: 282) in the case of cultural terms from a semiotic perspective.

## 2 Rethinking Jakobson's division of translation and its development

Jakobson's division conceptualizes "translation" and lays the foundation of this field of study (Munday 2010: 421). On top of that, we often go directly into the prototypical "interlingual translation" while neglecting the other two. But if we go deeper into Jakobson, we may find the classification not as simple as we think; two conceptions of translation co-exist in the essay, whose interrelation

demands further explanation. Before addressing this, let's first go back to Jakobson's initial wording.

## 2.1 Jakobson's division and its contribution

Jakobson's renowned division is quoted as follows:

We distinguish three ways of interpreting a verbal sign: it may be translated into other signs of the same language, into another language, or into another, nonverbal system of symbols. These three kinds of translation are to be differently labeled:

- 1) Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
- 2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
- 3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems.

(Jakobson 2000: 114, italics in original, underscore added)

As is clearly seen, “translation” is strictly classified into three “differently labeled” sub-domains, each utilizing particular approaches to convey meaning. Intralingual translation “uses either another, more or less synonymous, word or resorts to circumlocution” (Jakobson 2000: 114) to express semantic meaning, such as using “unmarried man” to denote “bachelor.” Interlingual translation adopts code-unites in another language, which involves “two equivalent messages in two different codes” (Jakobson 2000: 114). Jakobson wastes little ink on intersemiotic translation, but he names it “transmutation,” which means “to change or alter in form, appearance, or nature and especially to a higher form” (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*). The underlying notion of “the elevation of meaning through an elemental change” implies a transcending nature of intersemiotic translation. From this perspective, translation as an activity utilizes three forms of signs (signs inside a language, signs of another language, and signs outside the range of language) to convey the same meanings. As intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation mediate between disparate sign systems, they belong to different fields of study and are incompatible in nature. The heterogeneous view prevails in translation studies, expanding while limiting literature at the same time: it teaches people the vast range of translation studies while forcing them to choose one.

From another perspective, we could see the three as a unified whole – not in the sense of the area of translation, but as sign interpretation. “Three ways of interpretation” (Jakobson 2000: 114) suggests an interpretive nature of translation, which is more dynamic and flexible. Dynamicity is reflected in his Peircean semiotics. In quoting Pierce that “the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign,” Jakobson’s understanding of interpretation implies a developmental view instead of a static one. For one thing, intralingual interpretation deduces the code with some further developed code in one language; interlingual interpretation decodes the message and recodes it in another source, pairing or creating near equivalents in the other language; and intersemiotic interpretation goes even further. For another, intra-/interlingual and intersemiotic may be seen as a developing hierarchical structure. When introducing interlingual translation, Jakobson says “likewise, on the level of interlingual translation, there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units” (Jakobson 2000: 114, underscore added). If the three are separately rendered, “in the case of” or other expressions are preferred instead of the highly structure-bounded “on the level of.” The interpretive aspects stress the procedural nature of translation, opening possibilities to translative-interpretive studies.

Jakobson’s division has been most influential in two aspects. It first consolidates and expands the scope of translation studies in delimiting the boundaries of the field. As Kourdis and Kukkonen (2015: 5) note, the publication of Jakobson’s seminal paper occurred in an era when translation studies was not a fully recognized field in the humanities. Jakobson’s article potentially states the ambition of the new field by introducing the scholarly trend of semiotics at that time, which is in line with academic practice (Hermans 1997: 17). His choice proves to be effective not only in stabilizing the status of the discipline but also in guiding its development decades after. Today, translation semiotics has become an emerging influential area, which dates back to Jakobson’s article (Baker 2004: 220). The extended interests in many forms of intersemiotic translation (e.g. comics, movie subtitling, etc.) find their origin in Jakobson’s “sign,” which goes beyond the written texts. Secondly, the semiotic view of translation brings new air to issues such as translatability and equivalence. In Jakobson’s view, translation is “a process of receding” (Jakobson 2000: 70) in conveying the potentially endless chain of signs. It offers the possibility of translation as transcending beyond the original through semiosis. From this perspective, he indeed enriches the methodologies of translation studies (Torop 2008: 256). In a word, Jakobson’s legacy set the tone of future translation studies in many aspects.

