INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION IN THE THEATRE: CREATING A STAGE PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT: The standard way of creating a stage production is to take a written source text (the play) and transfer it to the stage through visual and auditory means. This is, essentially, an act of intersemiotic translation although, in the theatre, the "languages" of the target text are neither clearly defined nor limited. This article explores the function of the playtext in the theatre as the source of both the stage production and the verbalised meaning-making system that constitutes a performance. The objective is to reconstrue the various participants in the process as translators, analysing the ways in which interlingual and intersemiotic translation are comparable.
KEYWORDS: Interlingual Translation, Intersemiotic Translation, Drama Translation, Theatre Translation, Dominant, Stage Production

1. Introduction

Staging a play for performance in a theatre is a collective art form. People from very different professional fields are involved in the creation of a stage production, each with their own area of responsibility and expertise but collaborating together: the stage director is conditioned by the intent of the playwright, actors are conditioned by the concept of the director, etc (Lotman, 2006, pp. 195-196).

Theatrical signs and sign systems have been categorised differently since the initial establishment of theatrical semiotics in the 1930s (Elam, 1980, pp. 4-5). For example, the German performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992, pp. 14-17) divided theatrical signs into 14 categories covering music and other sounds, the different expressive means of actors, and the physical appearance of performers and the stage (ibid.)[1]. However, Fischer-Lichte's categorisation, though thorough, is today a little dated, especially in the light of the technological changes of the last decades. Today, for example, productions often include a video background or even live filming.

Despite such developments, the classic form of staging still involves, for the most part, building the entire production on a certain source text, i.e. a play or dramatisation.[2] Each participant in the process bases their personal vision on the initial ideas of the playwright, which will then be adapted according to the context, making it possible for the director, actors, costume designers and other participants to generate a variety of meanings (Birch, 1991, pp. 7-8). Each participant expresses their understanding with the

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[1] Fischer-Lichte's complete list is as follows: sounds, music, linguistic signs, paralinguistic signs, mimic signs, gestural signs, proxemic signs, mask, hair, costume, stage conception, stage decoration, props and lighting (1992, p. 15).

[2] This article deliberately leaves out "non-traditional" forms of creating a stage production, such as the 'devising method', formerly called 'collective creation', when a troupe begins rehearsing without a fixed playtext and creates the final dialogue during that process (see, for example, Epner, 2013, p. 119).

means available to them in their personal area of responsibility, namely the meaning-making or sign system that they operate with.

From this viewpoint, we can extend the notion of "translation" to every participant in the process of staging a play since each one of them transfers a meaning found in the source text to a target text, which is intersemiotic translation as defined by Roman Jakobson (1959). The central component of any translation is the text. In semiotic terms, 'text' is not necessarily viewed as a written line of sentences but rather any materialisation of a narrative or meaning that emerges from the need "to cast a structural framework on a portion of reality, thus turning it into a text" (Leone, 2023, p. 118). In this sense, the entire stage production (with or without spoken words) is the target text of a process of intersemiotic translation. In the context of this article, however, 'text' is used predominantly to refer to the written playtext[3] that is the basis for all subsequent intersemiotic translations of a stage production, and the enunciation of words by actors on stage.

In the theatre, the playtext assumes a dual role: as a work of literature, it is holistic and self-contained, but as a text spoken by actors, it becomes only one of the several verbal and non-verbal sign-systems that constitute a performance (Ubersfeld, 1999, p. 14; Lotman, 2006, p. 194). The main objective of this article is to analyse to what extent and in what terms the participants in the process of staging a play can be considered translators. In sections three and four, we will analyse the way that the general structure of (interlingual) translation applies to intersemiotic translation as executed by the stage director and actors respectively.

2. Theoretical framework

Translators are simultaneously meaning-makers and meaning-takers, who "receive and interpret the source text as a whole but communicate that interpretation forward by compiling a new complex of signs to be included in a target text, which is then received as a whole by the target audience" (Haapaniemi, 2023, pp. 14-15). The craft and significance of translation has been viewed in different ways throughout history but contemporary views incline toward the notion that a translation involves "working *alongside* an original work, extrapolating the work in oblique fashion and always maintaining semiotic distance and creative tension with it" (Lee, 2022). This analysis is eminently applicable to the process by means of which a dramatic performance is built out of an initial playtext.

