



# Isotopy and Literary Translation: Semiotic Tools for a Stylistic Target

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## Abstract

This essay discusses the main theorizations and applications of isotopy and its use as a criterion in translation practice and analysis. The idea of isotopy as a line of coherence established by sememes indexing a common seme and exerting semantic pressure on expressive features connects to that of style as unique conflation of form and content, which suggests that mapping relationships among isotopic bundles may help reveal the very style literary translators aim to achieve in their TT.

**Keywords:** Frame, Isotopic Bundles, Isotopy, Thematization, Translation Studies

## Introduction

Isotopy seems to be both a blessing and a curse to semiotics. It is the modelling paradigm of an immensely powerful analytical framework and yet the elephant in the room for several works addressing semiotic issues. Mentioning all the research papers and projects in the semiotic area that do not feel any need to address the notion of isotopy would take too much of the space available here and should arguably sound too controversial at the beginning of an essay that rather aims to locate such operational concept within the tradition of semiotics in order to assess its validity in literary translation practice and analysis. In fact, retracing the complex and somewhat troubled history of its theorizations while mapping the intersections and exchanges with adjoining disciplines – primarily Theory of Language, Pragmatics, Stylistics and Translation Studies – may well reveal isotopy as the source of divergences among semiotic scholars and even schools. And yet, as a linguist and a translator who has worked with and through isotopies for twenty-five years, I have found such investigation necessary to make full sense of its potential as a translational paradigm.

## 1. Theoretical Background

The first definition of isotopy notoriously dates back to Algirdas Julien Greimas's *Sémantique structurale* in 1966, whereby it proved crucial in reshaping the import of linguistics within the human sciences by welcoming the contribution of semantics – its “poor relation” (4) – and accordingly defining the signification processes through which meaning is produced in language. However, if *Sémantique structurale* laid the groundwork of modern semiotics – and this article mainly focuses on subsequent revisions of its content – it marks in the first place the destination of an unforeseeable journey that turned its author from a) “a young linguist in 1935”<sup>1</sup> who “still regarded with disdain the works by the schools of Geneva and Prague” because of their “esoterism” and “merely theoretical speculations” (Greimas 1956, 191); b) into a “fully Saussurean” (Arrivé 2017, 166) scholar in 1956 who praised the revolution experienced by Sociology, Ethnology, History and Literary Studies thanks to the integration of Ferdinand de Saussure’s methodology and conversely blamed “the paradoxical situation of Saussure’s heritage in France” on the linguists’ delay in tackling it; c) and, finally, into a post-Saussurean semiotician by 1963–64 (Zilberberg 1985, 3–5).

To illustrate the main stages of this journey is neither feasible nor necessary here. What should instead be pointed out, when focusing on the notion of isotopy, is that by the time Greimas wrote *L’actualité du saussurisme* in 1956, he had already absorbed Saussure’s attempt to develop a descriptive epistemology rather than a phenomenological approach to knowledge, thus trying to advance the description of language by elaborating on the methodology proposed in the *Cours* and drawing on the Swiss linguist’s view of the world “as a vast network of relationships, as an architecture of forms charged with meaning, each bearing its own significance” (192). However, through readings of Jakobson, Levi Strauss, Barthes and, above all, Louis Hjelmslev, he was also moving away from Saussure. As Michel Arrivé puts it, he increasingly “Hjelmslevised” Saussure (2017, 172) until he could only go back to him through a “Hjelmsleavian glossary” (Zilberberg 1985, 5). Another departure and further progress along the above-mentioned journey could no longer be adjourned.