Jakobson's article also faces fierce criticism, which is tentatively categorized below. To begin with, many have cast doubt on his domains of translation. Due to the lack of a comprehensive definition of kernel terms such as "sign" or "translation," the dividing line between each category becomes ambiguous. For instance, Munday (2010: 421) questions the boundary between intralingual and interlingual translation with the example of dialect. Jia (2017: 33) criticizes the blurred line between interlingual and intersemiotic translations. Still others challenge Jakobson's translation ideology underlying the text. To name just a few, Toury (1986), Hemans (1997: 17) and Petrilli (2003) point out the predominant status of the linguistic system, seen in the definition of interlingual translation as "translation proper," which implies other forms are questionable. Damaskinidis (2015: 23) and Cosculluela (2003) indicate the unidirectional reference from verbal signs to other forms implied in Jakobson's typology, which implies the superiority of verbal over nonverbal signs and overlooks the bidirectional relations between them. Jia (2017: 37) thinks that Jakobson's framework carries a strong sense of structuralism in bringing forth a series of binary terms, which fails to realize Peircean triadic semiotics but stays in Saussurean dyadic semiology. Torop (2002: 596) points to the relation with Jakobson's other study fields, stating that his typology proceeds from his general understanding of the communication process and types of messages which unavoidably lack the dimensions of dialogism.

To be fair, some criticism is based on contemporary views of translation which stress cultural space, dynamicity, and plurilingualism. Their accusation of Jakobson's orientation toward linguistic system neglects temporal space limits during that period. The article's title "On linguistic aspects of translation" and Jakobson's linguist profession suggest its linguistic prominence. In any case, comments from all areas indeed enrich the legacy Jakobson left, which in turn promotes further scholarly developments.

## 2.2 Further developments

Based on the above observations, many scholars develop Jakobson's divisions from different vantage points, among which Toury (1986), Eco (2001), Petrilli (2003), and Torop (2002) are well recognized. They contribute to the expansion of Jakobson's typology in the following two aspects, which I name "sign transference" and "sign interpretation."

### 2.2.1 Development of sign transformation

By “sign transformation,” I mean types of sign conversion between sign systems. Transformation means “a change into sb. or sth. completely different” (*Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*). In sign transformation, the appearance of a sign is reformed into another. The commonly understood tripartite division of Jakobson falls into this category.

Recognizing Jakobson’s limitations, scholars rearrange or explicate the typology of sign transformation in translation. To begin with, the idea of intersemiotic translation has been revisited and expanded to vast forms of semiotic systems which goes beyond verbal signs (Queiroz and Daniella 2015: 201). This trend begins with Toury (1986), who wonders the probability of listing two kinds of “lingual” against one “semiotic,” thus substituting it with a primary division into two types (intrasemiotic and intersemiotic), with intrasemiotic further subdivided into intralinguistic and interlinguistic translation (Baker 2004: 220). Following his path, others propose new models to encompass various forms of semiosis. For instance, Petrilli (2003) includes translation outside the human world, stating that “translation does not only concern the human world, anthroposemiosis, but rather is a constitutive modality of semiosis, or more exactly, of biosemiosis” (Petrilli 2003: 17). There is an ongoing trend to extend the notion of translation along with the boundary of semiotics.

The second trend explores the internal relationships among the three types, summarized as procedural and integrated. Lotman (2009: xxxiv) states that the three types of translation could be regarded as an inner dynamic hierarchy of a single translation process, and partly of any communication process. As Torop (2011: 24) observes, it reflects the simultaneity of the three processes in the psychological process of translation. That is to say, even one type of translation may involve the other two. “Translative processes [...] always involve the three modalities identified by Jakobson” (Petrilli 2010: 378). They always co-exist with each other to different degrees. For instance, interlingual translation may always resort to intralingual translation for a full understanding of the source, or to forms of nonverbal signs for adequate presentation in the target language (e.g. book illustrations, see Pereira 2008). Regarding natural language as semiotically multilingual, Torop (2007) argues for the necessity of simultaneously speaking of the three branches in translation studies. In this sense, the three aspects are in a dynamic projection toward sign development.

As is observed above, types of sign transformation as intra-/interlingual and intersemiotic translation have been expanded to embrace vast forms of semiosis, which even go beyond human activity. The clear-cut boundaries are

also broken in that they co-exist in one single type of translation. Width and depth of sign transformation are extended.

### 2.2.2 Development of sign interpretation

With “sign interpretation,” I point to the interpretive nature of translation, where the meaning of a sign is generated and is in constant interaction with the mechanism of culture. Scholars develop the view from two aspects.

