THE VISUAL *MESSAGE*

Cristina Camelia IGNATOVICI
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați

Abstract: Cultures, languages, colloquial ways of communication do not change overnight, but they do change. It is amazing how much of the lexicon specific to computer, mobile phone, internet, mass-media fields has been invading and influencing our language and culture in the last decade.
Words like googling, texting, viral, sms, site, etc. have become part of the common day Romanian communication, especially for the younger generation. This proves that languages and cultures can be enriched, or impoverished, by the contribution of a generation.
Modern times can be rightfully labeled as a period of prevailing image over word, mainly in its written form. Foucault's theory of dominant discourse, with its connection between the physical and discursive realities, the linguistic signs and their cultures, has probably never been so obviously necessary as during the 21st century.
Interesting enough, the motility of linguistic signs can be observed even in the transpositions, from the conservatory language into a contemporary one, of classical texts as it is the case of the Bible.
In The Message, Professor Eugene Peterson remains in the trends of his time, of the word – image, while transposing the formal Bible version into a colloquial one, in the simple, ordinary, common day English.
Therefore, the biblical text becomes both accessible to the inexperienced and to the theologian scholars alike and enjoyable, as if the reader found oneself seated in front of a large screen ready to unfold timeless truths uttered in a modern manner.

Keywords: physical reality, discursive reality, linguistic sign, socio-linguistics, the word-image

Semiotics, or rather the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, is a major aspect that needs to be considered when dealing with translations, their import and impact upon a language and culture.

It is the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, that makes a language susceptible to the changing influence of a culture, its canons and traditions, as several linguist scholars have already stressed it out.

Although the signifier may seem to be freely chosen, from the point of view of the linguistic community it is imposed rather than freely chosen because a language is always an inheritance from the past which its users have no choice but to accept. …Indeed, it is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and [it is] because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary. (Ferdinand de Saussure, 1983: 71, 72, 74; Ferdinand de Saussure 1974: 71, 74)

Alongside Ferdinand de Saussure, other linguist theoreticians, Rosalind Coward, John Ellis, Charles Sanders Peirce identify the conventionality of the linguistic sign and its subjectivity to dynamic change, as it is determined by the social, cultural conventions within a community.

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In short, a word is named in a certain way because it already existed a previous agreement on it, in accordance with the social and cultural canons of that community.

More than ever the present day society describes the daily, physical realities placing them under the authority and dominion of the image.

Laura E. Tanner's article, *Holding on to 9/11: The shifting grounds of materiality* depicts so well, not only the tragedy of a nation under attack, but also the difficulty of recording physical realities unaltered by the abounding images. The reporter Benjamin Wallace – Wells, finds himself in the impossibility of providing his viewer with a fresh, firsthand account, as his interviewers describe their experience in terms of already existing concept - images.

What did it look like? You know the movie *Independence Day*? It looked like that.
What did it feel like? The footage from war-torn countries? Bosnia. It looks like that. (Wallace-Wells qtd. in Tanner, *PMLA* 2012:70)

It is interesting to observe how, and to which level, this versatility of the language to adapt itself to cultures and societies has been influencing even classical texts as the Bible.

The Message Bible in Contemporary English

The most recent reading version of the Bible was written by the American professor Eugene Peterson. It took him ten years to bring the Hebrew version of the Old Testament and the Greek one, of the New Testament, into modern day English.

After forty years of interpreting the biblical message and providing a more contemporary translation for his students and fellow church people, Eugene Peterson decided to write a more colloquial version, especially for those who had never read the Bible and for those who became too familiar to find any attraction in its content anymore.

His primary goal was to capture the tone of the text and the original conversational feel of the Greek, in contemporary English… The first group was made up of those who hadn't read the Bible because it seemed too distant, irrelevant, and antiquated. The second group is made up of those who had read the Bible all their lives but now found it "old hat", so familiar that they were no longer startled by the truth of its message. (*The Message*, Navpress, 2002: 5)

Professor Peterson stresses the importance of a comprehensible, readable Bible version, so that the Word of God would be communicated in modern, colloquial words, efficiently used in every day conversations.

In the forward of *The Message* Bible it is written:

Language is always changing. When we hear something over and over again in the same way, we can become so familiar with it that the text loses its impact. *The Message* strives to help readers hear the living Word of God, the Bible, in a way that engages and intrigues us right where we are. *The Message* is designed to be read by contemporary people in the same way as the original koiné Greek and Hebrew manuscripts were savored by people thousands of years ago. (*The Message*, Navpress, 2002: 5, 6)

The purpose of *The Message* has never been that of replacing a Bible study version. Actually, the author himself warns against replacing the study versions of the Bible with his

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own, while he stresses the main goal of his work, that of providing an accessible, reading version of the Bible.

The goal of The Message is to engage people in the reading process and help them understand what they read. This is not a study Bible, but rather "a reading Bible." The verse numbers, which are not in the original documents, have been left out to facilitate easy and enjoyable reading. The original books of the Bible were not written in formal language. The Message tries to recapture the Word in the words we use today.

(*The Message*, Navpress, 2002: 5, 6)

The passage chosen for this paper is actually depicted by all four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, of John the Baptist answering the question of the Pharisees about his own identity. The record of the traditional Bible version is as follows:

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (NIV, Mark 1:6-11, 1985:1493).