Undoubtedly, in *Sémantique structurale* Greimas espoused Hjelmslev’s aspiration to set scientific goals achievable through rigorous – “systematic, exact, generalizing” (Hjelmslev 1961, 9) – methods and showed to have critically appropriated his quadripartite conceptualisation of the sign, thus superseding any “naïve and non-relational notion of sign” (Eco 1976, 4). This ushered in his post-Saussurean view of language as “not a system of signs, but an assemblage... of structures of signification” (Greimas 1983, 20) and of text as “forløb”, a process which variously accomplishes one of the infinite actualisations of such system (Hjelmslev 1961, 39). This perspective consequently urged a focus on the “mutual dependences” through which each part of the system relates to the others because “both the object of the examination and its parts have existence only by virtue of these dependences” and “the whole of the object under examination can be defined only by their sum total”, which in turn “does not consist of things but of relationships” (23). Such framework accordingly necessitated the description of “the relationships into which it [language] enters or which enter into it” (1970, 8),<sup>2</sup> a task which Greimas primarily interpreted as the twofold search for 1) the modalities to segment such functions into minimal units and 2) the “aggregating and integrating constancy [...] a constancy, which is not anchored in some reality outside language” (1961, 8) and ensures the organicity

<sup>1</sup> The translations of quotations from texts in languages other than English are mine.

<sup>2</sup> “Such relationships, or dependences, registered by scientific description, we shall call functions” (Hjelmslev 1970, 8).

of a discourse as a signifying whole (Greimas 1983, 78). It was arguably in the context of this search that Greimas wrestled with defining the concept of isotopy, thus framing what Umberto Eco subsequently called the “correlational nature of the sign-function” (1976, 5).

## *2. Isotopy: Definitions and Conceptual Variants*

Greimas substantiated his aspiration to achieve scientific objectivity for his idea of constancy by drawing the notion of isotopy from chemistry and physics, where, according to the *OED*, an isotope is a “variety of a chemical element (strictly, of one particular element) which is distinguished from the other varieties of the element by a different mass number but shares the same atomic number and chemical properties (and so occupies the same position in the periodic table)”. Along similar lines, in *Sémantique Structurale* he defined isotopy as “the permanence of a hierarchical classematic base which, because the classematic categories are the opening of the paradigms, allows variations of the units of manifestation, variations which, instead of destroying the isotopy, on the contrary only confirm it” (1983, 108). In order to clarify it, a few words need to be spent on the term “classematic” and on Greimas’s revisitation of Bernard Pottier’s semic analysis (1974 and 1980).

By “permanence of a classematic base” Greimas meant the semantic redundancy and the subsequent coherence achieved, despite the different manifestations, by the “reproduction along the syntagmatic axis of identical comparable entities which are situated at the same level of analysis” (1982, 166), and, following Pottier, by these entities – the communicative feature corresponding to isotopes in physics – he meant *classemes*. In fact, according to semic analysis, if the lexeme is a dictionary entry, only a virtual unit of content, the meaning effect it produces when employed within an utterance is a *sememe*: the cluster of fixed and variable *semes* – the latter called *classemes* – that each time variously partake in shaping the meaning effect. In this understanding, the *seme*, or semantic trait, belongs to the content plane and amounts to the minimal unit of signification resulting from basic categories which, in turn, are conceptualised at the very slippery intersection of experience (psychology and logic) and reality (physics). In particular, *semes* allow for a molecular analysis of meaning, although, as Greimas and Joseph Courtés clarified in distinguishing it from standard componential analysis: “the *seme* is not an autonomous, atomistic element; it exists only because of the differential gap that opposes it to other *semes*” (278). Pottier distinguished three types of *semes*, which he intended as the semantic traits arbitrarily found to be relevant to the meaning of a *sememe* by the message addressee: a) specific and therefore constant (*semantemes*); b) generic and therefore contextual and variable (*classemes*); c) connotative (*virtuemes*). According to Greimas, on the other hand, *semes* can only be either nuclear, i.e., specific, permanent and invariant, or *classemes*, i.e., generic, contextual and variable. This initially led him to argue that the minimal condition for the existence of an isotopy was the presence of at least two *sememes* sharing one *classeme* along a syntagmatic axis (1983, 59), which explains the above-mentioned permanence through syntagmatic reproduction or iterativeness. However, following exchanges with other linguists, Greimas eventually extended the definition of isotopy to cover not only the iterativeness of *classemes*, but also, more generally, of any “semic categories” (1982, 174).