Firstly, the interpretive nature of translation is further stressed, with Eco, Petrilli, and Stecconi as representatives. Known as interpretive semiotics, this camp discovers the nexus between Peirce’s and Jakobson’s theory. Stecconi finds Jakobson is trying to “explain aspects of language and language use drawing on Peirce’s notion of the translatability of all signs into other signs” (Stecconi 2010: 314). In this sense, translation is “a crucial element of all meaning-making” (Baker 2014: 261), and the problem of translatability eventually becomes one of “expressibility” – whether that which is said in one historical-natural language can be expressed in another (Petrilli 2010: 380), and to translate is always possible. In another case, equivalence is redefined in Pierce’s interpretation as the product of inferential process (Stecconi 2010: 316–317; Goriée 1994: 179–195). Thus, the equivalent is not matched, but pronounced and constructed by the translator (Stecconi 2010). Also, the interpretive typology of translation is remodeled. In *Experiences in translation* (2001), Eco distinguishes between forms of interpretation (2001: 100–128) as interpretation by transcription, intrasystemic interpretation, and intersystemic interpretation. By establishing “some macro-scopical distinctions” (Eco 2001: 129) of interpretation, he attaches to the problems posed by variations in form and content. Some go further in relating Pierce with Jakobson, as in Petrilli’s work. She defines Jakobson’s idea as a distinction between three types of translative-interpretive process, with each modality dominated by conventionality, indexicality, or iconicity in Pierce’s tripartite classification of signs. Derived from Jakobson, this branch explores the interpretive kernel of translation, and is gradually coming into the spotlight, as many believe it represents the future of translation theory (Baker 2014: 261).

Another branch correlates culture with translation, with the Tartu-Moscow School as the avant-garde. Lotman, the school’s leading proponent, , stresses the translation mechanism of culture, implying translation’s function as a filtering boundary between semiospheres (Lotman 2001: 140). Although Lotman did not point to Jakobson’s intersemiotic translation directly, Jakobson’s idea of communication and translation prepares the ground for the emergence of the

concept of “semiosphere” (Lotman 2009: xxxiv–xxxv). Semiosphere (defined as the semiotic space of the culture, by analogy with biosphere, see Lotman 2001: 123–125) allows the semiotics of culture to reach a new understanding of its holistic feature (Lotman 2009: xxxv) and its spatial potentials (see Nöth 2015). From then on, cultural semiotics takes the lead. Building on Lotman’s concept, Torop (2002: 593) proposes that translation reveals an important mechanism of culture, and the general notion of culture shall be described as the process of total translation. Also drawing on Lotman, Jia (2017) borrows the notion of semiosphere and divides translation into intrasemiospheric, intersemiospheric, and suprasemiospheric, with the former two designating translation activities happening in and between cultural spaces, and the latter referring to cross-media semiotic transformation including the other two. Jia’s version further identifies the notion of cultural temporal space in translation studies, interweaving translation, culture, and semiotics in a spatial view. In a word, Jakobson’s typology has become an important methodological tool to understand culture (Kourdis 2015: 310), or “semiotics of culture” in Lotman’s word. As sign interpretation happens in cultural-bound temporal spaces, translation unavoidably carries cultural identities across various boundaries.

To conclude, followers regard sign interpretation as an interpretive process as well as a cultural event. Interpretation is constrained by properties of sign and by subjective preference on a micro-level, and also by a cultural mechanism on a macro-level.

Above all, the two underlying ideas of Jakobson’s division (translation as “sign transformation” and as “sign interpretation”) have been well developed, while leaving spaces for further investigation.

## 2.3 Research gaps

In many senses, we have transcended Jakobson’s original theory. The simple, unidirectional, and static language-oriented typology has been expanded to a complex, bidirectional and dynamic semiosis in both the human world the biosphere, the result of which gives new insights into recurring problems in translation studies (e.g. “translatability,” “equivalence”) and cultural studies.

However, the ongoing development is not without flaws. For one thing, translation categorization “goes to the other extreme, maximally extending the notion of translation” (Sütiste and Torop 2007: 200). Especially in the field of intersemiotic translation, scholars share conflicting views of intersemiotic translation (Pérez-González 2014: 120) with the lack of consensus on the definition of basic terms (O’Halloran et al. 2016: 200). Some borrow the name of

intersemiotic translation but discuss topics other than translation, fusing the line between disciplines. It seems that we are eager to jump into translation forms other than interlingual without fully clarifying the complexities of “translation proper.” For another thing, the above discussions are generally more theoretical than practical, proposing new models and terminologies regardless of their applications. This may be affected by the similar trend in translation semiotics in general, where some scholars warn against the risk of leading translation semiotics to becoming purely theoretical, which narrows down the field and fails to conform to translation as an applied practice (Trifonas 2015: 4; Kourdis 2015: 317). This trend may partly be due to the vastness of the research subject and the difficulty of grasping a text-type (such as literary text) all-sidedly. There are both theoretical and practical needs for further developing Jakobson’s classification based on feasible and concrete research subjects.

It is worth mentioning that despite the efforts to categorize translation through various perspectives, Jakobson’s version still remains the most influential (Kourdis 2015: 309), manifesting its accountability in many issues. To further develop translation semiotics particularly in bridging theory with translation practice, this study chooses cultural terminology as the subject to reconstruct a model for cultural term translation, taking into account the dynamic, interpretive, integrated, and cultural features of translation semiosis.

