

# Semiotics and Bible translation

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## Abstract

*Bible translation over the past half century has increasingly supplemented its traditional philological-linguistic approach with a wide variety of disciplines ranging from archaeology to cultural studies. This turn toward an interdisciplinary approach is especially true of new media Bible translation with its theory and practice now engaging virtually every digital and screen medium. Not surprisingly, (new media) Bible translation has discovered the field of semiotics, thanks in large measure to the work of translation scholars such as Dinda L. Gorlée and Ubaldo Stecconi, whose pioneering research into Charles Sanders Peirce has unearthed a gold mine of conceptual and even practical applications of semiotics to translation research, training, evaluation, and production. In this essay, we set out some of the foundational elements of Peircean semiotics in its application to Bible translation, including new media Bible translation. In particular, the insights of semiotics into the process of sign production and meaning making will add exponentially to the resources for Bible translators.*

## 1. Connecting semiotics and translation

Semiotics studies signs. It explains the three parts of a sign and how they work together to give meaning to persons, places, things, and concepts. The term 'semiotics' goes back to a Greek word *semeion*. Classical and biblical scholars (Liddell and Scott 1968: 1593) know it, for instance, as a religious term meaning 'a heavenly or divine sign'; or, as a term for establishing a causal connection between things, as in 'those clouds are a sign that it is going to rain.' As a military word it meant 'battle flag' or 'war cry,' while in ancient medicine it served as a medical term for 'symptom of a disease.' The second century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint uses *semeion* to mean 'a sign from God,'

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1 describing, for instance, the plagues against Egypt as such (Exodus 7.9,  
2 10.1). The first half of the Gospel of John supposedly drew on a ‘sign  
3 source,’ which could explain why it describes two of Jesus miracles with  
4 this Greek word (John 2.11, 2.23).

5 Modern semiotics has influenced just about every humanistic and scien-  
6 tific field with its methods and applications. Its origins lie in the work  
7 of three scholars: Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), Charles Sanders  
8 Peirce (1839–1914), and Charles William Morris (1901–1979). Saussur-  
9 ean semiotics is also called structuralism or, in French, *semiologie*. It  
10 lies outside our field of interest. We focus rather on Peirce’s semiotics be-  
11 cause of its wide-ranging applications to all the forms of translating and  
12 interpreting that Jakobson (1959) grouped under inter-linguistic, intra-  
13 linguistic, and inter-semiotic translation.

14 In a recent essay, Steconni listed some of the points of contact between  
15 semiotics and translation:

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17 These pages can give the reader a rough idea of what semiotics is about and of its  
18 use for a translation scholar. The semiotic notions covered include semiosis, the  
19 object-sign-interpretant triad, ground and goal, habit and belief, and pragmati-  
20 cism. The translation topics include process and product, equivalence, the dialectic  
21 between originals and translations, the categories of source and target, and  
22 norms. (Steconni 2004: 153)

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## 25 **2. Signs are everywhere and equal**

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27 Semiotics takes for granted that anything can function as a sign. It sees  
28 signs in an isolated word or a whole novel, in a single charcoal line or  
29 entire sketch, in heaps of rough stones or a fully executed statue, in a ran-  
30 dom thought or an entire philosophical argument, in a person’s name or a  
31 whole biography, in a hand gesture or a full ballet production. To qualify  
32 for ‘signhood,’ something must point beyond itself to something else and  
33 be capable of interpretation. A beachfront of loose stones does not qual-  
34 ify as a sign. A row of stones along a forest path does. Words and images,  
35 cultural artifacts and secret codes, thoughts and feelings, plants and  
36 animals, lines and colors, smells and tastes — everything is potentially  
37 a sign pointing to something else. Semiotics groups signs into two differ-  
38 ent classes. The one divides them according to philosophical categories,  
39 the other according to functional relationships between the parts of a  
40 sign.

41 When we treat all signs as equal we accept two important conse-  
42 quences. First, we cannot say that one sign system, even a natural-

1 language sign system such as Mandarin Chinese or American English, is  
2 'better' than another sign system, say, artificial and non-linguistic systems  
3 such as American sign language, film language, or even computer pro-  
4 gramming language. Natural language sign systems convey information  
5 in ways proper to their capacities, functions, and limits, as do artificial  
6 and non-linguistic sign systems. This consequence applies in a special way  
7 to translation. We cannot say that a source language, say biblical Greek  
8 or Hebrew, is better than a target language, say Gullah (a Creole lan-  
9 guage) or Eskimo Yupik. Second, everything is potentially a sign: words,  
10 windmills, cats, cuisine, clothing, clouds, books, pictures, gestures, lan-  
11 guages, animals, plants, and stars. Vast networks of social mores, street  
12 codes, and cultural systems function as signs, as do political institutions,  
13 literary genres, and scientific theories and laws. Concepts and ideas as  
14 well as feelings and emotions can be signs. When we look at a cloud and  
15 predict rain, we are treating the cloud as a sign. When we look at a paint-  
16 ing of our great uncle Isaiah and think of our ancestor and family history  
17 we are reacting to a sign. When we translate the Bible from one language  
18 to another or from one medium to another we are working with signs. The  
19 feeling of being hungry and reaching for a Big Mac turns hunger into a  
20 sign. A hand wave to a New York taxi driver turns our arm into a sign.  
21 Flags that make us feel patriotic, colors that make us feel serene, and a  
22 loaf of French bread and a bottle of Medoc wine that take us back to  
23 the Paris of our student days are all signs.

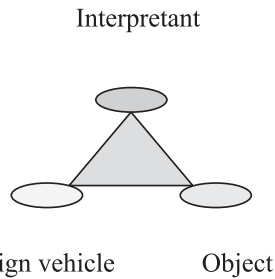
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### 26 **3. Semiotic triangle**

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28 Semiotics recognizes that a sign has three parts: (1) a sign vehicle; (2) an  
29 object; (3) and an interpretant. The sign vehicle is the thing or thought  
30 that points beyond itself to something else — to an object. The interpre-  
31 tant gives meaning to the combination of sign vehicle and object —  
32 though never a fixed or final meaning, and only in certain respects and  
33 in specific conditions. When we approach a fruit stand on the street and  
34 see an advertisement (sign vehicle) for Jonathan apples (object) we con-  
35 nect that advertisement with a basket of bright red apples on the stand.  
36 If we are of a mind to bake an apple pie, then we act as an interpretant  
37 at that moment and in that respect. That ad and its apple-object signify  
38 for us that we have reached a destination where we may purchase a  
39 pound of apples to bake a pie. If we are allergic to apples and pass by the  
40 same ad and basket of apples, we will perhaps quicken our step or give a  
41 slight cough or reach for an allergy medication. A semiotic triangle illus-  
42 trates the relationship of a sign's three parts.

