

## Translating Charles S. Peirce's Letters: A Creative and Cooperative Experience

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**Abstract:** In this article we wish to share the work in which the Group of Peirce Studies of the University of Navarra has been involved since 2007: the study of a very interesting part of the extensive correspondence of Charles S. Peirce, specifically, his *European* letters. Peirce wrote some of these letters over the course of his five trips to Europe (between 1870 and 1883), and wrote others to the many European scientists and intellectuals he communicated with over the course of his life. The translation of those letters has been an excellent practical example of the creative and abductive nature of translation, as well as of the cooperative character of research. Translating Peirce's letters has allowed us a deep study of some theoretical aspects, and at the same time it has permitted us to work creatively and cooperatively to enrich the common vision of this scientist and philosopher.

As an homage to Prof. Ivo Ibrí,<sup>1</sup> who has done so much for the reception of Charles S. Peirce in the Portuguese-speaking world, we think it appropriate to share the work that the Group of Peirce Studies has been involved in since 2007, in particular several research projects on Peirce's *European letters*, a very interesting part of his extensive correspondence. These are the letters that Peirce wrote during his five trips to Europe (between 1870 and 1883), as well as those he wrote to the many European scientists and intellectuals that he communicated with over the course of his life.<sup>2</sup>

These projects have had a number of theoretical results: we have shown that through his trips Peirce had intense contact with European art and a new cultural world. As a man of great sensibility and intelligence, his experiences left a mark on him that only deepened over the years. Indeed, the seeds of some of his future ideas can be found in his European experiences. The sensations Peirce encountered in Europe were lasting, and in time bore fruit in a new vision not just of science, understood as a living activity undertaken in community, but also of art, understood as the capacity to capture firstness and give it form, to the point of somehow expressing the inexpressible.

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We have already studied these theoretical aspects elsewhere (Barrena and Nubiola 2012, Barrena 2014, and Nubiola 2014). In this paper we wish to focus on our experience as we worked with Peirce's correspondence, specifically on the translation of the letters, an excellent practical example of the cooperative character of research and the creative and abductive nature of the translator's task. Translating the letters has not just made it possible to study and penetrate further into their theoretical aspects, but also, in continuity with subsequent annotations and commentaries, to work creatively and cooperatively to broadly enrich our vision of Peirce. Through this project we have come to know a much more human Peirce, whose thought and life closely interweave, and have also come to better understand, by applying some of Peirce's own ideas, what it means to translate and work on the original texts.

In this article we want to share our experience with translating Peirce. We will first give a description of the work already done, then will move on to a richer vision of the translator's work as seen through the lens of Peirce. This means taking a step further in the unceasing process of semiosis, making it possible to enrich the texts, considering them as something alive, and generating new ideas about them. To finish, we will discuss certain ideas that have arisen through our experience and that may aid in understanding and improving translation as an art. The imagination and abductive capacity of the translator are central factors, as is the ability to correct oneself and make the text grow in community. The text itself serves as a guide during the process of translation, allowing new and better interpretations to arise. As Peirce himself wrote: "The writer of a book can do nothing but set down the items of his thought. For the living thought, itself, in its entirety, the reader—and we might add, the translator—has to dig into his own soul" (*CP* 1.221, c.1902).

## **1. Description of the research**

Since 2007 the Group of Peirce Studies has undertaken various projects, under the umbrella of what we might call the "Cosmopolitan Peirce", all dedicated to the study of Charles S. Peirce's relationship with Europe through his correspondence.

The common image of Charles Sanders Peirce as an isolated thinker writing in Arisbe without any contact with the world is not only historically inaccurate, but also it makes it difficult to understand some key elements of his philosophy. Charles S. Peirce traveled to Europe on five different occasions. The five trips occurred between the years 1870 and 1883,

all of them in the service of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, at that time the chief scientific agency of the United States. Those trips—which covered a total of thirty-eight months—were a rich mixture of scientific research and tourism, of communication with other scientists and of enjoying the artistic treasures of Europe. The impact of this extensive travelling was so important to Peirce's life and thought that it makes perfect sense to identify this period of time as his “cosmopolitan period”—to use Max Fisch’s expression (Fisch 1986, 227).

Peirce's experiences of his European voyages are vividly reflected in his extensive correspondence (professional and family letters), which until now has been neglected by the scholarship, partly because it is difficult to access and partly due to the analytic tradition’s general lack of interest in the biographical aspects of philosophy. A close study of Peirce's letters and other documents from those years helps in avoiding a number of misunderstandings about his thought and its evolution, highlighting his active participation at the vanguard of several fields of cooperative scientific research (astronomy, geodesy, etc.).