### 3 Toward a new understanding of cultural terminology translation

In the past, the term *terminology translation* was practically illegitimate if not completely non-existent (Wei 2018a: 262). Traditional terminology “make[s] its start from the study of concept” (Wuster 2011: 23), and the term translation seems no more than concept matching or coordination. From the 1990s, the multidimensionality of terms as “linguistic, cognitive and contextual units” (Cabr e 2003) was rediscovered, providing the opportunity to revisit terminology translation. As a special branch in natural language, cultural terminology (or culturological terminology in Ye’s words; see Ye 2019) encompasses significant social and cultural values and deserves attention in transcultural communication. While its significance is well received, the name and nature of cultural terminology translation are rarely touched. The following section presents a tentative response to this issue.

### 3.1 Rethinking cultural terminology translation

The premise of exploring cultural terminology translation is to define cultural terms.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the expression “cultural term” (as well as its Chinese term 文化术语) is rarely used. Scholars often refer to a “culturally-loaded word” (文化负载词), “cultural keywords” (文化关键词) and “culture-specific item” (文化专有项), to name just a few. This concept is used quite often in recent literature but differs significantly in definition and naming. To emphasize the terminological properties of cultural concepts, this essay borrows the definition of “cultural key concepts” from the “Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture” (hereafter as KCCTC) project,<sup>2</sup> and defines Chinese cultural terms as “words or phrases created or used by the Chinese people to designate concepts specific in the Chinese cultural system.”

This definition implies two features of the term. Firstly, the terminological property emphasizes the terms’ conceptual significance, systematicity, and domain-specific nature (Feng 2011: 32–41). In this regard, cultural terms function as conceptual nodes in the Chinese cultural system. They are not isolated objects in reality, but conceptualized “units of thought” (Feng 2011: 95) to better present and classify knowledge of a culture. Therefore, it is the conceptual system that makes a term. Secondly, cultural terms present cultural identity. Rooted in the lexical system of a specific culture, these terms embody peculiar signs of the “lifeworld” and reflect certain cultural traditions, ways of thinking and core values (Wei 2018b: 66). Take kinship terms for instance. Only some Chinese terms are commensurable with their English counterparts (like 爸爸 ‘dad’, 妈妈 ‘mom’). Comparison between Chinese and English kinship terms reveals the Chinese “differential mode of association” (差序格局) versus the Western “organizational mode of association” (团体格局) (Fei 1985: 97). The highly structured and differentiated terms in Chinese reflect such deep thought as “order between seniors and juniors” (长幼有序) and “inequality between genders” (男女有别).

Conceptual and cultural characters should be well rendered in translation. The next part sees cultural terminology translation as “sign transformation”

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<sup>1</sup> In the discipline of Terminology, “term” and “terminology” are different, with the former “designat[ing] a single sign of a concept in a discipline” (Feng 2011: 29) and the latter referring to a “collection of terms, often featured with systematicity” (Zheng 2006: 5). The present study follows this view.

<sup>2</sup> A national cultural communication project launched in 2013; more information on this available at <https://www.chinesethought.cn/EN/single.aspx?nid=115&pid=118>.

and “sign interpretation” based on an extended version of Jakobson’s typology (see Section 2).

## 3.2 Cultural term translation as sign transformation

As sign transformation, cultural terminology translation happens in several sign systems, i.e., the cognitive sign system, the linguistic sign system, and the cultural sign system, with each focus on a particular aspect.

### 3.2.1 Transformation of the cognitive sign system

By “cognitive sign system.” I mean the cognitive space created by the constant interaction between sign usage and human cognition in a culture. It has been proved by Humboldt, Sapir, and others that each culture conceptualizes the world in different ways, which is reflected in (or even shaped by) their languages. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, translation is based on “multiple interactions among subjects with differently embodied backgrounds,” and shall “map or re-express the meanings in the target language” (Wang Yan 2005: 15). Therefore, terminology translation transforms sign systems to reconstruct the cognitive world.

Each culture recognizes the world with certain basic principles, which can be observed in cultural terminology. For instance, Chinese philosophy sees the world as an extension from ourselves. Instead of viewing the world as “the other” in opposition to “self” as Western philosophy does, we deem man and nature to be harmoniously united. The Chinese characters are formed “from what’s near our body and far in the world” (近取诸身, 远取诸物), which in essence are experiential and embodied cognitive. It is reflected in single-character terms such as “仁,” “天,” and “心.” “仁” means “亲” ‘nearness,’ and is composed of “two” and “people,” underlying a relational metaphor between people (Chang and Ames 2016: 89). “天” evolves from 𠂇, first meaning ‘the top of man’s head’ (天, 颠也; 颠者, 人之头顶也) (Xu 2006), and develops a couple of senses to generate a philosophical semantic web. Apart from single-character terms, the relational and analogous cognitive features are also reflected in clusters of terms, like “亲亲” and “天人合一.” The above examples show how cultural terminology reflects the way we organize the world, calling for proper rendering in cross-cultural translation.