By alerting to the scattered presence in a discourse of *sememes* indexing common, identifiable *semes* and by trying to reveal how these nets actualise relationships of coherence pointing at relevant interpretations, Greimas envisaged an interpretive tool whose capacity did not go unnoticed in different fields such as Literary Studies, Art, Aesthetics, Psychoanalysis, Ethnology, Marketing, Advertising, and others. On the other hand, as anticipated, his initial formulation also prompted several replies and consequent adjustments of it. As early as 1972, François

Rastier proposed a *Systématique des isotopies* which altered the nature of isotopy by extending it to the expression plane where isotopies would result from the recurrence of phonetic and syntactic features (called isoplasms and isotaxies, respectively), while on the level of content isosémies were distinguished from isologies.

The idea of the extension in itself was accepted by most scholars, including Arrivé and even Greimas and Courtés, who argued in the *Dictionary*: “nothing stands in the way of transposing the concept of isotopy, developed and restricted up until now to the content plane, to the expression plane”. But then they also warned against the “even greater confusion” likely stirred by a too general definition of isotopy as the one advanced by Rastier: “the recurrence of linguistic units” (1982, 165). In 1981, Rastier further problematised this and other issues in *Le développement du concept d’isotopie*, which was unsurprisingly accompanied by disclaimers in Arrivé’s *Postface* (1981, 32-36) and Courtés’s *Contre-note* (1981, 37-48). In this small and dense book, Rastier maintained that “isotopies relate exclusively to the syntagmatic dimension of language” and that they “result from the projection of the principle of equivalence of the axis of selection (paradigmatic) onto the axis of combination (syntagmatic)” (1981, 10). Moreover, he observed that also specific semes, and not only contextual ones, partake in isotopies and he argued that the distinction between figurative and thematic isotopies lacks ontological grounds, given the impossibility to really distinguish between abstract and concrete. Finally, he classified “two types of isotopies: that which is constituted by the recurrence of a given content and we will call taxic; that which is constituted by the recurrence of different contents belonging to the same class and we will call taxemic” (28-29).

In later works Rastier further elaborated on these arguments and developed more specific and highly useful concepts, including the semic molecule – a grouping of no fewer than two semes appearing together in one semantic unit more than once – and the often-related bundle of isotopies, i.e., more isotopies that index more or less the same sememes (2009). Not few semiotic handbooks, including Louis Hébert’s *An Introduction to Applied Semiotics* (2020), adopted these concepts and their definitions whereas others more simply stood by Greimas’s general understanding of isotopy as an “operational concept” accounting for “the homogeneity of the utterance-discourse” (1982, 163), and, in particular, of the semantic isotopy as what “makes possible a uniform reading of the discourse as it results from the partial readings of the utterances making it up and from the resolution of their ambiguities which is guided by the search for a single reading” (164). In this respect, Denis Bertrand should be mentioned, in that he also kept the distinction – deemed ontologically inconsistent by Rastier – between figurative and thematic isotopies, one which is, as we will see, of great importance in translation:

Unlike the lexical field, which encapsulates the lexemes referring to the same universe of experience, and unlike the semantic field, which encapsulates the lexemes with a common structural organization, isotopy applies to the discourse, not to the single word.<sup>3</sup> As such, it may relate the creation of a figurative universe (actorial, time and space isotopies) as well as the thematization of this universe (abstract, thematic and axiological isotopies) and, above all, the hierarchy among isotopies by virtue of recognizing the isotopic nucleus that determines the isotopies of a lower level. (2002, 131)

A figurative isotopy does not necessarily prompt a thematic one while in texts with multiple figurative isotopies, these can build up either one or more thematic ones. In polysemic