Understanding Peirce as an American philosopher means grasping that he was profoundly influenced by European thought and culture, and inquiring into how his American and European experiences worked together to form his ideas and shape him into the world-renowned philosopher he became.

From this background, our group's research has progressed as follows:

1. The transcription and publishing of the *European letters* on the web. We performed a simple yet careful transcription of the original English text, without noticing crossed-out expressions, inclusions, etc., since a scan of the original manuscript is also available.

2. A faithful translation of every text into Spanish, published on the web with abundant annotations that explain the meaning of certain difficult passages. These notes sometimes provide complementary information that substantially enriches the reading.

3. Numerous links from the text of the letters and annotations to illustrations, which can have associated explanations and links to sources external to the project.

Up to the present we have transcribed, translated and annotated more than 100 letters and documents from Peirce's first three European voyages, and we have further studied his relationship with some 35 European correspondents.<sup>3</sup> Our goal is to finish this project in the next few years, studying and publishing the letters and documents from his fourth and fifth

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.unav.es/gep/CorrespondenciaEuropeaCSP.html>

trip, seeking a global vision of how Peirce's thought was influenced by his voyages and his relationship with Europe.

## **2. C. S. Peirce on translation**

Contrary to a common stereotype, translation is not primarily a mechanical task: it is essentially creative. It is true that certain grammatical rules and linguistic codes have to be used in translating, but translating is no mere step by step following of rules. It is an activity that involves discovery, the "invention" of expressions that render the meaning of the text to be translated, an imaginative search for new vehicles of thought. For Peirce, the translation of thought involves growth, since signs grow when they give rise to other signs.

### **2.1 Thought as a sign**

For Peirce, everything in the universe is a sign, since everything can make something manifest to another, can be interpreted. The action of signs, what Peirce calls *semiosis*, is a continual and universal process. Everything, therefore, demands interpretation: "A sign must have an interpretation, or interpretant as I call it. This interpretant, this signification, is simply a metempsychosis into another body, a translation into another language" (*MS 298*, 1905). We continually interpret because everything is a sign, and the interpretation of signs is just translation under another name, as Peirce expressly says: "Interpretation is merely another word for translation" (*MS 283*, 97, 1903).

As Ivo Ibric has written, for Peirce the task of semiotics is much broader than the mere study of linguistic signs:

In this task of semiotics, one must recognize signs that designate from the most indeterminately vague to the most determinately defined; from those immediately inserted in language to those which can barely be uttered. In this task, Semiotics ought to be open to all that potentially signifies and which can somehow be *said*. And this is much more than what is bound by language (Ibric 2011, 74).

Translation can be defined as pouring certain signs into others, and is not always of a verbal character; sometimes signs and ideas can be translated into non-linguistic forms, as in the case of the figurative arts. We are continuously translating, but that does not mean that everything is partial and inexact. It is, though, open to continuity and to that process of constant growth that signs undergo, a process that makes them acquire new forms.

The human mind is constantly processing and translating signs, producing

interpretants that are in turn new signs. In translation we start with a sign, on the basis of which the mind creates an interpretant, for which the translator seeks another with equivalent meaning. It is not an exact operation; rather, it is an open, continuous process like semiosis, in which new signs are produced that can be even more developed than the first. Indeed, a sign is not a sign if it does not give way to something new:

A sign can complete its future-oriented double mission of representation and interpretability/translatability only when it is explained (*CP* 2.230), translated (*CP* 5.594, for instance), interpreted (*CP* 5.569), or has determined an interpretant (*CP* 5.569). To express this more precisely, a sign is a semiotic sign provided that it is possible for the sign to receive an explanation, translation, interpretation, or interpretant (Hartama-Heinonen 2012, 117-8).

Linguistic translation, like any other, is nothing more than an open process of interpretation. The fear at not being literal must be overcome, provided that the soul of the sign, its original meaning, is preserved (*CP* 6.455, 1908). In translation meaning is given a new material form, within that continual evolution that signs undergo. Thought is given new clothes, a thought that could not exist without those clothes, without signs, since “All our thinking is performed upon signs of some kind or other, either imagined or actually perceived” (*NEM* I, 122). As Peirce writes more extensively:

Thinking always proceeds in the form of a dialogue —a dialogue between different phases of the *ego* — so that, being dialogical, it is essentially composed of signs, as its matter, in the sense in which a game of chess has the chessmen for its matter. Not that the particular signs employed *are* themselves the thought! Oh, no; no whit more than the skins of an onion are the onion. (About as much so, however.) One selfsame thought may be carried upon the vehicle of English, German, Greek, or Gaelic; in diagrams, or in equations, or in graphs: all these are but so many skins of the onion, its inessential accidents. Yet that the thought should have *some* possible expression for some possible interpreter, is the very being of its being. (*CP* 4.6, 1905).