As cultural terminology presents “local knowledge” (Geertz 2000) of a region, the cognitive dimension requires a systematic transference of signs. It

has been proved by cognitive science that systematicity is the essence and starting point of cognitive activities (Yu 2010: 3). Cognitive space could not be transferred without systematic knowledge construction. Therefore, term translation not only concerns the single term and its context, but also involves relational ones in the semantic web. For instance, to comprehensively present our ancient cosmology on 天, derivative terms (e.g. 天子, 天地, 天命, 天道, 天理) and related terms (e.g. 道, 理, 气) must all be introduced coherently to restructure the knowledge space (Huang 2018). In a word, cognitive sign system transformation deals with creating the knowledge space through systematic introduction of Chinese cultural terminology.

### 3.2.2 Transformation of linguistic sign system

Cultural terms are linguistic signs by nature, and thus should conform to linguistic rules in translation, where linguistic semiotics (or “semiology” in Saussure’s words) finds its place. As is pointed out by Saussure, at the micro-level, a linguistic sign is a combination of signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept) (Saussure 1959: 66), and they conform to principles of arbitrariness and of immutability at the same time. At the macro-level, individual terms form a language system, where the value of each term “results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (Saussure 1959: 114). These linguistic rules offer insights into cultural term translation.

From semiology, the translation process is redefined as seizing the signified in the source language system and giving it a signifier in the target language. At the micro-level, principles of arbitrariness and immutability open, at the same time restricting the opportunity for all forms of translation. Arbitrariness means the signifier has no natural connection with the signified (Saussure, 1959: 69). A cultural-specific item could be named variously so long as the signified is vacant in the target culture, which is most eminent in ideological<sup>3</sup> terms, like “道,” “气,” and “理.” According to the KCCTC termbase, “气” in traditional Chinese philosophy bears more than nine translations in English, like ‘breath,’ ‘vital force,’ ‘qi,’ and ‘emotions.’<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, “the signifier [...] is fixed with respect to the linguistic community that uses it” (Saussure 1959: 71). Likewise,

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<sup>3</sup> Here “ideological” is used in a non-political sense, i.e. based on or relating to a particular set of ideas or beliefs (Cambridge English Dictionary, 3rd edn.).

<sup>4</sup> See the entry for “气” at [https://www.chinesethought.cn/shuyu\\_show.aspx?shuyu\\_id=2130](https://www.chinesethought.cn/shuyu_show.aspx?shuyu_id=2130) (accessed on 16 May 2019).

no individual or community could modify terminology at ease when it's bound to the existing language, because of "collective inertia towards innovation" (Saussure 1959: 73). Time, as well as the people, shapes the terminology we use in translation, especially for existing terms. Take "龙" for instance. Upon awareness of discrepancies between "the Western evil dragon" and "the Chinese virtuous *Long*," many scholars propose substituting the old translation as 'dragon' with 'Loong (or Long)' (see for example, Huang 2006; Guan 2007). However, "dragon" or "Chinese dragon" remains the accepted expression<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, cultural term translation takes account of the principle of "established by usage" (约定俗成).

At the macro-level, translation involves the presentation of the sign's value across systems. As Saussure argues, the value of a term is accordingly determined by its environment (Saussure 1959: 116), or by its relation to other signs inside the system. Comprehensive transplantation of terminology is recommended, during which "differences" (Saussure 1959: 120) in and between language cultures are given due attention. Firstly, the difference inside the Chinese terminology system must be observable in translation. Taking a negative example, homophonic terms in 文心雕龙 are transliterated by Vincent (Liu 1983) in the same signs (e.g. 辞, 词, 刺 as *tz'u*; 术, 书, 疏 as *shu*), causing confusion in the Chinese literature terminology system (Wang 2017). Secondly, the difference between Chinese and Western terminology is likely to be kept, or at least recognizable. Scholars have criticized the negative effect of domesticated translations, like 天 to 'Heaven' or 神 to 'God,' which confuses terms in different value systems. In a word, macro-level translation concerns the term's value presented through "difference" in and between language systems.

Linguistic sign transformation concerns the basic rules in linguistic transference, which lays the premise for the survival of the terminology system, upon which cultural sign transformation is likely to happen.