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***The Message* version**	***Personal* translation**
11 The good news of Jesus Christ - the Message! - begins here, **2** following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you; He'll make the road smooth for you. **3** Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight! **4** John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. **5** People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. **6** John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey. **7** As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to **whom I'm a mere stagehand**, will change your life. I am baptizing you here, in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism – a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit – will change you from the inside out." (*The Message*, Navpress, 2002: 717)	**11** Vestea bună adusă de Isus Hristos – Mesajul! – începe aici, respectând întocmai scrierile profetului Isaia. Luati aminte: „Îmi voi trimite predicatorul înaintea voastră, el va netezi drumul. Tunet în deşert! Pregătiţi-vă pentru venirea Domnului! Neteziţi-vă drumul şi îndreptaţi-vă viaţa! Ioan Botezătorul a apărut în deşert, predicând botezul schimbării vieţii ce duce spre iertarea păcatelor. Oamenii veneau la el cu miile din Iudea şi Ierusalim şi, mărturisindu-şi păcatele, erau botezati în râul Iordan spre o noua viaţă. Ioan purta haină din păr de cămilă, prinsă la mijloc cu cingătoare de piele, mânca lăcuste şi miere sălbatică. Predica: „Urmează adevărata acţiune. Vedeta din rolul principal, faţă de care eu sunt un simplu băiat de scenă (maşinist), vă va schimba viaţa. Eu vă botez, în râu, renunțând la viaţa pământească, de jos, în schimbul celei de sus, cereşti. Botezul Domnului – sfânt, prin Duhul Sfânt – vă va schimba întru-totul, din interior spre exterior.

Context is not the main thing, but the only thing, it is the rule of the thumb for a better, overall understanding of any text and particularly of the biblical one. Therefore, in order to grasp a correct meaning of the text, the serious seeker should always strive to understand a passage of Scripture within both its immediate context and its general one.

Mark, the evangelist, starts up the registration of his record with a direct quotation from the book of the prophet Isaiah – whose scrolls were found perfectly conserved in the caves by the Dead Sea – one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. Isaiah wrote his book around seven hundred years before John and Christ's birth on earth, foreseeing Christ's work, death and resurrection for the salvation of mankind.

The voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the LORD, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. (NIV, *Isaiah 40:3*, Zondervan 1985: 1071)

It can be observed that, while the modern version of professor Peterson renders a more familiar meaning to the contemporary reader, there is a sense of loss in understanding John the Baptist and his ministry as God's messenger, rendered in *The Message* as a *mere stagehand*. Although John was describing himself in comparison with Christ, his cousin and his Creator, the concept of John as one sent out to speak of and from God seems to be lost in the modern version, while *the stagehand* has a more practical, hands on meaning.

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Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance Bible* is another excellent tool toward a better understanding of the biblical text, the researcher being able to study the words in their original language, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

SEC offers the English translation of the Hebrew terms from Isaiah 40:3 relating to John the Baptist.

H4397

מלאך mal'âk (*mal-awk'*)

From an unused root meaning to *despatch* as a deputy; a *messenger*; specifically of God, that is, an *angel* (also a prophet, priest or teacher): - ambassador, angel, king, messenger. (SEC, Hendrickson 2009)

H6437

פנה pânâh (*paw-naw'*)

A primitive root; to *turn*; by implication to *face*, that is, *appear*, *look*, etc.: - appear, at [even-] tide, behold, cast out, come on, ~ corner, dawning, empty, go away, lie, look, mark, pass away, prepare, regard, (have) respect (to), (re-) turn (aside, away, back, face, self), ~ right [early].

H7121

קרא qârâ' (*kaw-raw'*)

A primitive root (rather identical with H7122 through the idea of *accosting* a person met); to *call* out to (that is, properly *address* by name, but used in a wide variety of applications): - bewray [self], that are bidden, call (for, forth, self, upon), cry (unto), (be) famous, guest, invite, mention, (give) name, preach, (make) proclaim (-ation), pronounce, publish, read, renowned, say.

H3474

ישׁר yâshar (*yaw-shar'*)

A primitive root; to *be straight* or *even*; figuratively to *be* (causatively to *make*) *right*, *pleasant*, *prosperous:* - direct, fit, seem good (meet), + please (well), be (esteem, go) right (on), bring (look, make, take the) straight (way), be upright (-ly).

mes-il-law' From H5549; a *thoroughfare* (as *turnpiked*), literally or figuratively; specifically a *viaduct*, a *staircase:* - causeway, course, highway, path, terrace.

The Hebrew study of the words does offer the perspective of John the Baptist as both a voice and a doer, which could explain Professor Peterson's choice of describing him as a stagehand. Since in the Romanian target text, its literal translation (maşinist) has a negative connotation, of one prone to shrewd schemes, it seemed proper to the translator to use its Romanian description, the noun phrase a stage boy.

A word of caution needs to be addressed as one might truly think that John the Baptist was *merely a stagehand* indeed. It has to be stressed that, it is John calling himself such in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, while comparing himself with Jesus Christ, the Mesiah, *the star in this drama*. Yet, one should never mistake him for a simple, common citizen of this planet. In fact, Christ Himself bears testimony in the favour of John the Baptist:

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After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' *I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John*; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (NIV, *Luke 7:24 – 28*, Zondervan 1985:1510)

A twofold conclusion could be drawn from paralleling the traditional and the contemporary biblical texts, that even the latter sounds better, closer to the daily conversational, common language it could not exist in the absence of the first one. And, once again, the context is indeed not the main thing but the only thing in understanding the biblical text. Context should never be taken lightly, nor for granted, but always as the best resource for a most comprehensive, wholistic, understanding of any text, and so much more of the classics!

Sebastian's words from *Cum am ajuns huligan*, an apology written in defense of his book *De două mii de ani*, reflect probably in the best way, even 80 years later since their recording, the above conclusion:

Erase one word, suppress a parenthesis, misplace a coma and - behold: the unfortunate paper fallen into your hands says exactly what you have intended from the beginning. ...The most dangerous anti-Semitic weapon has never been the gun, or the stone, but a completely different one: *the quote*! (Sebastian, Humanitas, 2006: 20, *my translation*)

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