Thus, new aspects appear through the chain of interpretants that is created, and the signs become living agents able to modify their environment (Esposito 1980, 202). Ideas, says Peirce, by taking on flesh in different vehicles, can transform the world (*CP* 1.217-19, 1902).

## **2.2 Abduction: inventing how to express an idea.**

In the process of translating signs, abduction plays a primary role. Abduction provides us with the spontaneous conjectures of reason, but for a hypothesis to arise the cooperation of the imagination and instinct are needed. Abduction is like the spark of understanding, a jump beyond what we already have, and is where the creative force resides. For abduction to happen one has to leave the mind free. Peirce speaks of *musement*, a moment more instinctive than rational in which ideas flow, until suddenly a suggestion lights up.

Abduction is at the base of any investigation, for without it knowledge would never advance, and is likewise at the base of translation. It is through abduction that we have to find the words that fit the meaning we want to translate. Even though the words already exist, they come to our minds like suggestions for discovering, *inventing*, a way to express the idea in the language we are translating to. It is not a matter of analyzing and decoding sentences and paragraphs, but of grasping the meaning and creatively pouring it out in a new form obtained by abduction. It isn't a systematic search, but free.

Once we have the suggestion we have to test it, since the first ideas obtained through abduction are merely working hypotheses. We have to confirm how the words fit into the text, just as in the scientific method hypotheses are adopted provisionally until confirmed. Thus they must first be explained and made precise through deduction (*CP* 7.203, 1901), then experimentally confirmed through induction, in the experimental verification phase, and validated by the scientific community. Sometimes, as in science, a translator has to reject certain possible translations and seek a better one. Translations, like the process of semiosis, are never complete: they can always be improved. It is a process without limits where in the long term the testing corresponds to the community, although practically speaking it has to end somewhere.

### **3. Suggestions for a better translation: the case of Peirce's letters**

Bearing in mind Peirce's theories as applied to translation, explained in the previous section, together with our experience as translators of his texts, we present three fundamental criteria for becoming a good translator:

#### *1) Develop the imagination*

Abduction, which plays an essential part in translation, demands the cooperation of the imagination. Against many stereotypes, translators must be people of imagination, inventors of solutions. They must be *creative*. Translators must have the right attitude, their minds must be clear and their imaginations stimulated. This attitude is critical for feeling and hearing the meaning of the text, not just with the mind, but with the heart and the imagination too, as should happen every time one tries to write something. As Peirce says: "With your eyes open, awake to what is about or within you, and open conversation with yourself" (*CP* 6.461, 1908).

In a text from 1905 Peirce explains that without imagination the function of signs cannot be fulfilled, even when they can give rise to others:

“What does it mean to speak of the ‘interpretation’ of a sign? Interpretation is merely another word for translation; and if we had the necessary machinery to do it, which we perhaps never shall have, but which is quite conceivable, an English book might be translated into French or German without the interposition of a translation into the imaginary signs of human thought. Still, supposing there were a machine or even a growing tree which, without the interpolation of any imagination were to go on translating and translating from one possible language to a new one, will it be said that the function of signs would therein be fulfilled? (MS 283, 1905).

In this text, which is no longer science fiction thanks to the existence of automatic translation programs, Peirce makes it clear that without the imagination's work the proper function of signs is not realized. That is, semiosis does not take place in the human being's mind, giving rise to something new.<sup>4</sup> The sign does not grow. Our imagination overlaps with the way we interpret and confront everything, and without imagination we can't explain the many ways we conceive reality in our daily, scientific or artistic activity.

Thanks to the imagination, said John Dewey, old and familiar things become new in experience (Dewey 1934, 271-72). Creation is impossible without imagination, nor can what has been created be understood. The conclusion: without imagination it is impossible to translate well. Translators are not just second-hand writers, people who merely transmit what others have thought. They are creative, and must foster and develop their imaginations just as any artist would, through reading, writing, free thought, idea play and the development of perceptive abilities.

## 2) *Let the text speak*

According to what we have said so far, the translation of a text is a creative process where there are both freedom and rules, both action and passivity, for the translator has to let the text develop as a sign. It has been said that translation is the search for a new material form for the meaning of a sign. So translating, then, is not just the capturing of content or information, but also of the intention, the *ground* of the signs, i.e. the way that the sign relates object and mind, the aspect under which the sign stands for something and for somebody. Translators, then, should attempt to enter into the mind of the author through the signs they have to translate, letting those signs develop naturally. In a way they should let the text carry out, let it speak and grow, letting their minds wander freely, as in any other creative activity.

