
Beyond the Script: Unveiling the Complexities of Theatrical Translation

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Abstract:

Theatrical texts, with their emphasis on performance and nuanced language, pose unique challenges for translators. This is especially true for works by renowned playwrights like William Shakespeare. This exploration delves into the intricate relationship between theatrical texts and their translation within the context of theatre's rich history and diverse genres (tragedy, comedy, poetic play). By examining the art of theatre – its historical development, core concept (drama), and influential genres – the study establishes a foundation for understanding theatrical texts. It then delves into the technical characteristics of a play, including composition guidelines and key elements like dialogue, plot, and figurative language. The focus then shifts to the intricate link between theatrical texts and translation. The abstract explores the translation process and the challenges translators face. It highlights specific areas of concern, such as the potential confusion between literal translation and capturing the essence of the original text, and the importance of considering different linguistic levels during the translation process.

Keywords: Theatrical translation; Drama; Play; Performance; Intercultural communication

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ملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث العلاقة المعقدة بين النصوص المسرحية وترجمتها، وذلك في سياق التاريخ الغني للمسرح وأنواعه المتنوعة (المأساة، الكوميديا، المسرحية الشعرية). من خلال فحص فن المسرح، بما في ذلك تطوره التاريخي، ومفهومه الأساسي (الدراما)، والأنواع المؤثرة، ينشئ البحث أساساً لفهم النصوص المسرحية ثم يتعمق في الخصائص الفنية للمسرحية، مناقشاً عناصرها الرئيسية مثل أسلوب الحوار، الحبكة، والصور المجازية. بعد ذلك ينتقل التركيز إلى الرابط المعقد بين النصوص المسرحية والترجمة لاستكشاف عملية الترجمة والتحديات التي يواجهها المترجم مسلطاً الضوء على مجالات محددة مثل: تقصي حيرة المترجم بين الترجمة الحرفية والتقاط جوهر النص الأصلي وكيفية نقله إلى لغة أخرى أو بالأحرى إلى مزاج شعب آخر. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تحسين فهم العلاقة بين النص المسرحي والترجمة بالإضافة إلى مساعدة المترجم المسرحي على ترجمة النصوص المسرحية بشكل أفضل.

كلمات مفتاحية: الترجمة، المسرحية، الدراما، العرض المسرحي، التواصل بين الثقافات.

1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world where the captivating words of William Shakespeare, the powerful emotions of ancient Greek tragedies, and the witty banter of classic comedies transcend language barriers. This is the magic of theatrical translation, an art form that breathes life into plays for audiences across cultures and throughout time.

Translating plays goes beyond simply converting words from one language to another. It's a delicate dance that demands a deep understanding of the playwright's vision, the cultural context of the original work, and the expectations of the target audience. Skilled translators are not just language experts ; they are

cultural ambassadors who bridge the gap between different worlds, ensuring that the magic of theatre resonates with diverse audiences for generations to come.

This exploration delves into the intricate world of theatrical translation. We'll begin by unveiling the captivating art of theatre itself, examining its historical development and core elements. Then, we'll delve into the unique characteristics of a play, the building blocks that bring a story to life on stage. With this foundation in place, we'll shift our focus to the intricate link between theatrical texts and translation. We'll explore the challenges translators face, the various strategies employed to bridge the gap between languages, and the importance of capturing the essence of the original play.

2. Theatre's Roots: From Rituals to Renowned Playwrights

Theatre, a powerful art form with a long history, delves into the complexities of human emotions, relationships, and social issues. As Abdel Hamid Salam (1992 :19) suggests, theatre is a creative and intellectual collaboration that allows for freedom of expression. It comes alive through live performances that can deeply impact audiences on a physical, mental, and emotional level.

Theatre's origins are linked to religious celebrations. Ancient Egyptians held festivals honoring the Nile River, while Greeks celebrated fertility and thanked their gods during spring festivals. These celebrations initially featured music and dance, but a turning point came with the introduction of specifically written lyrics for the occasion. Performances evolved beyond dance, incorporating spoken elements with individual actors joining the traditional chorus. Playwriting competitions further fueled theatrical development, leading to a wider variety of theatrical presentations.