### 3.2.3 Transformation of the cultural sign system

The cultural sign system concerns the way a culture organizes various signs to function properly in its temporal space. The totality of a culture's sign system forms a "semiosphere," the semiotic space necessary for the existence and

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<sup>5</sup> According to statistics in COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English), "Loong" as a legendary creature has no match, while "Chinese dragon" has 32 matches. See <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/> (accessed 14 May 2019).

functioning of languages and communication (Lotman 2001: 123). It is featured with boundaries that distinguish “I” from “the Other.” When two cultures interact, signs are filtered and adapted by the boundary (Lotman 2001: 140), generating new information and reshaping the system. Therefore, the transformation of cultural signs involves shaping the cultural image through terminology which demands creative naming ideas.

The translation of Dao-related terms in *Dao De Jing* is a case in point. As is noted by Xin (2008: 200), the journey of *Dao De Jing* in the West is supported by various transmissions and interpretations of Dao. For instance, George Gardiner Alexander translates “故从事于道者，同于道；德者，同于德；失者，同于失 [...] 信不足焉，有不信焉” as “Remember, however, that the man who regulates all his actions by a belief in God, will become like unto God; just as he who walks in the path of virtue will become virtuous; and he who pursues a course of vice will become vicious [...]. To have a weak faith is to have no faith” (quoted from Xin 2008: 204–205). In translating 道 as ‘God/Creator,’ 德 as ‘virtuous,’ 信 as ‘faith,’ and 失 as ‘vice,’ Alexander borrows Biblical terms to construct a “Chinese Jesus,” the result of which creates a religious image of Chinese culture. In another case, the sinologists Ames and Hall create an interpretive context-based terminology of Dao, where its verbal, nounal, and procedural features are unveiled in its translation as ‘road,’ ‘path,’ ‘way,’ and ‘way-making’ depending on context (Xin 2016: 58). In introducing “clusters of terms” (Chang and Ames 2016: 92), Ames aims to “let Chinese philosophy speak its own language,” where the term’s conceptual and contextual development is taken into account. Ames’ translation successfully rekindles aspiration for Chinese philosophy research in the West, and to some extent restores a profound but real-life Chinese cultural image.

Transference of cultural signs indicates deeper interaction between cultures. The “glocalized” world now requires diverse and authentic cultural interaction, and terminology translation serves the purpose.

All in all, sign transformation centers on the transference of “form,” whether linguistic, conceptual, or cultural. It is a process of structuring through the creation of signs, in which rules at different levels are followed. The next phase dwells on interpretation, the procedural development from intra-/interlingual to intersemiotic translation.

### 3.3 Cultural term translation as sign interpretation

Here I borrow the notion “translation as interpretation” from Eco (2001: 80), who notes that “translation is a species of the genus interpretation, governed by

certain principles proper to translation.” Cultural term interpretation happens in several phases, each going a step further toward cultural construction.

### 3.3.1 Intralingual sign interpretation

For cultural term translation, intralingual interpretation is essentially a type of knowledge-centered interpretation. Eco (2001: 75) borrows Pierce’s “*ad infinitum* chain of interpretation” to describe intralingual translation, where one sign is interpreted by another, and this in turn expressed by the third. In the chain of expression, every interpretant says something more about the interpreted, making the implicit/absent explicit in translation. The same happens in cultural terminology translation as we reiterate traditional concepts in a modern view.

Chinese culture has a long history of intralingual interpretation, or “exegesis, *xungu*” (训诂). Unlike “the propositional mode of development” (Guo 2015: 152) in Western philosophy, where successors overturn a previous statement to lodge their own, Chinese philosophers love to reinterpret ancient classics with the same or extended terminology. For instance, Zhu Xi annotates *the Analects* to develop his idea of *li* (理). In the interpretation of “夫子之言性与天道, 不可得而闻也,”<sup>6</sup> he points out that “性者, 人所受之天理;天道者, 天理自然之本体, 其实一理也”<sup>7</sup> (quoted in Yue 2018: 16), which connects 天道 ‘Way of Heaven’ (the kernel term in Confucius) with 理 ‘*li*, law’ (the concern of Neo-Confucius). Generating from existing terminology, the new term preserves the heritage from the classics, which in turn revitalizes the knowledge by putting it in a fresh view.

As Cai (2000: 60) puts it, “intra-lingual translation grows itself through constant self-transformation, whose spirit becomes fuller in a culture made by its language.” Intralingual interpretation enriches the conceptual connotation of the term through self-development. It is the premises for interlingual translation.

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<sup>6</sup> Translation: the Master’s views on human nature and the Way of Heaven—these we have never been able to hear!” (Burton 2007: 38).

<sup>7</sup> Translation: Human nature is the manifestation of the natural law, and the Way of Heaven is the essence of the natural law. They all follow the same *li* (law).