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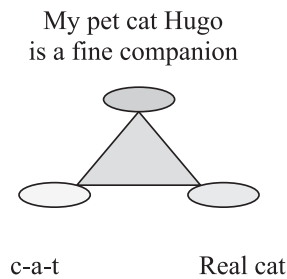


10 Figure 1. *The basic semiotic triangle*

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The letters ‘c,’ ‘a,’ and ‘t’ form a sign vehicle, namely, the letters that make up the English word ‘cat.’ Depending on our reference point (cat owner, cat-allergic, musician), we may take the object of this sign vehicle to be either a real or conceptual cat, a source of allergic reactions, or a jazzman. As an interpretant responsible for finding the meaning and significance of this sign vehicle and object, we may assert that it’s all about our pet cat Hugo; or, that it is time to renew our allergy prescriptions; or, that in this instance we are to think of jazzman Louis Armstrong. One possible combination of sign vehicle, object, and interpretant is illustrated below.

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33 Figure 2. *The semiotic triangle and semiosis*

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36 **4. Types of signs: The three categories**

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Semiotics draws on an ancient philosophical tradition of grouping or categorizing our mental perceptions, a tradition that goes back at least to the Greek philosopher, biologist, and ethicist Aristotle (384–322 BC). As the mind receives and organizes information from our outer and inner worlds, it deposits that information into mental spaces or categories. We

1 use these mental spaces or categories to sort out all the impressions that  
2 pour into our minds via our five senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, and  
3 smell as well as via imagination, emotion, and reason. The categories  
4 work like containers into which the mind places related sense impressions  
5 so that the mind can go about its work of logically processing the impres-  
6 sions, turning them into thoughts, propositions, and value judgments and  
7 then sparking an appropriate action response from us.

8 Aristotle spelled out ten such categories: substance, quality, quantity,  
9 relation, where, when, position, having, action, passion. Immanuel Kant  
10 (1724–1804), the German philosopher, postulated four sets of categories  
11 for the mind: quantity, quality, relation, and modality. In the Kantian  
12 view, for example, my nose and eyes pick up information from a billow-  
13 ing cloud of smoke and transfer these sense impressions to my mind,  
14 which in turn assigns them to a category called relation, specifically a re-  
15 lation that determines causes and effects. My mind processes this infor-  
16 mation and determines that the smoke points logically to fire. Peircean  
17 semiotics works with just three categories, thus simplifying the way we  
18 envision thinking, reasoning, and meaning-making. They are called ‘first-  
19 ness,’ ‘secondness,’ and ‘thirdness.’ We should think of these three catego-  
20 ries as containers of related information which the mind uses to order and  
21 make sense of the information it receives.

22 Although semiotics treats all signs as potential equals, it distributes  
23 signs across the three categories to help us see the limits and possibilities  
24 for a sign and its meaning. For translators, the categories reveal new  
25 aspects of meaning that they can transplant across the boundaries of  
26 language, culture and media (Gorlée 1994: 40–42). Signs that express  
27 firstness refer us to the primacy of human experience, raw feelings and  
28 gut-level emotions, a cry of pain, for instance. Signs that belong to the  
29 category of secondness relate these primal experiences to established and  
30 past events, as when we say ‘We heard a sharp cry of pain and we took it  
31 to be a mother’s birth pang.’ Signs of thirdness point to future, rule-based  
32 actions that we may expect on the basis of firstness and secondness, as  
33 when we say ‘We assume that a baby will be soon born when we hear a  
34 mother cry out in pain and the cry is a birth pang.’

35 According to Gorlée, firstness describes a present moment, especially as  
36 captured by the realm of feelings. It

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38 ... stands for unanalyzed, instantaneous, immediate feeling: direct ‘suchness’ de-  
39 pendent on nothing else beyond itself for its comprehension. For example, First-  
40 ness is experienced in ... the feeling of acute pain, an electric shock, a thrill  
41 of physical delight, the sensation of redness or blackness, the piercing sound of a  
42 train whistle, a penetrating odor ... Firstness is thus the idea of the timeless

1 present instant experienced as ‘pure emotion of the *tout ensemble*.’ (Gorlée  
2 1994: 41)

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4 We experience firstness when we read a thermometer calibrated in degrees  
5 of Centigrade but only know a Fahrenheit scale. ‘sixteen degrees centi-  
6 grade’ is a raw number without any reference point in our own experi-  
7 ence. Monolingual English speakers experience firstness when they stare  
8 at a text written in Chinese or Arabic and gaze on its ‘strangeness.’

9 Firstness is a prominent quality of stories in the Bible where narratives  
10 depend on raw feelings, emotions, and direct experiences of God to seize  
11 our attention. The Song of Songs conveys wave after wave of erotic pas-  
12 sion. The figures of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Paul shrink  
13 back in angst during God’s appearances to them (Exodus 3.1–3.22; Isaiah  
14 6.1–6.13; Jeremiah 1.4–1.10; Ezekiel 2.1–3.27; Acts 9.1–9.19; Acts 22.6–  
15 22.16; Acts 26.12–26.18). Saul is mad and jealous (1 Samuel 18.6–18.16).  
16 Paul is brought to tears by his opponents in the city of Corinth (2 Corin-  
17 thians 10.1–12.21). The connection of firstness to experiences in the pre-  
18 sent shows up in the rapid-fire, breathtaking quality of the resurrection  
19 story in John 20 where all the verbs are in the present tense. John 20.21  
20 is a case in point: *Τῇ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ ἔρχεται*  
21 *πρωτὶ σκοτίας ἔτι ὄψεως εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον καὶ βλέπει τὸν λίθον ἠρμένον ἐκ*  
22 *τοῦ μνημείου.* (On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary  
23 Magdalene *comes* to the tomb and *sees* that the stone is rolled back from  
24 the tomb. [author’s translation])

25 We can chart firstness as follows:

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27 Table 1. *Elements of firstness*