Greece became a breeding ground for dramatic literature. Renowned tragedians like Sophocles (famous for "Oedipus Rex") and Euripides (known for "Medea") explored profound themes. Comedy also flourished with playwrights like Aristot-

phanes (think "Lysistrata"). Roman playwrights like Plautus drew inspiration from their Greek counterparts, adapting comedies for Roman audiences.

3. Drama: A Performance-Driven Story

Drama is more than just words on a page; it's a vibrant art form that unfolds through performance. Unlike a traditional story, drama thrives on its embodiment by actors in front of a live audience. This live aspect is crucial, as the goal is to elicit emotions and establish a deeper connection with viewers.

Scholars have delved into the unique qualities that distinguish drama. Some, like Northrop Frye (1972 :200), view drama, particularly tragedy, as a bridge between idealized and realistic portrayals. Comedies, in contrast, often offer a lighter and more grounded perspective. Others, like Magdy Wahba (1974:121), define drama more broadly as a serious play that delves into real-life issues and resonates with the audience.

Ibrahim Hamadeh (1971:259-260) emphasizes that drama is a "performance-driven creation," crafted specifically for the stage. He highlights the importance of dialogue, individual acting, and even mime in conveying the story. This focus on performance sets drama apart from a passive reading experience. The success of a play hinges on a carefully orchestrated interplay of various elements, including lighting, sound, movement, and the actors' ability to forge a connection with the audience.

Furthermore, scholars like Thornton Wilder (1941) underscore the collaborative nature of drama. Each participant plays a vital role in bringing the story to life. The playwright shoulders the responsibility of crafting a cohesive narrative with clear themes and ideas. Plays, like Shakespeare's masterful tragedies, offer a "social and psychological exploration of human experience" within a defined historical or cultural context.

4. Unveiling the Many Faces of Drama: Tragedy, Comedy, and Poetic Expression

4.1. The Power and Catharsis of Tragedy

Drama encompasses diverse forms, each revealing a unique perspective on human experience. This exploration delves into tragedy, a prominent genre with a profound impact. Building upon Aristotle's influential ideas (1953), tragedy can be understood as a reflection of a significant and complete action, brought to life through performance rather than mere narration. Here, language and structure play a crucial role in evoking emotions of empathy and fear. Ultimately, tragedy aims for a catharsis, a cleansing or release of these powerful emotions within the audience.

Greek tragedies often explored the darker aspects of the human condition. They addressed how even those with high standing and ambition are vulnerable to misfortune. These downfalls could be triggered by forces beyond their control, like fate or the gods, or by internal conflicts like guilt or moral flaws. These plays commonly culminated in the protagonist's demise, following a structured artistic framework.

A distinctive feature of Greek tragedy was the presence of a chorus and a focus on maintaining the three unities of time, place, and action. Often, stories were drawn from established myths and legends, making the events themselves familiar. The audience's attention shifted from the specifics of the plot towards the consequences and deeper meaning conveyed through the tragedy.

4.2. Comedy: A Lighter Perspective

Comedy, a descendant of ancient Greek theatre, provides a lighthearted and sometimes satirical counterpoint to the seriousness of tragedy. Comedies typically feature light-hearted situations and characters, culminating in a satisfying

resolution for both the characters and the audience. Unlike tragedies, comedies often address social issues through a more accessible and humorous lens. Witty dialogue, relatable characters, and cleverly constructed predicaments all contribute to the comedic effect.

However, comedies are often more tied to their specific cultural and social context compared to timeless tragedies. This can make them less relatable to audiences from different eras.

4.3. Poetry's Enduring Role in Theatre

Poetry has played a significant role in theatre since its inception, even predating the use of prose. Aristotle himself valued the use of poetry in drama, viewing it as a reflection of human actions. From ancient times, poetry has served as a powerful tool for depicting the internal and external struggles of humanity.

Even in plays written primarily in prose, playwrights harness the power of expressive language to craft dialogue. Sentences imbued with rhythm and structure elevate the theatrical experience by offering a deeper look into the characters' thoughts and inner world.