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere in *Précis de Sémiotique Littéraire* Bertrand argues: “The analysis of semantic fields can be considered a first stage that paves the way for a thematic analysis. However, since the first and ultimate object of such analysis is the single word, it can hardly explain the syntagmatic development of a discourse” (118).

and pluri-isotopic texts, two or more isotopies can be connected to each other by means of a shifter or *connecteur*, a unit on the discursive level that is consistent with more, superimposed significations, thereby allowing for more, co-existing interpretations. Accordingly, to identify the continuity of a meaning effect through the networks of coherence established by semantic chains along a discourse and to recognize an abstract, underlying and relevant thematization through the conceptual organization, categories and values of such pre-determined social discourses as the religious, philosophical, sociological, political, artistic, esthetic or mythological ones enhance and deepen textual and narrative comprehension. With respect to literary texts, presuming a thematic isotopy based on the contextual and situational disambiguation(s) of the figurative one(s) is an essential step towards the recognition of its dianoetic nucleus, of the narrative models around which such nucleus is arranged in the text and of the semantic oppositions and relationships which inform those models, paradigmatically as well as syntagmatically.

### 3. Applications of Isotopy as an Interpretive Tool

Critical works that have successfully applied the interpretive tools of figurative and thematic isotopies are countless. For instance, in *Précis de Sémiotique Littéraire* Bertrand found that Love's shooting of arrows in *Roman de la Rose* "corresponds to a regulated distribution of feelings of love" (2002, 137) and that the figurative isotopy of escape in *La chartreuse de Parme* remains open to a range of thematizations on account of the variety of socio-cultural codes and frames<sup>4</sup> engaging the reader of Stendhal (35-49). Likewise, in the already quoted *Contre-note*, Courtés listed several thematizations of "ramassage" in Maupassant's *La Ficelle* and regarded each of them as a "reorganization, according to an underlying Narrative Program, of the figurative material" (1981, 38). And, just to prove the global currency of such tools, in a critical commentary on Foscolo's *A Zacinto*, Cesare Segre detected a figurative isotopy of "sea" interacting with various sememes in the sonnet, thus enabling the thematizations of "fertility",<sup>5</sup> "motherhood", "life", and, by opposition, "death" (1999, 32-34).<sup>6</sup> Bearing translation in mind, one should notice that this process of thematization, here intended as the semiotic activity of reception that informs and characterizes (in Daniele Giglioli's definition of theme) "the space of tension [...] where relationships between the topic and the sense are constantly negotiated" (2022, 33), also shapes the semantic universe in the light of which lexical choices are made by translators. Both thematizations and lexical choices are in fact oriented by the reader's engagement with cognitive frames and standardized information circulating in semiotized form that accordingly dismisses the old-fashioned, blunted charge of immanentism. As the rest of this essay will hopefully show, this engagement is of utmost importance for the practice and study of translation.

If its applications are so diverse, it can be difficult to determine which understanding of isotopy – Rastier's? Greimas's? – is meant when it happens to be employed as an interpretive tool by scholars from the broad range of disciplines familiar with it. Could it be that someone

<sup>4</sup> The cognitive process of framing relates the schemes and models through which the human mind perceives, confronts and organizes experience. Despite the terminological differences, the concept of "frame" is common to several branches of human sciences: rhetoric, political science, sociology, communication research, media studies, behavioural economics, cognitive linguistics, and others. In communication research, the most relevant area of study for the sake of this article, the "frame" encompasses all the data and information (including linguistic practices and scripts) regarding a stereotyped situation that is stored in our memory and enables our mental representations of such situation.

<sup>5</sup> This is often the outcome of "metaphoric" shifters (see Greimas and Courtés 1982, 52).