29 Qualities	Examples	Bible
31 Feelings and emotions	Falling in love; betrayal; 32 death; angst	Song of Songs; Hosea’s wife (Hosea 33 2.1–13), David’s dirge for Saul 34 and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1.17– 35 1.27); angst of the call narratives 36 (Isaiah 6.1–6.13)
37 Powerful first sense 38 impressions	Shock, pain, amazement	Fall of Jerusalem (Lamentations 39 1.1–1.22); discovery of empty 40 tomb (Mark 16.1–16.8 and 41 parallels)
42 States of Mind	Ecstasy, madness, visions, status and identity	Ecstatic dance (1 Samuel 19.18– 19.24); vision (Revelation 1.9– 1.20); status and identity of a chosen people (2 Samuel 7.1–7.17)
Oriented to Present	Here and now	John 20.1–20.31 (present tense verbs)

1 Secondness connects a present firstness to the past. We might say  
2 ‘the dread I feel now as I walk through this darkened hallway reminds  
3 me of ghost stories I used to read.’ By connecting firstness with a past  
4 event or experience, secondness gives to firstness a quality of ‘otherness.’  
5 Otherness involves

6  
7 . . . two-sided consciousness, the experience of action and reaction, stimulus and  
8 response, change and resistance to change. The idea of hitting and getting hit is a  
9 true Second, since it contains the elements of polarity, interaction, comparison  
10 and struggle. While a First is a potentiality, a possibility, ‘merely something that  
11 *might* be realized,’ a Second is a hard fact, ‘an occurrence . . . something that *actu-*  
12 *ally* takes place . . . All knowledge of the factual world and the more practical as-  
13 pect of human life — such as opening a door, making a phone call, and kicking a  
14 football — are Seconds. (Gorlée 1994: 41)

15 When we look at a thermometer scale in the familiar degrees Fahr-  
16 enheit and read ‘fifty’ we experience secondness because our experience  
17 provides us with a correlate, a second, for the raw number. We relate  
18 the number to our experience of air whose temperature remains chilly  
19 but not cold. Or in the case of the Chinese and Arabic texts, we experi-  
20 ence secondness when someone says to us ‘You are looking at the Chinese  
21 version of *Chairman Mao’s Sayings*’ or ‘You are holding an Arabic-  
22 language version of *Arabian Nights*.’ In both cases we may not be able  
23 to read the words, but we know the contents and thus have experienced  
24 secondness.

25 In the Bible, secondness shows up in historical narratives (Joshua,  
26 Judges) that tell how Israel applied its firstness (its status as a chosen peo-  
27 ple) to the ‘other,’ namely, the Canaanites and the resulting conquest of  
28 the ‘other nations.’ We find secondness in narratives laying out conflict,  
29 for example, between Cain and Abel (Genesis 4.1–4.16) or David and  
30 Saul (1 Samuel 18.6–18.9). Apocalyptic writing regularly appeals to sec-  
31 ondness when it connects ancient cosmic battles between good and evil  
32 with the struggles of local churches in the first century AD (Revelation  
33 13.1–13.21.8). We meet secondness in Paul’s letters where he confronts  
34 opponents (2 Corinthians 10.1–10.18). We find it in stories of polarity,  
35 change and resistance to change such as the dynastic histories of Israel  
36 and Judea (1 and 2 Kings). The Passion Narratives of the Gospels  
37 (for example, Mark 14–16; Matthew 26–28) illustrate this dialectic side  
38 of secondness.

39 We can chart secondness as follows:  
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Table 2. *Elements of secondness*

Qualities	Examples	Bible
Otherness; change, polarity, and struggle; two-way consciousness and communication	Conquest and defeat; wars and social conflict; consciousness of another; dialogue and debate; family conflicts; wars and military campaigns	Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Maccabees; Creation accounts; parables conflict stories, miracle stories; 3 John (Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius); Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37); Passion Narratives; Psalms (dialogue)
Action and reaction; knowledge of factual world	Response to need; world views	Collection for Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9); life out of common fund (Acts 4: 32–37); signs of the times (Luke 12.54–12.56)
Hard facts; occurrences		The Flood (Genesis 7); Ecclesiastes 3 (A time for everything)
Oriented to Past	Good old days	Kerygma (1 Corinthians 15.1–15.11)

Signs with the quality of thirdness take us into the future. They go beyond

... the vague generality of Firstness ... and the definite nature of Secondness ... [to] continuity, the rule of feeling and action by general principles. Since these principles provide logical explanations, all intellectual activity is a Third. Logical thought, Thirdness creates orderliness, law, and regularity ... Since it is concerned with continuity, Thirdness is future-oriented and permits us to predict what is to be, and to adapt our attitude accordingly ... (Gorlée 1994: 41)

When we read the scale in degrees Fahrenheit and note that the air temperature is chilly, we may conclude with a general rule of thirdness: 'This reading and air temperature are customary and predictable for this time of year.' In the case of the Arabic text of *Arabian Nights*, we experience thirdness when we learn the rules of the text (vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of Arabic) and read the story in its original. In the Bible, narratives with this quality of thirdness would include Proverbs, the Holiness Code of Leviticus, the Ten Commandments, and the Sermon on the Mount.

We can chart thirdness as follows:

1 Table 3. *Elements of firstness*

2	Qualities	Examples	Bible
4	Orderliness	Lists, tables, maps, charts, blueprints	New Temple (Ezekiel 40.1–48.35); New Jerusalem (Revelation 21.1– 22.5); 1 Chronicles 1.1–9.44)
6	Regularity	Succession, predictability	Call of Twelve Apostles (Mark 3.13–3.19);
8	Generalizing	Wisdom, advice, common sense	Proverbs, Job
9	Authority	Laws, rules, codes, norms	Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.1–20.17); Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7); Holiness Code (Leviticus 19–26); Deuteronomic Code;
13	Future oriented	Predictions, hypotheses, apocalyptic	Daniel, Revelation

### 17 5. Types of signs: Functional classes

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19 Semiotics also classifies signs according to function, that is, according to  
20 different working relationships among the three parts of a sign (sign vehi-  
21 cle, object, and interpretant). These working relationships reveal informa-  
22 tion above and beyond what we see in the categories, thus helping us to  
23 dig even deeper into the meaning of a sign and to see even more possibil-  
24 ities for translating signs across sign systems. A quality-sign (technically a  
25 quali-sign) is given in the letters, morphemes, and lexemes of a language,  
26 in the colors on an artist's palette, in the numbers of an arithmetical sys-  
27 tem, in a feeling of happiness, and in a thrill of excitement. A single sign  
28 (technically a sin-sign) is present when we have a sign vehicle that is a  
29 single occurrence of something in the present, say Haley's comet or a  
30 New York transit strike. When a sign vehicle stands for a generality or  
31 a repeatable case, for instance, laws and trends, it is called a law-sign (or  
32 legi-sign). These functions of sign vehicles illustrate firstness.