When we are speaking of translation in the context of the theatre, especially if we regard it as something that goes beyond a language-based activity, we should make a terminological distinction between drama translation and theatre translation. In this article, I will use *drama translation* to signify interlingual translation, the act of translating a written play from one language to another, and *theatre translation* to signify

[3] Different authors refer to this as the script or dramatic script (see, for example, terminological overview by Tarantini, 2021, p. 19).

intersemiotic translation, the act of transferring the ideas of a playwright to the other sign systems that comprise the stage production.[4]

Any kind of translation is dependent on the translator's perception of the focal points of the source text, something on which to build the translation. As such, it is not so much a constraint (as articulated by Lefevere, 1985; or Bennett, 2007) as the ground for successive creative acts. Consequently, the outcome of theatre translation (i.e. the target text) depends on a number of factors, including external circumstances and "the translator's psycho-physiological condition at a particular point in time and in the sociocultural habitus in which they are embedded" (Lee, 2022).

Take, for example, the act of dramatizing and staging a well-known literary work like *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas. The playwright or dramaturg in charge of dramatizing the novel must make a choice about which characters, scenes, and dialogues to display explicitly and which can be compensated through other meaning-making systems (for example, long descriptions of the scenery can be illustrated by the set design; these do not need to be verbalised by actors). This is an act of translation in itself since the dramaturg will utilise the same kinds of internal and external factors as the literary translator (such as the surrounding circumstances, media resources, and personal psycho-physiological conditions). The person that dramatizes a well-known novel like this will also take account of the fact that the majority of the audience is probably familiar with the work and build on what spectators already know.

As for the scenic designer, they will search the novel for descriptions of scenery and transfer these to the non-verbal sign system of the set design and decorations. They will also make choices between what to display explicitly and what can be compensated by other resources. The costume designer, for their part, may try to find a balance between reproducing the authentic costumes of 17th century France while also considering that actors must be able to move freely or engage in sword fighting scenes. On the other hand, if the stage director decides to create a modern version of the play, the costume designer may still choose to include some elements that serve as references to the original era of the story. All the examples described here illustrate that the decision of what to preserve and what to adjust or exclude essentially rests on the stage director's interpretation of the original work. And as we will see, this applies to all types of theatre translation, regardless of the target sign system.

The general function of the theatre is to create meaning under specific conditions and in a specific manner through the internal code of the theatre, which regulates "(1) which material creations are to apply as vehicles of meaning – in other words, as theatrical signs; (2) in what way and under what conditions these signs can be combined selectively with one another; and (3) which meanings can be attributed to these signs […]" (Fischer-

[4] This distinction does not correspond with the terms used by other translation and theatre scholars. A detailed overview is given by Tarantini (2021, p. 18), who also notes that terminological issues arise not only from differentiating between interlingual and intersemiotic translation, but already from whether an interlingual translation is intended for page or stage.

Lichte, 1992, p. 10) The target text of theatre translation is the stage production in all its complexity and multi-level meaning-making systems.

3. The playtext

A great deal of attention has already been given to drama translation in the interlingual sense, from Susan Bassnett's pioneering attempts to find a way through the labyrinth (1985, 1991, 2001) to more recent works by Sirkku Aaltonen (1996, 2008, 2010), David Johnston (2000, 2004, 2011), Eva Espasa (2000, 2013), and Cristina Marinetti (2013a, 2013b, 2018), among others. We will not be exploring the issues of performability, speakability and the craft of interlingual drama translation in much detail here. Instead, we are more concerned with the extent to which a dramatic text can itself be considered a translation.