<sup>6</sup> This is often the outcome of "anti-phrastic" shifters (see Greimas and Courtés 1982, 53).

among those who have avoided it so far are just afraid of the troublesome diatribe summarized in the theoretical section of this essay? Nonetheless, its use remains widespread and, at a closer look, the most common understanding seems to be a general one that Rastier would have not contested, at least upon writing in *Le développement du concept d'isotopie*: “the isotopy is more exactly a relation that links some sememes through the recurrence of some of their semes” (1981, 12). As vague as it may sound, this definition resonates with Pottier’s “the redundancy of a seme across various elements of a sequence” (1974, 326) as well as with Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s claim that isotopy amounts to a “principle of textual coherence” (1976, 33).

Regardless of the difficulty in theorizing it in detail, its scope of application has been impressive and has almost involved every academic and research institutions where semiotic tools are not ideologically rebuked. This was especially so between the 1970s and the 1990s, and an excellent case in point is Fredric Jameson, who relied on isotopy as a critical tool in *Prison House of Language* (1972) and, even more importantly given its sociological core-subject, in *Political Unconscious* (1981). Eco’s non-semiotic production is another notable example. But there certainly is no shortage of instances and to name all the journals and “schools” where it has been employed extensively is impossible for obvious reasons. Applications in literary studies are undoubtedly most remarkable, especially where analyses acknowledge the input of structural linguistics and can rely on strong stylistic traditions and their characteristic focus on linguistic texture. Groupe Mu went so far as to identify isotopy as “the semantic norm of the discourse” and put it at the heart of a semiotic reconfiguration of rhetoric (1991, 53). Pozuelo Yvanco addressed the formal implications of it when he observed that “far from pointing at families of words”, isotopies unveil “convergencies of content” that “give an account of the coherence and the discursive interweaving of the text” (1989, 208). And drawing on the stylistic import of such remark he argued that “the isotopic description is a more scientific way to sort what literary theory used to call theme of a text” (209), thus suggesting a role for isotopies in the genetic development of literary genres, here intended as dynamic classifications of texts. Obviously, many branches of linguistics have also been concerned with the potential of isotopy. Just to quote an example, Salvatore Attardo conceived of a theory of humour where the “isotopy-disjunction model” was found to govern the logic of several jokes (2020, 90-94).

#### 4. *Isotopy and Translation Studies*

The heterogeneity of references in the previous paragraph should be enough to make the relatively scant attention paid to isotopy in Translation Studies astounding, especially with regard to the linguistics-oriented research which focused on textual, grammatical and pragmatic equivalence, lexical semantics and semantic shifts, as in Anton Popović (1976), Joseph L. Malone (1988), Peter Newmark (1988) and Mona Baker (1992). Heidrun Gerzymisch-Arbogast and Klaus Mudersbach made a notable exception when they employed it in their works on thematic coherence in scientific and economic translations in order to identify the lines of meaning continuity as well as the explicit and implicit meaning patterns in the source text (ST) that a translator should leave intact in the target text (TT) (1989). In later works, Gerzymisch-Arbogast further emphasized the importance of detecting isotopic patterns in the textual analysis prior to any translation (1994) and proposed to use the isotopy as an “equivalence parameter in evaluating translated texts” (2001, 227). Christiane Nord rested on Gerzymisch-Arbogast’s connection between isotopic patterns and equivalence when she remarked that isotopy is “the crucial concept in the analysis of the subject matter” on account of its agency in the distribution and density of thematic concepts (2005, 96). More recently, Evangelos Kourdis made use of isotopies in order

to analyse how cultural elements in film and newspaper titles were translated from French into English and Greek. His conclusion is that “every act of translation can be approached through the lens of semantic isotopies in order to enhance a theoretical understanding of the cultural function of translation” (2012, 115), a thesis which he reiterated in Federico Zanettin and Chris Rundle’s *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Methodology* (2022, 146).