33 When we translate sign vehicles in themselves we may wish to transfer  
34 the firstness of a narrative from one language or medium to another. In  
35 so doing we aim to pass along a feeling or emotional quality inherent in  
36 an original source text. The Passion Narratives of the New Testament  
37 Gospels are prime instances of firstness in the Bible, although they have  
38 suppressed most of the brutal firstness of death on a cross, leaving only  
39 hints and implicit information. The Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the*  
40 *Christ* made this implicit firstness explicit, with cinematic and visceral in-  
41 formation about Jesus' death. Whatever else we may say about Gibson's  
42 faithfulness to the biblical Passion Narratives, we have to applaud, from

1 Table 4. *Sign vehicle and firstness*

2 Firstness	Types	Features	Examples	Bible
4	Quality Sign	Colors, numbers	Mathematical and algebraic expressions	Red, purple scarlet (Revelation 17)
5	Single Sign	Single occurrences of things	Halley's Comet	Birth of Jesus (Matthew 1.18–1.25)
8	Law Sign	Generalities, laws, trends	$E = mc^2$	Judges 21.25 (Everyone did what was right in his own eyes)

12 Table 5. *Sign vehicle and secondness*

14 Secondness	Types	Features	Examples	Bible
15	Icons	Representational,	Maps, portraits, blueprints, dreams, visions	Biographies of David, Saul, Joseph
18	Index	Cause and effect	Thermometer, cloud formations, barometers	Parables, miracle stories, exorcism
21	Symbols	Conventional, Culture-bound	Words, texts, designs, images	Symbology of Book of Revelation

24 a translational perspective, a film that has brilliantly spotted firstness in a  
 25 source text and transferred it to a screen adaptation. Firstness is also pre-  
 26 sent in the quality signs of a biblical narrative such as Revelation 17 with  
 27 its palette of colors (red, purple, and scarlet). It is also present as a single  
 28 sign in the stories of the birth of Jesus, which for Christians stands for a  
 29 unique event. Statements such as Judges 21.25 ('Everyone did what was  
 30 right in his own eyes') function as law signs, pointing out a regularity  
 31 and trend in human behavior during the period of the judges.

32 When we combine a sign vehicle with an object we create a case of  
 33 'otherness' or of secondness. The film *The Prince of Egypt* plays creatively  
 34 with the secondness of the biblical narrative. It connected the firstness  
 35 and uniqueness of the Hebrews and their patriarch with the 'other,' the  
 36 story of Egypt and Israel's domicile among the Egyptians. As we have  
 37 said, signs of secondness connect past events and experiences to each  
 38 other. Some of these signs are called icons, for instance, maps or portraits  
 39 that represent an established land mass or an historical person. Icons can  
 40 include blueprints, dreams, and visions. They represent an external ob-  
 41 ject, as a map may stand for a grid of city streets, a portrait for a person,  
 42 a blueprint for a skyscraper, a dream or vision for repressed desires or

1 divine messages. Bible stories that give us literary portraits of David,  
 2 Saul, or Joseph serve as icons because they point us beyond themselves  
 3 to an historical object or correlate.

4 An index is another type of secondness sign. An index connects a  
 5 cause and an effect. We see an index when a sailboat's Windex or wind  
 6 arrow is caused to point in a certain direction by the blowing of the  
 7 wind. An action can be an index if it affects something and has a conse-  
 8 quence. A killing leads to clan warfare, for instance. Thermometers, ba-  
 9 rometers, cloud formations are indexes. A thermometer responds to the  
 10 amount of heat in an object; a barometer reacts to the pressure of the  
 11 air, a cloud formation builds in response to a weather front. Jesus' para-  
 12 bles and miracles function as narrative indexes, pointing in cause-effect  
 13 fashion to, say, the authority and glory of God, or the coming of the  
 14 Kingdom.

15 If custom or convention dictates that something stands for something,  
 16 then we have a symbol. A stop sign is a conventional symbol pointing to  
 17 a traffic law. Letters and words are symbols set within the conventions of  
 18 a language system that give them meaning. Single words and longer texts,  
 19 along with many designs and images fall mostly into the category of sym-  
 20 bol since they are always conventional and culture-bound signs. Conven-  
 21 tion determines how a language represents its words and draws its seman-  
 22 tic maps and how both of those represent the world. Convention, for  
 23 example, determines that the hooked cross or swastika represents Nazi  
 24 Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, but that the same symbol has ritual  
 25 and religious meaning among Native Americans.

26 When a sign vehicle, an object, and an interpretant come together they  
 27 establish a relation of thirdness, which we define as a future-oriented  
 28 action expressed in a rule, prediction, law or habit. Such signs of thirdness  
 29 often take the form of logical propositions, including those we use in  
 30 translation, to create the possibilities, propositions, and arguments that  
 31 structure human knowledge and discourse. If a sign of thirdness states a  
 32 possibility, it is called a rheme; if a sign stands for a fact, it is a proposi-  
 33 tion; and if a sign states a reason, then it is an argument.

