MULTIMODAL EXPERIENCES ACROSS CULTURES, SPACES AND IDENTITIES

Ayelet Kohn and Rachel Weissbrod
Multimodal Experiences Across Cultures, Spaces and Identities

This book explores the interplay between various semiotic modes in multimodal texts and the ways in which they are employed to express cultural translation, seeking to expand prevailing views of translation and adaptation in light of ever-changing social realities.

Drawing on work from multimodal discourse studies, translation studies and adaptation studies, Kohn and Weissbrod shed a light on the increasing prominence of the visual in multimodal texts in the act of translation in a broad sense, and specifically, in conveying cultural translation, broadly understood as the processes and experiences which communities and individuals undergo in the face of social and cultural upheavals which require them to become acquainted with new signs, uniquely encoded across different contexts. Each example showcases individual sociocultural domains while also engaging in the active role of the audience and the respective spaces these works inhabit.

The book brings together work from translation and adaptation studies and multimodality and opens up avenues for new research, making it of interest to scholars in these disciplines as well as fields such as media studies, migration studies and cultural studies.


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To our families, for their cheerful support during this adventure.

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Introduction
Multimodal Experiences Across Cultures, Spaces and Identities

This book deals with the interplay between various semiotic modes in multimodal texts, and the ways these modes are employed to express cultural translation, namely, the experience of people moving between cultures and the impact of this movement on their individual and collective identities. Utilizing the frameworks of multimodal discourse studies, translation studies and adaptation studies, it aims to provide an integrative discussion of these issues by examining a rich selection of multimodal texts across a wide spectrum of media and genres. The discussion considers not only the works themselves but also their individual, social and cultural contexts, as well as the active role of the audience, whether as readers, critics, museum visitors or Internet surfers. Special attention is given to the relationship between modes of audience reaction and the various spaces in which the works are experienced and commented upon (e.g., the physical space of a museum vs. the virtual space of a website).

Translation in its various forms, including cultural translation and adaptation (also in the sense of adapting oneself to new circumstances), requires an updated interpretation in view of the instability and uncertainty that presently characterize all areas of life, including politics, economy, health and security. The need to adapt to drastic changes – whether in one's personal environment, due to migration for example, or in the global environment, due to developments like the Covid pandemic or the advent of new media that have permeated every aspect of our lives – is becoming the norm and gives rise to an all-pervading sense of disorientation. This new reality requires individuals to be familiar with the wide variety of signs that bombard them at every turn, and with their interplay in old and new media. Written and spoken language, visual images, gestures and perceptions of time and space, embedded in diverse and ever-changing societies, are all culturally loaded, and social integration depends on mastering their dynamic meanings.

In light of the above, translation in this book is intertwined with multimodality – the relationship between words, images and audial elements that collaborate to create rich multidimensional texts (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001; Iedema 2003; Jewitt 2005, 2009; Kress 2010; Hiippala 2013). Jewitt defines modalities, or modes, as “semiotic...
resources for making meaning that are employed in a culture – such as image, writing, gesture, gaze, speech, posture” (Jewitt 2009: 1). Multimodality is thus “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 20). Jewitt also points out the importance of context, stressing that what counts as a mode is “inextricably shaped and construed by social, cultural and historical factors” (Jewitt 2009: 22). Kaindl (2013) distinguishes between mode and medium, the latter being the channel of communication, such as literature, cinema or the Internet. The same mode or modes (e.g., written language) can be used in more than one medium.

Our corpus consists mainly of texts which combine the verbal and the visual modes – comics, graphic novels, illustrated letters, Instagram Stories and more. This is in line with the conviction that, in an era when visual texts serve as a dominant perceptual frame for interpreting social and cultural phenomena, research should conform to “the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the medium of the image” (Kress 2003: 1). In our analysis, we therefore regard visual elements as equal participants in multimodal texts, no less important and no less central to the act of translation than the verbal component.

Methodologically, the multimodal nature of the texts under discussion dictated a multi-phased process of analysis: First, considering each modality separately, and then examining the cumulative impact of the text as a whole (Adami and Jewitt 2016). By analyzing the texts in context, we have followed the view that –

Social semiotics sees meanings as fluid and contextual [...] Sign makers draw on the resources that are available to them to make signs in socially-situated contexts, in relation to their interests, their communicative purposes and their assessment of their audiences.