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<sup>4</sup> Bingran Wang has sought to apply Peirce's semiotics to automatic translation. He claims that we humans are interpreters of language, while a machine only helps to find possible "vehicles" that are equivalent in another language, and its ability to do so depends on a manual translation having been carried out and stored beforehand. The problem with automatic translation programs is that, in natural language, each sign's meaning is interdependent with that of the others (Wang, 2015).

Translation, then, is partially passive; one lets oneself be carried away by the force of the continually growing signs. Translators should come to their texts with this mentality. Their translations are not mere reproductions; the sign that the author used with a given *ground* must take on flesh and grow. This makes translation a living process, not some dead transliteration. Texts are organic, always growing, and signs can develop without distorting the original signs. As Dinda Gorlee (1994) asserts, translators should surrender to the needs of the text rather than show off their skills, even though those skills are clearly necessary and constitute the final point to bear in mind.

### 3) *Cultivate skills*

Translators must have and hone certain skills, including of course an excellent knowledge of the languages involved, especially the destination language. Good writing is a must, the ability to clearly express the idea that enters the mind upon reading the text in the original language.

Translation is a creative activity, but translators must still master the rules. In the case of a translator of philosophy, he or she must have mastered the destination language and have as rigorous a knowledge as possible of the author's thought. This is especially true for complex authors like Peirce, who relates many different kinds of theories even within a single text, and who published few works during his life. As a result, the working material often consists of fragmentary, partial manuscripts that were never edited into a final form. It is impossible to be creative without first learning the rules: talent and creativity must be preceded by rigorous work and the mastering of technique. Translating demands *the ability to work*. Not everything is inspiration: much dedication and constancy is also required. A disciplined and fertile mind is necessary for ideas to arise seemingly without effort.

The creative, perhaps fundamental aspect of translation cannot be formally taught, but our experience tells us there are certain guidelines for the translator's work, even though not everyone works in the same way:

a) A comprehensive reading of the text, taking into account the cultural and socio-historical context it was written in. Before beginning, translators should submerge themselves in the text, in its internal world, to capture the general intention of the text. In Peirce's case this step is mandatory: he has a fragmentary way of writing, jumping from one thing to another, and uses extremely long examples that take him off the point; as a result it can be



difficult to get an idea of the whole. His ideas evolved over the course of his life, so it is also critical to situate the texts within the Peircean chronology, identifying the stage they belong to and tracing the original source of publication. In the case of the letters, the work of documentation is more necessary than ever, due to the innumerable references to circumstances and historical places key to correctly translating the text.

b) Begin from the beginning, not with pieces that are isolated or out of order. When a passage is obscure, it is best to continue on, since the passage may well be clarified by what comes after.

c) Don't translate word for word, but take complete phrases and meaningful units. Let your mind be free until the suggestion comes, let the thoughts sail, without obsessively focusing on the paper or the screen. The point is to direct one's attention within. It may help to consult the dictionary, but keeping in mind that the aim is to transcend the superficial structure of the text, to go beyond the materiality of the signs and seize their "soul", not just choosing between a set of alternatives found in the dictionary. Sometimes you may choose one of the meanings from the dictionary, other times not. Out of various suggestions, the simplest is often the best.

d) Try out the suggestion that seems most appropriate, always remembering that there is never just one solution to the problem. See how your idea functions in the sentence, in the paragraph, see if the original meaning is kept, if it is well-expressed in the destination language. Recheck the hypothesis as you go back and read it again. Obtaining the hypotheses and the test and correction are phases that intermix. Often when you return to a certain passage the phrasing that best expresses what you want to say will leap out at you. All of a sudden you will see something that had been in front of your eyes but didn't notice, and you will have the expression you were looking for.

e) When you reach the end, reread the entire translated text several times, making sure that it makes sense, checking spelling, going back to fragments you didn't understand or that you were unsatisfied with, assuring that the forms of expression and the order of phrases are correct, etc. You also need to fix loose ends, any words or expressions you were unable to understand, by consulting other sources or asking an expert.

f) When the time is right, declare the translation finished, avoiding perfectionism. Give the text to other people that can proofread it, checking their suggestions against the original. Correcting yourself is how you learn. In the case of our own project, we read the translations

in meetings of the research team, or we emailed them to the entire team. From this joint reading we gained a better understanding of the text and received new suggestions to better it, thus realizing the Peircean ideal of cooperative investigation.

In conclusion, a translator must combine great creativity with technical skills and preparation. Translation makes us better writers, and the better we write the better translators we become, in a feedback cycle between our creative skills and technical abilities. In addition, the text, understood as a sign, is much more than the translator's working material: it is a guide whose meaning can grow with a good interpretation, something impossible without the collaboration of others. Thus, the translator becomes an essential part of the community of investigation that seeks the truth.

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### Short Bio

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