Literature is also a type of a translational phenomenon in the sense that literary works often reproduce classic or religious narratives. As Allen (2000, p. 67) puts it, "the text not only sets going a plurality of meanings but is also woven out of numerous discourses and spun from already existent meaning." As an example, we might consider the plays that are regarded in Estonian theatre history as first Estonian-language plays, produced from 1865 and onwards. Inevitably, these were loose adaptations of German dramatic works, translated from German to Estonian and adjusted to local circumstances that the audience could relate with. From this viewpoint, literature is a permanent process of iteration in which "what is iteratively accreted is not a vast collection of identical units or perfect clones of the same thing; rather, every (re)iteration of 'the same' introduces some slight difference or deviation" (ibid., p. 110).

Writers and playwrights are also engaged in their own personal acts of translation. They have their childhood, education, work experience, reading and theatre background, personal preferences and experiences, cultural, societal and political environment, etc, all of which directly or indirectly influence the finished play. This is a sort of experiential translation in the sense that the writer "translates" aspects of his or her life that are relevant to the play.

Regardless of whether a play is staged in the original language or in a translated version, when the participants of the stage production start transferring it to the stage, they are engaging in an act of intersemiotic translation: the ideas in the written text are translated into different sign systems and include a number of complementary details (Lotman, 2006, p. 20). Such details, or theatrical signs, are added on all different levels, from the colour of the details on costumes to the lighting changes and musical background of the stage production. For example, when Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* was staged in Estonia in 2016, the stage director Ain Mäeots chose the entire playlist of pop hits from 1990s to play in the background of the Coverlies' party in the final scene, thus stressing the era of the events.

A theatrical sign, as defined by Fischer-Lichte consists of three dimensions: the syntactic dimension, or the relation of the sign to other signs; the semantic dimension, or

the relation of the sign to the object that it designates; and the pragmatic dimension, or the relation of the sign to its user (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p. 2). This three-dimensionality of the theatrical sign serves two functions. First, it enables all participants in the process of staging to make subjective conclusions about the meanings embedded in the text, which will in turn affect the outcome of the stage production. Second, it allows spectators to make their own subjective meanings and conclusions about the performance that they see and its story-world.

The verbal enunciation of the playtext (including actors' characteristic voice timbres, speech rhythms, pitch and intonation, etc.) is also a theatrical sign since in a performance, cooperating with other signs and contributing to new meaning-making processes.

4. Stage director as a translator

The starting point of the creative process of staging a play can vary greatly: some directors carry a play with them for years or even decades until they feel like it is the right time; some fulfil an order (for example, staging something in celebration of a renowned actor's birthday); some are introduced to a contemporary play by the dramaturge of the theatre, etc. The possibilities are endless and often rely on conditions that have less to do with the play and more to do with the director's internal world or external conditions.

The stage director is engaged in a translational act, similar to that of a playwright as discussed earlier, in that their personal experiences, cultural background, social circumstances and other conditions directly or indirectly affect the finished stage production. What is different is the "matter of expression" as formulated by Ubersfeld (1999, p. 5).

In this form of intersemiotic translation, the director-translator has a lot of space to adjust, modify, complement, accentuate, or even erase details of the story or nuances that are not easily accommodated to the needs of the production or their personal vision. The stage director focuses on the elements of the playtext that they consider to be most central to the story. Once this has been established, the less significant details may be included, modified or omitted as they see fit. Even if the stage director tries to pursue an outcome that is maximally faithful to the source text, their work still depends on the available resources, which include not only material resources like money, stage space and scenery, but also cultural resources like the audience's expectations, societal conditions, theatrical traditions, etc. The outcome of the translating act is always contingent on the surrounding circumstances, including the availability and accessibility of media resources (Lee, 2022). Therefore, all decisions made by the stage director ultimately serve the stage production's integrity and success.