(Adami 2017: 6)

The integration of multimodality and translation is not unprecedented, for multimodality is already an established component of translation studies (see, e.g., Kaindl 2013; O’Sullivan 2013; Campbell and Vidal 2018; Tuominen, Jiménez Hurtado and Ketola 2018; Boria et al. 2019; Pârlog 2019). However, to the best of our knowledge, combining multimodality and cultural translation – two foci of contemporary research that are usually dealt with separately – is an innovation, albeit one that is grounded in the perception of “resemiotization”, i.e., translation between semiotic systems, as a social and cultural process (Iedema 2003; O’Halloran, Tan and Wignell 2016). Given the dominance of multimodal phenomena in today’s culture, the role that these phenomena play in the experience of “translated people” as both producers and consumers (or “prosumers” in the terminology of Weber and Mitchell 2008: 27) requires in-depth
research. Linking multimodality and cultural translation is also a natural follow-up to our previous book, *Translating the Visual – A Multimodal Perspective* (Weissbrod and Kohn 2019), in which only the last chapter was devoted to cultural translation, serving – in retrospect – as a bridge between the two books.

The book presents three expanded notions of translation, elucidating each of them through selected case studies.

**Illustrations as translation**

The idea that illustrations can be regarded as an intermodal translation of the verbal text they accompany originates in Jakobson’s groundbreaking essay (Jakobson 1959). This notion has been elaborated *inter alia* by Oittinen (2002: 106, 113), Pereira (2008, 2021), Kaźmierczak (2018) and Weissbrod and Kohn (2019). A salient aspect that illustration shares with other kinds of translation is that both involve interpretation – a feature of translation that was highlighted in Steiner’s classic *After Babel* (1975) and, from a different (post-structuralist) perspective, by Venuti (2019). However, in illustrated texts, translation as interpretation has two unique features: First, the illustrations and the written text are in two different modalities. Illustrations involve means of expression unique to visual art, such as color and composition. Second, the illustrations and the verbal text are copresent (Kaufmann 2002; Pym 2004), namely, they are accessible to the same readers at the same time. Kaźmierczak (2018) regards this relationship as an addition rather than a replacement of a semiotic code. It follows that the relations between the illustrations and the verbal component – whether they are relations of selection, addition, amplification, moderation or contrast – are not just a matter of interest to the researcher but also play a major role in the creation and consumption of the multimodal whole (Mitchell 2008; Kaindl 2013). Reading the same text with different illustrations, or with no illustrations at all, may be a totally different experience. Pereira acknowledges this when she writes that “illustrations are illustrations exactly because they are linked to a text, otherwise they would be paintings, drawings or any other type of visual work that could be placed independently in an art gallery” (Pereira 2008: 105). We take this one step further and suggest that, due to their copresence, the written text and the illustrations are interdependent, and the interpretation is not unidirectional (i.e., the illustrations do not only interpret the text but are also interpreted by it). Thus, the boundaries between “source text” and “target text” and between “author” and “translator” become blurred.

**Adaptation as translation**

While “illustration as translation” refers to the copresence of different modalities in the same text, adaptation, as we use it, refers to the
transformation of entire texts. The view of adaptation as a form of translation, and the difficulty of tracing clear boundaries between these two concepts, can be elucidated using Jakobson’s (1959) mapping of the concept of translation. Jakobson distinguishes three types of translation, each of which can be linked with adaptation:

1. **Interlingual translation**, also referred to as translation proper. On the face of it, only free translations can be considered a form of adaptation. However, given that translations are never fully adequate, and given that freedom in translation is relative (Toury 2012), one may ask, with Azenha and Moreira (2012): “Don’t translators ‘adapt’ when they ‘translate’?”

2. **Intralingual translation**, or paraphrase, namely translation between different strata of the same language (Zethsen 2009; Berk Albachten 2014; Karas 2016; Mossop 2016). Toury (1994) regards this as a subtype of intrasemiotic translation (or endosemiotic translation in the terminology of Petrilli 2003: 19), which also includes, for instance, the recreation of a painting or a piece of music in a different style. An example is “Picasso’s cubist recodings of some of the canonical paintings of Velasquez”, which Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2013: 15) regard as a form of adaptation.

3. **Intersemiotic translation**, or transmutation. When applied to entire texts, this category includes for example the transformation of literary works into films and the transformation of comics into video games, or vice versa (referred to as “adaptations” in Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013). Intersemiotic, or preferably intermodal, translation takes place when there is a change in the mode or combination of modes.