35 Table 6. *Sign vehicle and thirdness*

36 Thirdness	37 Types	Features	Examples	Bible
38	Rheme	Possibility	Abductive and inductive syllogisms	Conditional Law (If . . . Then) in Old Testament
39	Proposition	Facts	Deductive syllogism,	Apodictic Law in Old Testament
40	Argument	Reasons	Enthymemes	Letter to Philemon
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42				

1 The statements of conditional law in the Old Testament are examples  
 2 of rhemes or possibilities within the field of biblical legislation. The well-  
 3 known formula ‘If . . . then’ represents such a case. ‘If you still continue to  
 4 resist me and refuse to obey me, I will again increase your punishment  
 5 seven times’ (Leviticus 26.21). Some form of ongoing action or thinking  
 6 (sign vehicle) points to resistance to the divine will (object), which to an  
 7 interpretant, steeped in conditional law, means that punishment must fol-  
 8 low. Statements of apodictic law, the Ten Commandments, for example,  
 9 stand for propositions or facts. In Exodus 20.1–20.17, a finite set of ac-  
 10 tions and thoughts (killing, stealing, coveting) represent sign vehicles  
 11 pointing to violations of the divine will (object). To an interpretant work-  
 12 ing out of a tradition of apodictic law killing means a breaking of the  
 13 covenant with God. Paul’s letter to Philemon represents an example of  
 14 an argument. The disappearance of a slave named Onesimus represents a  
 15 sign vehicle that points to a breach of social contract between slave and  
 16 master (object). The meaning of this sign vehicle and object to an inter-  
 17 pretant steeped in Roman law (the slave’s master Philemon) is clear: One-  
 18 simus is guilty and must be punished. But to another interpretant,  
 19 grounded in a gospel of love and forgiveness (Paul), the meaning is differ-  
 20 ent. Paul suggests reconciliation, even the possible liberation of Onesimus  
 21 in his elaborate argument.

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#### 24 **6. Semiosis, meaning, and translation**

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26 Semiosis refers to a process whereby the three parts of a sign (sign vehicle,  
 27 object, and interpretant) come together in certain respects to establish a  
 28 meaning or significance for the ‘something’ that is pointing to ‘something  
 29 else.’ In a 1907 essay on Pragmaticism, Peirce defined semiosis as ‘. . . an  
 30 action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects,  
 31 such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not  
 32 being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs’ (*EP* 1: 411).  
 33 Semiosis also describes accurately the process of translation, as Steconni  
 34 (1999) has shown in the material we rework below. Using the semiotic tri-  
 35 angle, we may break translation-semiosis down into three steps or acts  
 36 whose outcome is what we call meaning or significance. At the beginning  
 37 of the semiosis process there is a sign vehicle we call the original text,  
 38 for example, the Greek text of the Gospel of Luke (for the sake of the argu-  
 39 ment we exclude any consideration of the oral tradition behind the  
 40 Greek text though we could easily include it in the process of translation  
 41 semiosis). The object to which the text points is the life of Jesus. The first  
 42 interpretant (there are others, as we will see) would be a kind of proto-

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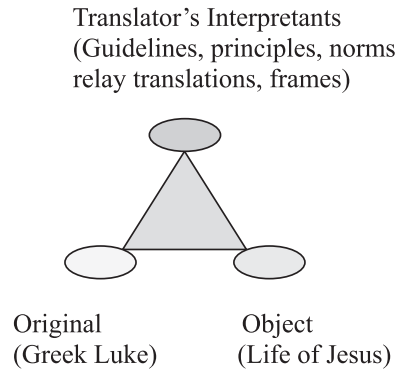


Figure 3. *The semiotic triangle and translation: A first move*

translation that consists in a translator's intellectual grasp of the Greek or Hebrew text as well as in his or her emotional reaction to the text. It would also include the translating strategy that is chosen (dynamic or formal equivalence, paraphrase, interlinear). In sum, the first interpretant would comprise the whole complex set of decisions we call guidelines and principles. The following diagram illustrates this first movement in the ongoing process of translational semiosis.

In a second semiotic move, the interpretant (the hermeneutic or interpretive combination of guidelines, principles, norms, frames, relay translations) turns into a sign vehicle and sets off a new process of semiosis. It still points to the life of Jesus as its object, but a fresh interpretant is now available, the actual translation. This translation gives concrete expression and meaning to its sign vehicle and object. Its diagram would look like this:

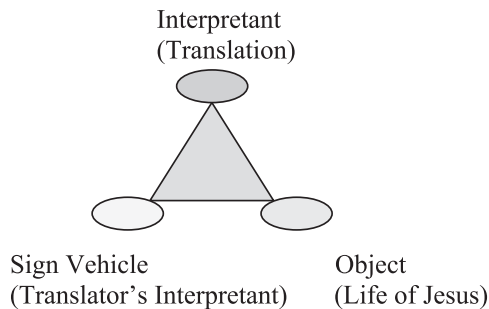
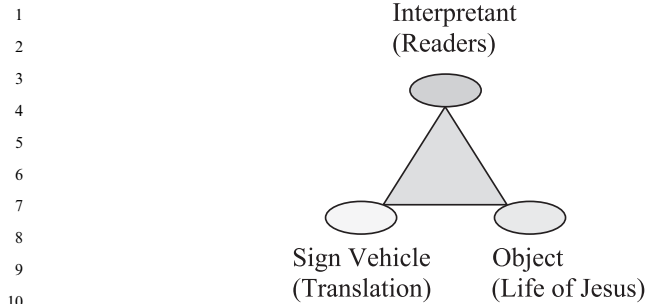


Figure 4. *The semiotic triangle and translation: A second move*



11 Figure 5. *The semiotic triangle and translation: A third move*

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13 In a third (though never final) move, the translation itself become a  
14 sign vehicle. Its object is still the life of Jesus. But now the new interpre-  
15 tants are the readers (or in a performance or media product, the viewers)  
16 who engage the text and fill it with their meaning, perhaps their own, per-  
17 haps a received meaning, or most likely a combination of both. At some  
18 point, the readers or viewers may decide that the meaning of the transla-  
19 tion as a whole is dated and flawed and that a new translation is neces-  
20 sary. In such a case, the semiotic process starts over again, producing  
21 new outcomes for meaning and significance.