T.S. Eliot (1951) notes a movement towards realism in theatre that aimed to minimize the use of poetry. However, even playwrights like Ibsen and Chekhov, considered pioneers of realism, integrated elements of poetic language within their prose works. Expressionist drama further emphasized the connection between the unconscious mind and reality through dramatic situations. Playwright Bertolt Brecht employed a unique style, incorporating both prose and poetic elements within his plays.

It's important to distinguish between theatrical poetry and lyrical poetry. Ghoneimi Hilal (1973) outlines the key features of theatrical poetry:

- Spoken on stage, it's a dialogue meant for performance, not simply imagery to invoke emotions.
- It avoids transporting the audience to a distant past.
- It utilizes clear, concise language, free from excessive complexity or lyrical imagery.

In essence, theatrical poetry pushes the boundaries of prose to create powerful dialogue. The spoken word takes on a rhythmic quality and depth that resonates with the audience.

Finally, T.S. Eliot emphasizes that a truly successful "poetic play" doesn't simply add poetry as an ornament. Instead, the play's structure itself is infused with poetic elements, culminating in the playwright's most powerful words being brought to life through performance.

5. Unveiling the Play's Blueprint: Key Technical Elements

A play's meaning and impact are meticulously crafted through a combination of essential elements. Let's delve into some of these building blocks that bring a play to life:

5.1 Dialogue:

At its core, a play unfolds through meticulously crafted conversations. Unlike a narrated story, plays rely on dialogue to reveal information that might otherwise be conveyed through elaborate sets or inner monologues. While plays share similarities with stories in their use of plot, characters, and themes, dialogue becomes the driving force, pushing the narrative forward through character interactions. Playwright Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1952:47) emphasizes the importance of focused and engaging dialogue, comparing it to poetry where every word carries weight.

5.2. Plot:

By its very nature, theatre reflects the complexities of life. Playwrights weave interactions between characters into dynamic plots with a clear structure. Consider Shakespeare's "Hamlet." The play doesn't simply introduce Hamlet as a prince; it portrays him as a multifaceted individual with flaws and strengths. These elements contribute to defining the plot and the deeper meaning of the play.

5.3. Imagery:

Vivid imagery, created using metaphors and other figures of speech, brings plays to life. This imagery enriches the atmosphere and strengthens the artistic and emotional impact. D.G. James (1963:114-115) defines poetic imagination as the ability to conjure sensory experiences or visualize things beyond the literal. Dialogue becomes the foundation for understanding both the plot and the characters' motivations. It shapes the atmosphere, drawing the audience into the world onstage. Bradley illustrates this by pointing to the use of dramatic irony in Sophocles' plays, where characters speak with a hidden meaning understood by the audience, hinting at future events while remaining oblivious to those onstage.

Ultimately, a play's success hinges on the interplay between compelling dialogue and evocative imagery. Together, they create a rich tapestry, where imagination and poetic language intertwine with the audience's emotions throughout the performance.

6. Challenges and Considerations in Translating Plays

Translating plays throws a unique curveball at translators compared to novels or poems. Playwrights themselves acknowledge the complexity of the art form. Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1952:142-143) likens a play to a complex puzzle, requiring careful attention to unlock its full potential. Similarly, translating a play means navigating a maze of limitations and demands that restrict the translator's freedom.

Plays are a unique blend of written word and live performance. While the text can be read silently or aloud, the true magic happens onstage. Here, a combination of audio and visual elements takes center stage, with spoken dialogue playing a crucial role. Gaperin (1977:27) highlights the power of the human voice – it can convey subtle nuances that written words on a page simply cannot. A change in pitch, melody, or emphasis can drastically alter the emotional weight of a line.

Theatrical language prioritizes clarity and ease of delivery. Playwrights aim for dialogue that sounds natural and complements the actors' movements. Imagine

spoken words clashing with the actor's portrayal – laughter erupting during a dramatic scene!