### 3.3.2 Interlingual sign interpretation

From an interpretive perspective, the essence of interlingual translation is “relation”: relating signs in different languages based on the comparison, where both difference and similarity are to be found. The dominating ideas of “equivalence,” “correspondence,” and “similarity” in translation studies all imply the structuring or finding proper relations between signs. Therefore, choosing between different translation methods (e.g. literal translation, free translation) means structuring some kind of relation instead of another. “Translation in all senses takes place in the dialectics between distinction and unity, on the basis of a common element uniting differences” (Petrilli 2009: 528). Interlingual interpretation seeks similarity in difference, bridging the two terminology systems at various levels which are realized by different translations. Take the philosophical term 良知 ‘intuitive knowledge’ for instance. First proposed by Mencius in “人之所不学而能者，其良能也；所不虑而知者，其良知也，”<sup>8</sup> the term refers to innate moral awareness and the ability to act upon it. It has two major equivalents: “conscience” (in the KCCTC termbase) and “intuitive knowledge” (by James Legge). The first seeks conceptual correspondence in English, where “conscience” means “the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*). It is a similar notion in Western philosophy, referring to people’s innate moral sense (Zhang 2015: 76). At the same time, “conscience” is different from 良知. Whereas 良知 refers to people’s innate tendency toward goodness (善) which is universal, “conscience” points more to “individual entity” that is distinct from one to another (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In addition, the Chinese 良知 emphasizes its potential in knowing cosmology by returning to the self, while “conscience” in Kant and empiricism stresses its role in making man obey the objective moral rules (Zhang 2015: 75). In a word, “conscience” and “良知” have commonalities in difference. In linking “conscience” with “良知,” this translation bridges ideas of moral self-awareness in East and West based on similarities, and prepares the ground for further comparison. The second translation of ‘intuitive knowledge’ points to Mencius’ original meaning in coining the term. It partially corresponds to the semantic structure in translating 知 as knowledge, while substituting 良 ‘good’ with “intuitive.”

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<sup>8</sup> Translation: A man’s ability which is not acquired by learning is his intuitive ability. A man’s knowledge which is not acquired through reflection is his intuitive knowledge (Zhentao Zhao et al. 2010: 297).

As a result, each of the translations constructs some kind of “equivalence,” whether semantically or conceptually, partially or holistically. They also induce comparison between Eastern and Western concepts, like examining “良知” (in Wang Yangming), “conscience” (in Kant) (Gu 2005), and “virtue” (in Socrates) (Zhang 2016), which promotes comparative cultural studies.

The underlying notion of interlingual interpretation is to seek similarity with the awareness of the difference in the hope of mutual understanding. As is demonstrated above, interlingual interpretation “further enhances the associative and dialogic character [...] and contributes to freeing the text from a single type or system of signs” (Petrilli 2010: 369). At the same time, the dialogue is not the finale; cooperative construction marks a further step. It is fulfilled in intersemiotic interpretation.

### 3.3.3 Intersemiotic sign interpretation

By intersemiotic sign interpretation, I mean interpreting by another heterogenous sign system, or “reconstruct[ing] the artwork into a distinct semiotic system, creating a sophisticated collection of interconnected signs” (Aguilar and Queiroz 2009: 1). It is featured with “creativity,” where the original meaning is re-arranged and re-created in a new signification system.

As is pointed out before, intersemiotic translation has outgrown Jakobson’s definition as “interpretation of verbal signs by non-verbal signs,” but designates relations between systems of different nature (Queiroz et al. 2015: 201). In relating “incommensurable” systems, meanings get multiplied by “transcreating relations at various semiotic levels” (Queiroz et al. 2015: 202). For cultural terminology, intersemiotic interpretation generates new meanings with the help of other signification systems and on the basis of interlingual translation, as will be shown in the following example of the 2019 Oscar-awarded short animation *Bao* (posters in Figure 1).

The 7-minute animation *Bao* tells a story about how a baby dumpling grows up under the generation gap and cultural difference, and how the family becomes reconciled after all sorts of conflict. Drawing from the Chinese director’s own life experience, the movie has aroused global resonance to its themes of growth and parental love. It should be noted that the only linguistic sign in the movie is its title “Bao,” not ‘steamed bun’ or ‘dumpling’ in similar senses. As is noted by the movie director Shi Zhimao, “Bao” means ‘baozi’ (包子)

as the food, and also ‘treasure, baby’ (宝) as the child<sup>9</sup> (Xinhuanet 2018). Some Western commentators go further in stating that “Bao” also means ‘protect’ (保), ‘praise’ (褒), ‘jewel’ (宝), indicating the weight of parental love (Hirsch 2018). It is clear that “Bao” has gone beyond its original designation of dumpling, and has gained a transcultural value.