22

23

24 **7. Semiosis is open-ended (and recursive)**

25

26 The example of translation as semiosis illustrates a key side of semiosis,  
27 namely, its recursive or open-ended nature. For translators, the recursive-  
28 ness of semiosis helps answer a common question: why are new transla-  
29 tions necessary? The answer lies in the semiotic nature of translation.  
30 Translations are signs, although very complex ones, and they are unstable  
31 and constantly call for improvement; or, in semiotic terms for more  
32 semiosis. We can illustrate this feature of semiosis with an example from  
33 a gospel text (Luke 12.54–12.56). Jesus said also to the people:

34

35 When you see a cloud coming up in the west, at once you say that it is going to  
36 rain — and it does. And when you feel the south wind blowing you say that it is  
37 going to get hot — and it does. Hypocrites! You can look at the earth and the sky  
38 and predict the weather; why, then, don't you know the meaning of this present  
39 time. (Luke 12.55–12.56, *Good News Bible*)

40

41 In this passage Jesus sounds very much like a modern semiotician! In  
42 the popular meteorology of the time, he and his contemporaries treated

1 clouds and winds as sign vehicles pointing in a cause-effect relationship  
2 to an object, namely, a weather event. We are dealing with an index.  
3 An ordinary interpretant would say that ‘This sign means that rain is  
4 coming (in the case of the cloud) and that it will be hot (in the case of  
5 the wind).’ Jesus takes this set of weather-related indexes and their mean-  
6 ing (You can predict the weather by looking at the earth and sky)  
7 and treats it as a sign vehicle. But it is now a sign vehicle that points to  
8 an inability, not an ability. As the new interpretant, Jesus is not speaking  
9 in terms of meteorology but with respect to proclamation of the King-  
10 dom. So he says that all the weather savvy of his audience points to their  
11 blindness and means that they cannot decipher who Jesus is. Implied  
12 in this scene is yet another act of semiosis. If only the audience would  
13 use their knowledge of weather signs (sign vehicle) to understand  
14 Jesus (object) they would see the meaning of Jesus’ deeds and words  
15 (interpretant).

16 We can also point to the translational case of Ezra in Nehemia  
17 8.1–8.12, one of the earliest, if not the earliest instance of translational-  
18 semiosis in the Bible. In this passage, Ezra reads out loud in Hebrew  
19 the sacred text of Torah to the Jewish people who have just returned  
20 from exile. But Ezra — a wise semiotician! — knows about semiosis,  
21 or at least the ancient equivalent. He must supply an interpretant for  
22 the assembled people who no longer command enough Hebrew to  
23 understand the sacred text. And so in a public display of semiosis, a  
24 group of Levites translates the Hebrew text into an oral vernacular, most  
25 likely Aramaic.

26 The sign of the cross is another example of the recursive side  
27 of semiosis. In the context of ancient Roman law, a figure in the shape  
28 of a cross would have pointed to an actual cross or even the process of  
29 crucifixion, signifying punishment meted out to a criminal. But when  
30 early Christians adopted the sign of the cross, they gave the sign-vehicle  
31 (figure of the cross) a new object (the cross on which Jesus died) and a  
32 new, if not multiple interpretants, for example, based in soteriology,  
33 Christology and ecclesiology. Later Christian devotion and theology  
34 adopted the sign of the cross further, turning the sign-vehicle of Jesus’  
35 cross into a gesture (sign-vehicle is now the physical touching of head,  
36 heart, and shoulders) that pointed to its object (physical death and  
37 material cross of Jesus). In turn, a new interpretant arose: the mystical  
38 union of believer with crucified and resurrected Christ (Dinkler 1960:  
39 cols. 46–47). Semiosis is related to what is sometimes called intertex-  
40 tuality (Kristeva 1986) in a literary polysystem, namely the citing and  
41 reapplication of texts within a system of literature. The synoptic parallels  
42 in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and the Sayings Source are examples of

1 intertextuality and recursive semiosis. One set of sign vehicle-object-  
 2 interpretant, say, The Parable of the Sower in Mark 4.1–4.9, becomes a  
 3 sign vehicle in Matthew and Luke with its own object and interpretant  
 4 (Gorlée 2005).

5

6

### 7 **8. The logic of translation: Semiosis at work**

8

9 When semioticians and translators look closely at how they each describe  
 10 the making of meaning, they discover a lot in common. Above all, they  
 11 see a special kind of logical process at work. Peirce called this process an  
 12 abductive syllogism, by which he meant that we form hypotheses or in-  
 13 formed guesses about what things mean, then test them out for validity.  
 14 When a translator says that a text in one language means this or that in  
 15 another language she or he is working with a semiotic triangle and mak-  
 16 ing a kind of wager about what a source text means, what a target text  
 17 will convey, and how an audience will understand the information. Schem-  
 18 atically the wager looks like this: I bet that this source text element cor-  
 19 responds with this target text element and that an audience will under-  
 20 stand it in this or that way:

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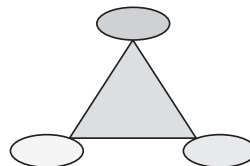
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Audience Understanding



Source

Target

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32 Figure 6. *The semiotic triangle and abductive reasoning*

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34 To think of abduction as a hypothesis has a real advantage. It clarifies  
 35 the need to continually test and revise our conclusions since they are  
 36 (in the case of firstness) a kind of intuition or feeling cast as a rule. In se-  
 37 miotic terms, it must be verified with other data, or even challenged or  
 38 falsified. This observation explains why there is no single answer to any  
 39 translational choice or decision; new data can verify but also falsify a  
 40 choice. The gamble of abductive reasoning is even more apparent in me-  
 41 dia translation where every translational choice remains open to verifica-  
 42 tion, falsification, and interpretation as the viewer brings her or his data

1 and experience to bear on the hypotheses represented in the work. When  
2 we referred to the recursive nature of semiosis we already had in view the  
3 role of abductive reasoning in translation. Abductive reasoning does not  
4 have the same logical force as inductive and deductive reasoning. But the  
5 power of its logic creates new knowledge in the sciences and in the hu-  
6 manities. An abductive argument begins with a premise in the form of a  
7 rule, states a result or observation, and draws a conclusion or case, which  
8 may or may not be true but which in any case must be subjected to ongo-  
9 ing testing (semiosis). Following Peirce (*CP*: 2.623) A simple example will  
10 illustrate abduction:

11

12 *Rule:* All the cars in the parking lot are Mercedes.

13 *Result:* These cars are Mercedes.

14 *Case:* (I hypothesize that) These cars are from the parking lot.

15

16 If this abduction is true, then we have created new knowledge about the  
17 number of cars in a parking lot. In biblical terms we would have:

18

19

20 *Rule:* All the statements in the Sermon on the Mount exhibit Jesus'  
21 authority.

22 *Result:* These statements exhibit Jesus' authority

23 *Case:* (I hypothesize that) these statements are from the Sermon on the  
24 Mount.