Redouane (1985) highlights two crucial aspects of translating plays: time (duration) and space (staging). Unlike stories, plays rely heavily on action and live performance to showcase characters and events. The written text is merely one element. Playwrights are restricted by both time and space, requiring them to be economical with characters and laser-focused on the central event. This presents a unique challenge for translators:

Balancing Readability and Performance: Translators must decide: prioritize readability for someone who might only read the play, or prioritize a successful stage performance? And further, for whom is this performance?

Holistic Communication: Translation goes beyond simply converting words. Translators must consider the entire theatrical experience. They need to ensure smooth communication between author, director, characters, actors, and ultimately, the audience. This necessitates delivering clear dialogue that faithfully captures voices, rhythm, and tone

7. The Theatrical Translator: Between Literal Fidelity and Balancing Audience Impact

Translating a play goes beyond a simple word-for-word substitution. It's a delicate dance that requires the translator to become one with the original text, grasping its meaning, its emotional core, and its "local spirit." A successful translation doesn't just convey what a character says, it reveals why they say it. Imagine a play like "The Committed One," where a line might be a passionate plea for a cause the playwright deeply cares about. In a psychological drama, dialogue unveils the characters' personalities. A skilled translator must grasp these subtleties and translate accordingly.

To truly excel, a theatrical translator must inhabit the playwright's world and understand the essence of theatre. Ghoneimi Hilal (1963) compares it to an

Aristotelian "real simulation," emphasizing the need for the translator to connect with the playwright's vision.

Since the translated text is meant to be spoken aloud, natural-sounding dialogue is paramount. Sentences must flow effortlessly for actors, be clear for the audience, and seamlessly integrate into the stage production. This can involve collaboration between the translator, author, and director to create a cohesive and aesthetically pleasing theatrical experience.

An actor's stage presence differs from everyday life, and the audience only hears the dialogue once. The translator must keep this in mind. Dialogue isn't a collection of isolated sentences; it's a unified whole with its own rhythm, ideas, and structure. Each sentence is a note in the play's harmonious melody.

The challenge becomes even greater with plays written in verse, like Shakespeare's works. Poetry relies on specific aesthetics and a denser, more evocative language. Capturing this essence in another language requires a skill akin to elaborating on prose itself.

Translating plays requires a delicate balancing act: staying true to the original text while making it relevant for a new audience. There's a healthy tension between literal translation, focused on word-for-word accuracy, and creative adaptation, prioritizing audience understanding.

Those with a literary background might favor a more creative approach, while linguists might prioritize strict accuracy. However, both perspectives can be valuable. Meschonic (1985 :55) argues that a purely literal translation can miss the mark. He highlights the difference between the spoken word (signifier) and the concept it represents (signified). A strictly literal approach might capture sentence structure but miss the play's true meaning. Meschonic suggests aiming for "equivalence," conveying the overall message and relationships between elements in the original play.

On the other hand, excessive adaptation can create a "local flavor" that ties the play to a specific audience and time period, potentially losing the original's litera-

ry merit. Abu Al-Hassan Abdel Hamid Salam (1993) defines quotation as borrowing themes or characters from the original and placing them in a new setting. This approach, often used by traveling troupes prioritizing performance, can stray far from the original script.

Historically, translated plays were primarily meant for performance, not as standalone literature. Therefore, translating renowned plays like Shakespeare's works often involves a blend of interpretation and adaptation. The key is to introduce the original play's creativity and essence to a new audience, even if it means sacrificing some literal accuracy.

8. Navigating Linguistic Levels in Theatrical Translation

Translating plays for Arabic audiences presents a unique challenge: choosing the right language. This dilemma centers on the historical divide between Classical Arabic, associated with the Quran and formality, and colloquial Arabic, used in everyday speech. This distinction has a long history. Aristotle himself linked poetry to the seriousness of tragedy and prose to the lighter nature of comedy (Ghoneimi, 1963 :164). Arab translators followed suit, using Classical Arabic, the language of the elite, for historical and poetic plays, and colloquial Arabic for comedies. For instance, Shakespeare's "Othello" was translated into formal Arabic by Muhammad Othman Jalal, while comedies like Corneille's "Horace" and Racine's "Enromaque" were translated into everyday Arabic by Salim Al-Naqqash and Adeb Ishaq, respectively.