The stage director can utilise any kind of meaning-making systems that they choose. Visual and auditory means are quite standard in contemporary theatre, i.e. costumes and make-up, musical background, lighting design, etc. But it is common for stage directors to push the boundaries. For example, in the 1995 production of *The Three Musketeers* in Estonia, the stage director Elmo Nüganen brought actual horses onto the stage and

organised riding lessons for the four leading actors. He also had the courtyard of the Tallinn City Theatre complex, which had until then been a duck pond, reconstructed to make it into a complete open-air stage (the construction of which was not complete until the night before the premiere). And for the third act of the production (Milady's imprisonment, escape, and the culmination of the story), the entire audience was directed from their seats in the open air to the fourth floor of the theatre where there used to be an attic. Innovations at the hands of stage directors are not limited to using live animals or expanding the concept of the stage: basically, a stage director can use whatever they think can get their interpretation across best.

All such theatrical signs are coordinated in the *mise-en-scène*, defined by Pavis (1992, p.132) as the situation of enunciation. The *mise-en-scène* is a complex of theatrical signs and their interaction. Each sign carries a meaning which can change if the sign is (a) inserted into a different semiotic context; (b) related to something else; or (c) used by another user (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p. 2). Theatrical signs can also carry different meanings for the characters on stage and the audience. This is another aspect of the theatre that a stage director can utilise. Sometimes they need the audience to know less than some of the characters (for example, in classic detective stories), and sometimes, they need the audience to know more (which is often the case in comedies). Thus, the stage director is able to manipulate the audience with the amount of information they are prepared to share. This brings us to the concept of control. The stage director has almost complete control over the *means* of getting their own or the author's ideas across, but they lose control when it comes to the *execution*.

The workload that the stage director assumes depends on their personal preferences. However, the more they delegate different assignments, the more they lose control of the whole vision. Even if the stage director is well familiar with the work of the other professionals involved in the staging process (set designer, costume designer, etc.), each new person involved is another translator, an additional voice. And the outcome of the stage production is the result of each of these different voices and visions. Whatever decisions a stage director makes, the interrelations between theatrical signs and their dynamics will start to fall into place during performances and in interaction with the audience. The stage director has no choice but to accept that their creation is a living organism that will always escape their control to some extent.

The most significant element of a stage production that is out of the control of the stage director is also the central element of any performance: the actor. Since actors occupy such an important part of a production and are an interesting phenomenon to explore separately, we will dedicate the final section of this article to them.

5. Actors as translators

It is the actors that present the characters of the play to the audience. Their act of intersemiotic translation occurs in an agreed time and place where they must act in a specific way and have a specific appearance (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p. 13). The means for

actors to create an intersemiotic target text are (1) their thinking process, (2) their bodily expression, (3) their physical appearance, and (4) verbalisation. Let's look at each of these separately.

The most widely used system of acting in contemporary Western theatre is the Stanislavski system[5] (Whyman, 2008, p. x; Elsam, 2006, p. x) developed by the Russian stage director and acting teacher Konstantin Stanislavski. He divided the process of creating a character into six stages. In the first stage, an actor gets acquainted with the play; in the second stage, they look for the psychological material needed to play the character from within themselves as well as the text; in the third stage, the actor will create an outline of the character; and only in the fourth stage will they actually start to physically embody the character (Mitter, 1992, p. 11). The fifth and sixth stages have to do with interaction with partners, the handling of external devices (props), and preparing for performance by generating a creative impulse within themselves, even when the choreographed movements and rehearsed encounters have started to feel mechanised. But one of the key words that is constantly stressed in all stages of creating a character is *embodiment*. For a plausible performance, actors adopt the mentality of their character and process it through their bodies. According to the Stanislavski system, this is the most important aspect of creating a character.

This process is analogous to that often used by interlingual translators trying to acquire a sense of the fictional world that they wish to deliver in translation. For example, Estonian translator Katrin Kaugver has said:

> Each text is new, everything is strange. This has allowed me to dive into worlds that I would have never known to exist, let alone discover. And each one of these worlds has complemented me in some ways: a fresh view on things, a location that I visited, the music that I listened to. If you focus on translating, you enter a character like an actor does; you are almost living the life of a character […] (Sakova, 2022, p. 13).