The close relationship between translation and adaptation is evident from the applicability of the same theoretical frameworks, such as polysystem theory (Cattrysse 2014) or relevance theory (Gutt 2000; see Chapters 4, 5), to both of them.

**Cultural translation**

The concept of cultural translation, which expands the boundaries of translation beyond the realm of texts and modalities, originates in a number of disciplines, including ethnography, culture studies, translation studies and literature (Conway 2013; Maitland 2017). It is often associated with Salman Rushdie’s coinage “translated men” (or women). His catchphrase – “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men” (Rushdie 1991: 16) – is a common thread running through this book.

While there is no single, clear-cut definition of cultural translation, and while some even question whether it should be included in translation
studies at all (Trivedi 2007), researchers who use this term (a partial list includes Bhabha 1990, 1994; Cheyfitz 1991; Niranjana 1992; Bharucha 2008; D’hulst 2008; Buden and Nowotny 2009; Pym 2010; Young 2012; Karas 2022) generally share the view that cultural translation takes place when “self” encounters alterity, particularly in a situation of domination or asymmetrical power relations. It is usually applied to immigrants, labor migrants and others who maneuver between their native countries and host societies, as well as entire ethnic groups and societies caught between their culture of origin and a dominant culture. At the same time, there are also significant differences in approach, for instance between researchers who focus mainly on cultural translation in the sense of subjugating a native society to a value system which annuls its independence and erases its original identity (e.g., Cheyfitz 1991), and others (mainly Bhabha 1990, 1994) who also acknowledge the enriching potential of cultural translation.

According to Bhabha,¹ the site of cultural translation is a “third space” where cultures acknowledge their incompleteness and open themselves to other cultures in an ongoing process of self-alienation and renunciation of “the sovereignty of the self” (Bhabha 1990: 213). In the third space, binary oppositions (such as the opposition between East and West, which Bhabha attributes to Said [see Said 1978]) collapse, resulting in hybridity: “The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha 1990: 211). In this book (see Chapters 1, 3, 7–10), we identify sites of cultural translation in Bhabha’s sense of this term and contrast them with manifestations of forcefully imposed cultural translation.

The book has three parts, each devoted to one of our expansions of the notion of translation. Part 1, focusing on illustration as translation, employs the toolkit of translation studies to study the relations between words and images in multimodal works – a children’s book (Chapter 1) and two graphic novels (Chapters 2 and 3). Although the focus is on multimodality, we also address cultural translation – in the life of individuals (Chapter 1) and on a national level (Chapter 3). Part 2, which serves as a bridge between Parts 1 and 3, is dedicated to adaptation. Its first two chapters, both of which employ relevance theory (Gutt 2000), examine the transformation of diaries written by young girls during the Holocaust into a graphic novel (Chapter 4) and into a series of Instagram Stories that were later made into a film (Chapter 5). In Chapter 6, adaptation is examined alongside other forms of intertextuality as manifested in the works of a comics artist. Part 3 focuses on cultural translation, as reflected in an exhibition and its catalogue (Chapter 7), in illustrated letters (Chapter 8), and in poetry and prose (Chapters 9 and 10). Its relationship with multimodality is examined through the works of artists whose paintings contain, or are accompanied by, verbal text (Chapters 7 and 8).
6 Introduction

Most of the case studies examined here are works in Hebrew by Israelis, some of which are known worldwide (particularly Anne Frank – The Graphic Diary, but also Rutu Modan’s The Property, a winner of the international Eisner Award, and others). The theoretical framing and insights are nevertheless intended to be universal and widely applicable. Each chapter corresponds with others not only in the same part, but also with the other parts of the book. Thus, cultural translation, the topic of Part 3, is also present in Part 1, and intermodal translation, which is the focus of Parts 1 and 2, is also addressed in Part 3. The difference between the various chapters and parts of the book is mainly a matter of focus. From the thematic perspective, some topics recur, such as migration, which is often the context in which cultural translation occurs (although we also discuss “inner migration”, which takes place in the mind and does not involve moving from one place to another).

As mentioned, we are also interested in issues pertaining to the audience: Who are the addressees? Where and how do they experience the multimodal texts? What is expected of them as decipherers and interpreters? Do they interact with each other and with the producers? These issues are closely linked to the notion of space, whether physical or metaphorical. The audience may be the readers of a children’s book who navigate between words and images on the space of the page and take advantage of the pictures to better understand the verbal text (Chapter 1); museum visitors who navigate the museum halls and view various exhibits that invite very different reactions (Chapter 7), or Internet users who react directly to the artists or participate in discussions about their work (Chapters 5, 7). By viewing space and audience as interrelated and taking them into consideration when discussing the works, we hope to shed further light on our fields of research and tighten the links between them.