Over time, translators recognized the need to bridge the gap between the play and the audience. In Syria, Abu Khalil al-Qabbani took a more audience-centered approach, blending classical and colloquial Arabic in his translations (Samia Asaad, 1989 : 29). This approach aimed to make the play more relatable and engaging for the target audience.

Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1972) acknowledged the readability of Classical Arabic but argued for translating plays into a language that actors can speak naturally on stage. He proposed a "middle language" – a blend of written Classical Arabic but delivered in a colloquial style, similar to Attia Abu Naga's approach in the "Deal Play."

The debate on language levels in translation continues. Each playwright and translator brings their own perspective. Ultimately, the choice of language level hinges on the target audience and the play's context. A historical drama aimed at scholars might benefit from a more formal register, while a children's play would likely utilize a more conversational style.

Translators need to strike a balance between preserving the play's historical language and making it accessible to a modern audience. This is especially true for translated classics like Shakespeare, where archaic language styles might be difficult for modern audiences to grasp fully.

Some argue that a truly faithful translation should retain the original language regardless of its difficulty. However, this approach could alienate the audience and hinder the play's message from reaching a broader spectrum of viewers.

Technology has also entered the equation. Subtitling provides additional flexibility, allowing for a slightly more formal script on stage while offering a more colloquial translation in the subtitles to enhance audience comprehension.

9. The Future of Theatrical Translation:

Theatrical translation is a dynamic field that continues to evolve. Here are some exciting trends shaping its future:

9.1. Collaborative Efforts: Collaborative translation ventures are becoming increasingly common. Teams of directors, actors, and translators work together throughout the process, ensuring a cohesive final product that seamlessly blends artistic vision with cultural sensitivity.

9.2. Digital Tools and Technology: Digital tools like translation software and online collaboration platforms are streamlining the translation process. These tools can provide a solid base, but the human touch remains crucial for capturing the nuances of the original text.

9.3. Focus on Inclusivity: There's a growing emphasis on inclusivity in theatrical translation. Playwrights and translators from diverse backgrounds are being reco-

gnized as they bring new perspectives and stories to life for a wider audience. This shift towards amplifying underrepresented voices enriches the theatrical landscape and allows plays to resonate with audiences from a wider array of cultures and social experiences.

Theatrical translation is more than just language conversion. It's an art form that bridges cultures and breathes new life into theatrical works. It allows playwrights to speak to audiences across continents and centuries. As the field continues to evolve, we can expect even more innovative and inclusive approaches to emerge, ensuring that the magic of theatre continues to enthrall and inspire audiences worldwide.

10. From Theory to Stage: Real-World Examples in Theatrical Translation

While theoretical discussions are essential, concrete examples can truly illuminate the intricacies of theatrical translation. Here are a few cases that showcase the challenges and triumphs of this art form:

10.1. Shakespeare's Sonnets in Arabic: Translating Shakespeare's sonnets, known for their intricate wordplay and rhyme schemes, presents a unique challenge. Translators like Ahmad Shawqi, a pioneering figure in Arabic poetry, opted for a more "free verse" approach, prioritizing the overall meaning and emotional impact over a strictly literal translation. This approach preserved the essence of the sonnets while allowing them to flourish in a new linguistic landscape.

10.2. Molière's Comedies and Cultural References: Translating Molière's comedies, known for their witty social satire, requires sensitivity to cultural references. Translators must find clever ways to convey the humor, even when jokes rely on specific societal norms. For instance, puns or slang might need to be replaced with contemporary equivalents to maintain the comedic effect for the new audience.

10.3. Ancient Greek Tragedies and Emotional Depth: Translating ancient Greek tragedies requires capturing the power and grandeur of the original language while ensuring the emotional weight resonates with a modern audience.

Translators may need to adjust sentence structure or phrasing while staying true to the core meaning and dramatic tension of the play.