Trying to fathom the thinking process of the writer or grasp the characters of the play is common in the act of translation, and this applies to both interlingual and intersemiotic (theatre) translation. For actors, if the thinking process is in place, it will be bodily expressed. Actors will seek characteristic ways for their characters to move; there may be some specific trait like hunching or limping, or there might be smaller details like the motion of the head when something is bothering the character or raising one eyebrow or the corner of the mouth. Whichever detail the actor feels will fit the character, they will have found it by sensing the source text and trying to translate it with the means available to him or her.

[5] Although the Stanislavski system is very common in Western theatre and film, it is by no means the only system that an actor can use. There are a number of alternative approaches, for example, those developed by Bertolt Brecht or Jerzy Grotowski, and there are also experimental approaches that knowingly refrain from submitting to any fixed systems.

Bodily expression is supported by the actors' physical appearance. This, of course, depends more on the vision of the costume designer and hair and make-up department. However, as theatre is largely a visual art form, the physical appearance of actors/characters is also very important for the integrity of the stage production.

The fourth means of creating a character is speaking their words. According to the Stanislavski system, verbalisation can begin only when the thinking process of the characters and the motives behind their actions are properly established because spoken words are the result of thought and action (Karusoo, 2020, p. 33). Adjusting the tone, rhythm, volume, or other aspects of their voice is one way for actors to convey their character's thoughts and emotions to the audience. Stanislavski wrote: "Remain still, wipe away the tears that roll down your cheeks, control yourself so as not to burst into tears openly, and speak in a barely audible voice, the way we speak of our dearest and most secret things" (2010, p. 39). What this description entails is that lowering one's voice is a way of illustrating intimacy and vulnerability, that is, of translating certain emotions and states of mind.

Speaking the words of others as if they were one's own requires extensive focusing, and can often be complicated, especially in the early stages of rehearsals. According to the Stanislavski method, actors are encouraged to reformulate the words of the playwright to make the meaning more understandable to themselves, only turning back to the author's original words when the thought process has become clear. "We must fight hard against vocal tension and clichés so that voice, speech and inflexions are still fully dependent on inner feeling and are its direct, precise servant" (Stanislavski, 2010, p. 185). The use of the voice and enunciation of words is thus a way of translating the character's internal world into external expression, something that is achieved by first making sense of the internal world by paraphrasing the writer's words.

As we can see, actors working within the Stanislavski system are encouraged to engage in *intralingual translation*, at least in rehearsals or on a mental level, much in the way that writers and interlingual translators do, as discussed earlier. But the process of portraying a character on stage is a constant intersemiotic translation because actors search for the meaning behind a playwright's words and start looking for ways to embody that meaning with all the mental and physical resources available to them. To this extent, it is an experiential process.

6. Conclusion

Theatre as an art form is the result of a number of multi-level acts of translation, the dominant one being intersemiotic. A performance utilises different theatrical signs to transmit a particular interpretation of a (usually written) source text to the audience.

All intersemiotic acts of translation in the theatre are directly or indirectly based on a source text, usually a playscript. The people involved in the process of staging a play will read the playscript and transfer it through their own perception to the sign system that they operate with. All such sign systems will generate meanings both separately and in

interaction with each other. Intersemiotic theatre translation therefore illustrates how a translation is not necessarily the result of faithfully reproducing an author's thoughts but rather an independent work that operates alongside the original, as observed by Lee (2022, above). The number of meaning-making operations used in a stage production is limitless. The final result is in the hands of the stage director who can utilise any kind of resources at hand. This requires a skilful and innovative approach to the source text as well as to the target text, i.e. the production.

However, even though the stage director is responsible for the end result of the stage production, they are not in total control. A production that results from the efforts of a number of people is a living organism which will adapt and change in accordance with the varying micro-circumstances of the individual performance. As we have seen, multiple acts of translation are present in any performance, whether intralingual, interlingual or intersemiotic. Indeed, the various forms of intersemiotic or experiential translation present in the stage production are very similar to classic interlingual translation (or 'translation proper', as Jakobson [1959] called it) in the sense that all involve interpreting the source text in the light of a particular agenda, and then trying to convey these perceptions using the various resources available to them.

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