From my perspective, the movie, as a whole, can be seen as an intersemiotic translation of a set of Chinese cultural terms, like “民以食为天” ‘food is of primary importance to the people,’ “孝”, *xiao* ‘filial piety’ “亲亲” ‘affection for one’s kin,’ and “推己及人” ‘put oneself in another’s place.’ These relation-centered terms have shaped Chinese ideas of education and family, which become a source of conflict in the movie. For instance, because of the idea of 孝 ‘*xiao*,’ the mother becomes so furious that she swallows the bao when he intends to leave home to live with his fiancée. In another scene, the mother cooks a big meal to please the child because of the vital importance of food (or “民以食为天”) in Chinese culture. The various plots of cultural communication/conflict are condensed in the title “Bao” and its multiple interpretations, through which both the Chinese and the Western cultures see it more than a kind of food. By restructuring cultural elements in a new form, the director creatively presents cultural interactions and produces a “transcultural” artwork.



Figure 1: Posters of the movie *Bao*

<sup>9</sup> Although lacking concrete evidence from movie producers, I think the two meanings of bao are also evident in the two posters shown in Fig. 1. The left one stresses ‘parental love,’ or 宝, while the right one refers to ‘steamed bun,’ or 包子.

As is argued by Dusi (2015: 183), intersemiotic translation is “a complex ‘form of action’, not a simple transcodification but a transcultural, dynamic and functional event.” In cultural terminology translation, translators (in the broadest sense) make use of different media to start a new life of the terms’ linguistic, conceptual, and cultural meaning. The interpretant transcends the original sign, and forms a self-contained system which has the potential to generate new cultural forms.

The above three phases depict a relatively complete picture of cultural sign semiosis. Intralingual interpretation proliferates the knowledge field of terminology, prolonging the term’s life space diachronically. Interlingual interpretation seeks similarity in different code systems, with the aim of promoting dialogue. Intersemiotic interpretation creates new sign systems based on the former two, which is transcultural in nature. In fact, this procedural has been described by the famous Significs scholar Lady Welby as “translative thinking.” It is “a semiotic process in which something stands for something else, in which different sign systems are *related*, in which one sign is more fully *developed*, enriched [...] and, in any case, *interpreted* in terms of another sign” (cited in Petrilli 2007: 312) (my italics). The expressions “developed,” “related,” and “interpreted” correspond respectively to the three kinds of sign interpretation in this essay.

All in all, cultural terminology translation forms a special kind of semiotic activity, in which sign transformation and interpretation are integrated. Any form of sign transference is accompanied by some kind of sign interpretation. They are inseparable like “content” and “form.”

## 4 Concluding remarks

Grounded on the available literature on translation semiotics, this paper recovers Jakobson’s triadic division of translation and its influence in academia, noting that two perspectives of his typology have paved the ground for semiotic translation studies. The two aspects, named here as “translation as sign transformation” and “translation as sign interpretation,” are further developed by scholars such as Toury (1986), Eco (2001), Petrilli (2003), Torop (2002), Steconi, (2010), and Lotman (2001) among others. They not only deepen and widen the scope and understanding of translation, but also take into account interpretive and cultural aspects. However, the ongoing trend is toward the purely theoretical, which is the gap that the current study intends to fill.

Based on some concrete examples, this paper proposes a new understanding of cultural terminology translation, both as “sign transformation” and as “sign interpretation.” Firstly, as sign transformation, it involves the transformation of cognitive, linguistic, and cultural sign systems. As to the cognitive dimension, the cultural cognitive space is to be comprehensively transplanted in systematic term translation. At the linguistic level, the translation conforms to rules of linguistic semiotics (e.g. “arbitrariness” and “immutability” at the micro-level, “linguistic value” at the macro-level). Cultural sign transformation requires presenting a proper cultural image through creative naming philosophy. Secondly, as sign interpretation, cultural term translation involves intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic sign interpretations. Intralingual focuses on knowledge development, where the terms’ concepts get revitalized through intracultural observation. Interlingual interpretation aims at finding similarity in difference to achieve mutual understanding. Intersemiotic interpretation creatively re-arranges the terminology in a new form, which transcends initial meanings of the term and invents a transcultural artwork. Together, sign transformation and interpretation form an integrated sign activity of cultural terminology translation.

It is seen that cultural terminology translation is not a single case of language transference. Rather, it is a complex form of sign transformation taking into account its conceptual, linguistic, and cultural peculiarities, and shown in the process of intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic sign interpretation. Consequently, translating cultural terminology is a complex sign activity going from “cultural consciousness” (文化自觉) to cultural communication, and ultimately to transcultural construction. It should be noted that the present discussion of cultural terminology translation in the Chinese–English context is just an initial attempt. The complexities of this research subject will be further revealed when set against the historical background, which will be the subject of future studies.

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