10.4.Modern Plays and Contemporary Issues: Modern plays often address complex social or political issues relevant to a specific time and place. Translators need to consider whether these issues translate readily to a new cultural context. Sometimes, they might need to adapt cultural references or even tweak the plot to ensure the play stays relevant and impactful for the new audience.

11. The Impact of Theatrical Translation: Beyond the Stage

The influence of theatrical translation extends far beyond the stage, shaping not only how we experience plays but also how we understand different cultures. Here are some ways theatrical translation leaves its mark:

11.1.Enriching Literary Traditions: Theatrical translations can act as catalysts for literary innovation in the target language. Exposure to diverse playwrights and styles can inspire local writers to explore new themes and forms of theatrical expression. For instance, the translation of European plays during China's May Fourth Movement (1919) significantly influenced the development of modern Chinese drama.

11.2.Preserving Cultural Heritage: Theatrical translation plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage. By translating historical plays, translators help safeguard traditions, stories, and languages that might otherwise be lost to time. These translated works become valuable resources not just for theatre enthusiasts but also for historians and scholars interested in understanding different cultures and time periods.

11.3.Promoting Intercultural Dialogue: Theatrical translation fosters intercultural dialogue by exposing audiences to new perspectives and ways of life. Witnessing characters from diverse backgrounds grapple with universal themes like love, loss, and justice can encourage empathy and understanding between different cultures. This dialogue can help break down stereotypes and create a more inclusive global society.

11.4. Boosting Theatre Tourism: Strong translations of acclaimed plays can draw international audiences to local theatres, boosting cultural tourism. This not only benefits the theatre industry but also stimulates the local economy through increased travel and hospitality revenue.

12. Ways to Champion Theatrical Translation

Theatrical translation, despite its transformative power, often remains an underappreciated art form. Here are some ways we can champion this vital field:

12.1. Supporting Translation Grants and Initiatives: Grant programs and awards specifically dedicated to theatrical translation can encourage more talented individuals to pursue this challenging but rewarding career path.

12.2. Recognizing Translators: Public recognition and awards for translators can elevate their standing within the theatrical community and acknowledge their contribution to the success of a production.

12.3. Promoting the Importance of Translation in Theatre Education: Integrating discussions about translation into theatre education programs can raise awareness about the complexities and significance of the translation process. This can inspire future generations of theatre professionals to appreciate the vital role translators play in bringing plays to life for new audiences.

By supporting and celebrating theatrical translation, we ensure that the magic of theatre continues to enthrall and inspire audiences worldwide, fostering understanding and connection across cultures and languages.

13. CONCLUSION

Following my analysis, I came to the conclusion that translating a theatrical text goes beyond the normal text transfer from one language to another. Such a text must bear the imprint of the original, creative text and be presented from one audience to another. This is reflected in the more difficult task for the translator, as

his/her translation often goes beyond the barriers of transmission to shift to adaptation or quotation.

Theatrical translation serves as a vital bridge between cultures and eras, dismantling the walls of language to connect audiences with the universal human experiences that resonate on stage. More than simply conveying words, skilled translators navigate cultural nuances, humor, and social references, ensuring these elements retain their impact in a new linguistic landscape. Through this meticulous process, plays are reborn, their messages and emotions continuing to resonate with audiences across generations and continents.

This heightened difficulty stems from the need to not only translate words, but also the soul of the play. The translator must become familiar with the types of plays, such as tragedy, comedy, and poetic plays, and their specific characteristics – dialogue style, plot structure, and metaphorical imagery – in order to best perform the translation.

The enduring power of theatrical translation lies in its ability to foster empathy and understanding. By experiencing the stories and struggles of characters from diverse backgrounds, we gain a deeper appreciation for the human condition. This cultural exchange transcends borders, fostering a more interconnected global community where shared stories ignite dialogue and dismantle stereotypes.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the art of theatrical translation plays a critical role in shaping a future where diverse voices are heard and celebrated. By championing this art form, we ensure that the magic of theatre continues to enthrall and inspire audiences worldwide, fostering a more inclusive and vibrant theatrical landscape.

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