Is isotopy finally receiving some long overdue attention? The encounter between isotopy and Translation Studies would have certainly not surprised Eco. In 1998, Siri Nergaard and Eco contributed to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* with a chapter on *Semiotic Approaches* and contended: “Thus two texts, one of which is the translation of the other, can be compared on various grounds, including basic lexical choices, isotopies and sense levels, narrative structures, and the relations between ‘voices’ ” (1998, 219). And few years later, in *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, a hybrid of translation handbook and memoir that could have been titled “Portrait of the semiotician as a translator”, Eco questioned isotopies throughout the book in order to account for his choices in translation as well as those made by the translators of his own works (2003, 51, 129, 142, 169, 182, 359 and 392). What stands out in his instances is the focus on those isotopies within the ST that were either magnified or narcotized by translators in the TT. In this respect, Eco argued that, in selecting the semantic properties of sememes in order to establish one or more levels of coherence, the reader/translator is oriented by the dominant isotopies, presumably those featured more frequently – indexing more sememes – or showing up in key passages of the text. This followed his *Lector in fabula* where he had affirmed that “the text is a lazy device which prompts the reader to co-operate and work hard in order to fill the ‘not-said’ or ‘already-said’ gaps [...] and this implies a number of what current literature calls presuppositions” (2020, 36-37). Through this very process, “the reader recognizes the discursive topics and establish their isotopies. The data from their encyclopaedia gently flow in and fill the gaps left by the text” (265), a statement which resonates with core ideas of pragmatics, the same assumptions keeping the extremes touched by reader-oriented theories at bay. As underscored by Giglioli, the reader’s “sovereignty over the text is constitutional, not absolute” (2022, 122).

The role of encyclopaedic knowledge (Eco 2003, 31 and 45-47) in the process of thematization emphasizes the importance of philology in literary translation, especially in re-translations of canonical writers, as aptly implied by André Lefevere in his comments on Ralph Manheim’s re-translations of Brecht (Binelli 2023, 222-23). Evidently, the semantic and stylistic paradigms according to which a literary text has been decoded before being translated (or re-translated) strongly influence translators who, besides being aware of its critical fortune and socio-cultural value, often have academic as well as commercial reasons to not depart too much from the traditional reception and the expectations this has fed in the readership.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the goal of accommodating the source text to the interpretive frames usually associated with an author or their work in criticism or in the popular imagination may prompt the translator to thematize and even magnify what has already been standardized as relevant. This urgency, that I call “anxiety of thematization” in the wake of Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* (1997), was tackled by Giulio Sanseverino’s investigation of the isotopies in the Italian translations of *L’Étranger* – “irrelevance”, “unrelatedness”, “alienation”, “panic”, “intellect” – which seem to make provision for “the existentialist profile more commonly ascribed to Camus nowadays”, as though translators had detected in the ST “anticipations, perhaps only implicit [...] of features belonging

<sup>7</sup> Hence, distinct readerships (more or less highbrow, commercial, academic, etc.) are likely to account for different approaches by translators who accordingly show different levels of attention towards previous readings and critical reception.

to later, more important works”, and had thus deployed in their TT “lexicon and stylemes only subsequently acknowledged as characteristic of his writing” (2022, 68). Beside critical traditions and commercial considerations, also imagological processes may affect the translators’ alertness – or lack of alertness – to certain themes and frames on account of the cross-cultural dynamism of and between literary systems. Again, examples abound. For instance, while an Italian scholar suggested a Freudian thematization of several figurative isotopies in Dickinson’s poetry (Pagnini 1988, 181-214), at about the same time but with a different audience in mind, *Anne and I* was dubbed into Italian in a way that often narcotized Woody Allen’s playful, sometimes paranoid inclination to interpret and speak of events in Freudian terms.<sup>8</sup> Along similar lines, Chiara Polli’s examination of Italian translations of US underground comics in the 1970s and 1980s revealed patterns of magnification of the political frame and, conversely, of narcotization of sexual transgression, obtained by means of a trivialising superimposition of the scripts typical of *commedia sexy all’italiana*, a sort of slap-stick comedy replete with clichéd sexual innuendos (2025).