Note

1 For an elucidation of the development of Bhabha’s theories, see Young (2017).

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Part 1

Illustrations as intermodal translation
Introduction

This part of the book deals with three multimodal works: *In the Garden (Ba-gina)*, a collection of children’s poems by Shaul Tchernichovsky, illustrated by Liora Grossman (Tchernichovsky 2012); *In the Water (Ba-mayim)*, a graphic novel by poet Tehila Hakimi and illustrator Liron Cohen (Hakimi and Cohen 2016), and *The Property (Ha-nekhes)*, a graphic novel by comics artist Rutu Modan (2013).

*In the Garden* includes poems that were first published in the 1920s and 1930s in various collections and periodicals, some of them with previous illustrations. Grossman added her illustrations to pre-existing texts, whose creator, as well as the literary school to which he belonged (Romanticism), were already long gone. In the resulting work, the verbal and visual components – viewed through the lens of translation studies (Venuti 2012) – are comparable, inviting questions that are usually asked with respect to translations, such as: Is the translation “literal” or domesticating? Which elements are toned down or omitted and which are amplified? In this case, we find Steiner’s (1975) view of translation as interpretation, or “hermeneutic motion”, highly applicable.

The graphic novel *In the Water* is a collaboration between poet Tehila Hakimi, who included biographical elements in it, and illustrator Liron Cohen. Although its verbal and visual components are integrated, they are still comparable and give rise to questions such as: What were the illustrator’s criteria in selecting what elements to depict? What was left out or, conversely, accentuated, e.g., by repetition? Steiner’s conceptualization of translation as interpretation is applicable in this case as well.

In *The Property*, artist Rutu Modan played a double role, as both author and illustrator. As she said in an interview, the creators of graphic novels differ from filmmakers in that they want to do everything themselves (Cavna 2014). Unlike in the case of *In the Garden*, here the verbal text has no independent existence and cannot be separated from or compared to the illustrations. A helpful framing is Walter Benjamin’s idea of source and target complementing each other in the act of translation, like the fragments of a vessel (Benjamin 1997: 161). A similar view emerges from McCloud’s (1994: 156) comparison of the relationship between words and images in comics to a dance in which the dancers...
support one another, rather than make the same movements, so as to create an integrated whole (see Chapter 3).

The three works are linked first of all by the basic feature of multimodality and the various kinds of movement it involves: interaction between words and images within the space of the page; the motion of the eye tracking them, and movement between different times and places, each with its distinct landscapes, objects and colors. In all of them, the motion is also from the outside in: from material entities such as a garden, a hotel or “a property” to the emotions and abstract ideas they evoke. Additionally, all three works involve new experiences anchored in pre-existing traditions. Grossman translates Tchernichovsky’s Romantic view of childhood into a visual style reminiscent of Jessie Willcox Smith’s and Warwick Goble’s illustrations in *The Water Babies* (Kingsley 1916, 1922 respectively); Cohen’s illustrations match Hakimi’s sense of the world, which has precedents in Allen Ginsberg’s poetry and in existentialist writings, and Modan utilizes traditions from the realm of comics, while at the same time evoking media texts dealing with the Holocaust (see also Part 2 for a discussion of this topic).

Beyond this thematic connection, Part 1 of the book lays the groundwork for the subsequent sections. By examining the relations between words and images in each work, it presages the discussion of adaptations in Part 2. Furthermore, in two of the works, we identify aspects of cultural translation (Bhabha 1990, 1994) – namely the construction of self-identity through an encounter with the other or with otherness – which, in our cases, takes place in a foreign land following immigration (*In the Garden*) or during a visit to a family’s country of origin (*The Property*). This paves the way to Part 3, which will focus on cultural translation.

**Note**

1 For the readers’ convenience, throughout this book works in Hebrew will be referred to by their translated English titles, giving the Hebrew title (transcribed in italic font) only at the first mention of each work. The transcription is based, with some modifications, on the guidelines of the Academy of the Hebrew Language: https://hebrew-academy.org.il/wp-content/uploads/taatik-loazit-2020.pdf (accessed March 15, 2022).

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