25

26 The force of abductive syllogisms lies in the new possibilities they  
27 open up. A set of cars outside a parking lot are seen to be Mercedes  
28 and are hypothesized to belong to the cars in the parking lot all of which  
29 are Mercedes. A set of statements are seen to have the authority of Jesus  
30 and are hypothesized to belong to the Sermon on the Mount. We can see  
31 that each hypothesis may be true but each would have to be tested with  
32 further observation and experiments. In translational terms we would  
33 have:

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35

36 *Rule:* A in the source language means X

37 *Result:* B in the target language means Y

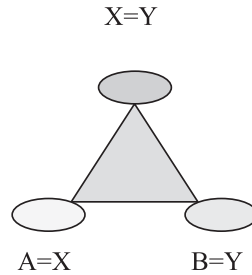
38 *Case:* (I hypothesize that) X is a similar, equivalent, or faithful represen-  
39 tation of Y.

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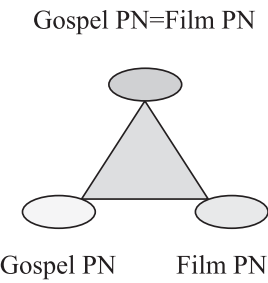
42 Schematically, we can represent this abductive argument as a simple  
problem in algebra:

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10 Figure 7. *The semiotic triangle and abductive reasoning*

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22 Figure 8. *The semiotic triangle and abductive reasoning*

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24 In this case, A, X, B, Y may be single words, whole discourses or entire  
25 texts. But whatever their scope, the hypothesis will need testing, just as in  
26 the cases cited above. What's more, we are dealing with signs. So that to  
27 say A in a source text means X may be to say that A stands for firstness,  
28 or secondness, or thirdness; or that A stands for a legi-sign, a single sign,  
29 a quality sign, an icon, an index, an symbol, etc. To take the example of  
30 the firstness of *The Passion of the Christ* film:

- 31
- 32 *Rule:* The Passion Narratives (PN) in the gospels mean Jesus died a vio-
- 33 lent death (case of firstness)
- 34 *Result:* Film language can reconstruct the violence (firstness) of death
- 35 *Case:* *Passion of Christ* film is an equivalent set of signs for the firstness
- 36 of Jesus' death.

37  
38 To take another example: a translator of the Gospel of Mark, wanting to  
39 understand the overall scope of the Gospel, might reason:

- 40
- 41 *Rule:* The Gospel of Mark presupposes the firstness of the Passion Nar-
- 42 rative of Mark 14–16 (A = X).

1 *Result:* Reference to suffering in Mark 8.31 is an instance of firstness  
2 (B = Y)  
3 *Case:* Mark 8:31 should be translated in light of the firstness of Mark  
4 14–16 (X = Y).

5  
6 By contrast, deductive reasoning begins with a rule, states a specific  
7 case, and ends up with a conclusion:

8  
9 *Rule:* All the cars in the parking lot are Mercedes.  
10 *Case:* This car is from the parking lot.  
11 *Result:* This car is a Mercedes.

12  
13 In a translational context we could say:

14  
15 *Rule:* All the statements in the Sermon on the Mount exhibit Jesus'  
16 authority.  
17 *Case:* This statement is from the Sermon on the Mount.  
18 *Result:* This statement exhibits Jesus' authority.

19  
20 Deductive reasoning does not create new knowledge, but only ampli-  
21 fies, applies and expands what we already know, bringing a general rule  
22 to bear on a specific case. Its conclusions are necessarily true. The premise  
23 or rule in a deductive syllogism, representing a generalizing statement, is  
24 an example of Thirdness. In semiotic terms we call such a generalizing  
25 statement a symbol of Thirdness. As such, the premise functions as a rule  
26 and convention that allows us to draw a necessary conclusion.

27 In inductive reasoning, we go from a specific case, to a result, and fi-  
28 nally to a general rule:

29  
30 *Case:* These cars come from the parking lot.  
31 *Result:* These cars are red.  
32 *Rule:* All the cars in the parking lot are red.

33  
34 Or in a translational context:

35  
36 *Case:* These statements come from the Sermon on the Mount  
37 *Result:* These statements exhibit Jesus' authority.  
38 *Rule:* All statements from the Sermon on the Mount exhibit Jesus'  
39 authority.

40  
41 Induction consists of a probable or statistical argument. It does not  
42 guarantee that the general rule follows necessarily from the specific case.

1 But inductive reasoning has a pragmatic intent: it provides one of the  
 2 chief paths along which we move to certainty and truth. Semiotics treats  
 3 the case or premise of an inductive argument as a special kind of sign  
 4 called an index ‘pointing’ to its conclusion like a weather vane points to  
 5 wind. Just as an index points to something else (the general rule), so the  
 6 premise of an inductive argument points to Secondness.

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### 9 **9. Concluding thoughts: Semiosis and media translation**

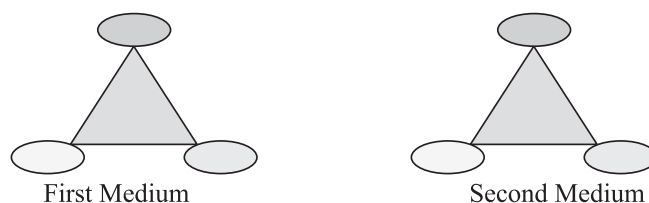
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11 There are two Bibles, one visible, one invisible. We see the visible Bible  
 12 rolled up in scrolls, sewn together in the pages of manuscripts; or, since  
 13 the invention of moveable type and the printing press, bound up in the  
 14 now familiar and canonical form of a printed book. We see the invisible  
 15 Bible in over two millennia of media presentations — drawings, illustra-  
 16 tions, music, dances, dramas, pageants, sculptures, icons, mosaics, paint-  
 17 ings, tapestries, rugs, and architecture elements such as stained glass,  
 18 portals, and altarpieces. Today, radio, television, film and the Internet  
 19 broadcast the invisible Bible. Both the visible and the invisible Bible  
 20 have a common ancestor, a now mostly sidelined oral tradition that se-  
 21 cured and handed down biblical stories from generation to generation.  
 22 True enough, this oral tradition has never fully vanished. It continues to  
 23 exist, for instance, in education and worship. It is present in modern oral  
 24 cultures that hear and share Bible stories. Still, over time, the power of  
 25 the printed or visible Bible, along with the beauty and artistry of the in-  
 26 visible Bible, replaced oral tradition in the safekeeping and handing on of  
 27 the Bible. We know well the outcome of this shift. Sacred writers and  
 28 later copyists committed the sacred stories to papyrus, parchment, and  
 29 paper. Artists sketched and painted biblical stories. Musicians, choreog-  
 30 raphers, and architects turned them into chant, dance, and decoration  
 31 for chapel, church, and cathedral.