### *Conclusion: Isotopy as a Key to Literary Style and Literary Translation*

Translating through isotopies means thematizing by means of the linguistic resources and cognitive frames of a target culture. By tracing the iterativeness of semes that establish isotopic patterns and suggest pertinent thematizations, translation scholars can face the long-standing problem of locating semantic constancies within textual units longer than one or two sentences (Delisle 1988, 44). Moreover, according to Theo van Dijk, isotopies also help reveal the connections between discursive surface structures and deep semantic structures of such texts (1972). Undoubtedly, isotopies are observed to be the outcome of – and accordingly exert semantic pressure on – actualized lexemes as well as linguistic elements other than lexemes: syntactical, grammatical, rhetorical, orthographical, phonetic, discursive and so forth. All these elements participate in building up coherence and homogeneous readings while defining the style of literary texts. Paola Pugliatti and Romana Zacchi, for instance, analysed the dissemination of phonetic bundles, especially with /f/ and /l/, morpho-syntactical features and other manipulations of signifiers which substantiated the figurative isotopy of “fluidity” and its complex thematizations in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1983, 34-63). Similarly, Eco observed that a certain rhythm may “respect” and even “accentuate” a “funeral isotopy” (2003, 342) and several scholars pointed out how often phono-symbolisms are part of Poe’s gloomy atmospheres and iconically signify his shadowy contents. To provide one more example, I would suggest that non-lexical elements such as the inter-phrastic organization (with anacolutha, digressions, sense of accumulation and open-endedness), the interrogative, hypothetical and potential moods, and the rhetorical approximation of the incipit of *Tristram Shandy* all appear to belong to and corroborate some of the most evident isotopies (“uncertainty”, “hesitation”, “bafflement”) and even axiologies (“intelligible” versus “unfathomable”) in Sterne’s novel.

It is through the connections, or dependences, between expressive means and semantic structures that the idea of style fits in this paper. The outlook of style in both stylistics – “the perceived distinctive manner of expression in writing or speaking” (Wales 2001, 371) – and sociolinguistics – “an assemblage of design choices ... style marks out or indexes a social difference” (Coupland 2007, 1) is consistent with the basic assumption of systemic functional linguistics, and therefore of semiotics, that a distinction between form and content can only be abstract and ideal. Literary style can thus be conceived of as an ineffable and still persistent

<sup>8</sup> Personal ongoing research.

effect on readers resulting from the individuating and culturally oriented interaction of form and content whose *quidditas* can only intuitively be gauged by the abstract distance between textual actualisations and theoretical standard models.

This understanding of style is definitely no news to translators. As shown by Cicero's *De optimo genere oratorum* or St. Jerome's *Epistolae*, translators have always known that the expressive means employed in communication shape the meaning and character of the exchange. The concluding argument of this essay is that it is not isotopies in isolation, but rather the orchestrated network of relationships among them – relationships that can be hierarchical, disjunctive, derivative, of correspondence and embedment – and their thematizations that calibrate and thereby reveal the contribution of all components to the overall sense of a literary text, as well as the cognitive effect of the distinctive conflation of form and content we call style. In keeping with Jurij M. Lotman's notion of cultural text as “the most abstract model of reality from the position of a given culture”, one of many “variants of some invariable text” which amounts to “the worldview of a given culture” (1975, 100-101), isotopies and isotopic bundles are key to it, its style and its rapport to the historical development of genres and styles in society. In the understanding proposed in this paper, isotopies have historically mediated the development of conceptualisations and themes, their gradual silencing in the light of updated epistemic concerns, or their revisitations, sometimes parodic, due to the conflictual and asymmetric relations within the cultural universe of which literary texts are valuable mirrors and functions. And, more importantly, isotopies have always mediated the correspondences between what John R. Firth called “naked ideas” (Palmer 1968, 75) and the morphological, figurative, and narrative resources available or yet to be invented in order to represent them.

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