32 From the point of view of translation Christians connect much of their  
 33 identity and self-definition with the (translated) visible Bible. They define  
 34 themselves as ‘people of the (translated) Book.’ They read ‘(translated)  
 35 Holy Writ.’ Both have a ‘(translated) Scripture’ and a ‘(translated) Good  
 36 Book.’ Christians take less note of the invisible Bible because its stories,  
 37 characters and themes do not reach us as (translated texts), but rather in  
 38 a mediated way, as artistic texts. They encounter the invisible Bible ‘dis-  
 39 guised’ as works of art and expressions of popular culture. They gaze  
 40 at van Gogh’s *The Prodigal Son* or Michaelangelo’s *David*. They listen  
 41 to Bach’s *St. John Passion*. They view Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* or  
 42 Chapman and Hickner’s *The Prince of Egypt*. As they do so, they do not

1 think of themselves as engaging the Bible but rather as appreciating art or  
 2 simply entertaining themselves with popular culture. Despite the prevail-  
 3 ing distance between the visible and invisible Bible we can sense some-  
 4 thing of their inner connection when we consider that we define a key  
 5 quality of both as ‘inspired.’ Christians believe that the Bible is the in-  
 6 spired Word of God. Standing in front of a van Gogh painting they can  
 7 just as easily say ‘This is an inspired work of art.’ We can appreciate this  
 8 inner connection even more by recalling the rather short history of liter-  
 9 acy and general education, the primary requirement for reading the visi-  
 10 ble Bible. Prior to the nineteenth century, most Christians did not get  
 11 their knowledge of the Bible from reading a book. Rather they received  
 12 it aurally or visually, hearing it read from a pulpit or viewing representa-  
 13 tions of biblical stories and characters in their churches and cemeteries,  
 14 markets and village squares, and roadside shrines and pilgrimage hostels.

15 When we translate the Bible into non-print media, we are dealing with  
 16 what Jakobson called inter-semiotic translation. To account for this act of  
 17 semio-translation, to use Gorlée’s apt phrase (introduced in Gorlée 1994:  
 18 226 ff. and discussed in Gorlée 2004), we must double our triangles to ac-  
 19 count for the addition of a second medium. Our source text has, semioti-  
 20 cally speaking, gone through its three phases of semiosis described above.  
 21 The outcome is a translation in a first medium that must move to a sec-  
 22 ond medium:



32 Figure 9. *Semiotic triangle and media translation*

33  
34 To illustrate this process we can point to the American Bible Society’s  
 35 *Life of Christ* project,<sup>1</sup> which was an instance of semio-translation.  
 36 First, the Greek text of six Gospel narratives served at the starting  
 37 point for the work. In the first phase of semiosis, guidelines and princi-  
 38 ples were drafted, giving the team a first interpretant. Those guidelines  
 39 and principles, now a sign vehicle, led to a translation, the second inter-  
 40 pretant. Finally the translation was turned over to a ‘reader,’ a third inter-  
 41 pretant. In this case the reader was the film director and her production  
 42 team.

1 At that point the director and the production team began to ‘trans-  
2 mediate’ the translation, that is to go from the triangle on the left (First  
3 Medium) to the one on the right (Second Medium). In semiotic terms, the  
4 finished video itself became a sign vehicle, capable of reaching out to an  
5 object and combining with an interpretant.

6 For media translation of larger texts and discourse units in the Bible,  
7 semiotics is especially provocative and rich because it offers a high level  
8 analytic tool for classifying and identifying signs, ordering and prioritiz-  
9 ing them, and ultimately deciding what signs a translation should transfer  
10 from one language and medium to another language and medium. In this  
11 decision-making process, genre often functions as a sign-vehicle, the gos-  
12 pel genre and the genre of the Passion Narratives, for instance. As a sign-  
13 vehicle, the gospel genre points in many people’s minds to the life of Jesus.  
14 If the interpretant is a scholar, then the result may be an historical-critical  
15 life of Jesus. If the interpretant is a film producer, then the outcome is a  
16 movie. *The Passion of the Christ* is a good example. In this case, the film  
17 itself is an instance of an ongoing semiosis that goes back through the  
18 whole history of Hollywood films about Jesus and even beyond into the  
19 whole history of media representations of the Christ. It is also a sign vehi-  
20 cle, pointing to its object, the historical suffering and death of Jesus. For  
21 an interpretant viewing the film from the point of view of return on in-  
22 vestment, theology, race relations, violence, or translation studies, the  
23 film will represent a financial bonanza, the vicarious suffering and death  
24 of Jesus, a barrage of anti-Semitic barbs, a sea of gratuitous violence, or a  
25 brilliant cross-cultural effort in screen translation.

26 The recent book-to-film event centering on Dan Brown’s novel (2002)  
27 *The Da Vinci Code* illustrates the importance of genre in media translat-  
28 ing. Disingenuously, the novel claims to write history about Jesus, Mary  
29 Magdalene, the Priory of Sion, Opus Dei, and a host of other events  
30 and institutions related to Christianity. Scholars can easily debunk these  
31 claims, recognizing an ancient literary device. But ordinary readers, trans-  
32 lators, and film producers take the claim of historicity serious, and come  
33 to the book and its film translation with expectations based on historical  
34 representations of fact, not novelistic ones.

35 Today, no serious translator of the Bible can ignore the vast resources  
36 of semiotics for production, evaluation, training, and research. This claim  
37 applies especially to the realm of media translation.

38  
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#### 40 Note

41

42 1. See [www.newmediabible.org](http://www.newmediabible.org).

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- Robert Hodgson (b. 1943) is Dean of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship at the American Bible Society <RHodgson@americanbible.org>. His research interests include translation studies, biblical studies, media translation, and semiotics. His publications include *From One Medium to Another. Basic Issues for Communicating the Scriptures in New Media* (ed. with P. Soukup, 1997); *Fidelity and Translation. Communicating the Bible in New Media* (ed. with P. Soukup, 1999); and *Similarity and Difference in Translation* (ed. with S. Arduini, 2004).

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