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## THEATRE TRANSLATION: EVOLUTIONS ACROSS TIME, SPACE AND TRADITION

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### Abstract

This paper aims to anchor current research on translation of and for the theatre in the evolution of modern translatology. Both terms (translation of theatre seems to allude to a finished product, while translation for the theatre encompasses the multi-modality and collectivity involved in the process), define the activity through which a play originally written in one language becomes accessible to an audience speaking another language, or even to an audience with diversity, who access through surtitles, signed languages or audio description the same theatrical product. Starting from a series of reflections on the phenomenology of theatre and the role of translation in its evolution, the authors address issues that are less explored by scholarship in order to draw a more inclusive and encompassing map of this dynamic, changing, and unfathomable field.

**Keywords:** Theatre translation. Reception. Collaborative translation. Intercultural theatre. Inclusion.



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## Resumen

Este trabajo se propone anclar en la evolución de la traductología moderna las investigaciones actuales sobre la traducción del y para el teatro. Ambos términos (la traducción del teatro parece aludir a un producto término, mientras que la traducción para el teatro abarca la multimodalidad y colectividad que interviene en el proceso) definen la actividad a través de la cual una obra de teatro escrita originalmente en una lengua se vuelve accesible a un público hablante de otra, o incluso a un público con diversidad, que accede a través de sobretítulos, lenguas signadas o audiodescripción al mismo producto escénico. Partiendo de una serie de reflexiones sobre la fenomenología teatral y el papel de la traducción en su evolución, las autoras abordan cuestiones menos profundizadas por la academia para dibujar un mapa más inclusivo y abarcador en este terreno, de por sí, dinámico, cambiante e inabarcable.

**Palabras clave:** Traducción teatral. Recepción. Traducción colaborativa. Teatro intercultural. Inclusión.

## 1. Contextualization and concepts

It is fair to say that one of the success stories in the Humanities and Social Studies of the last few decades has been the development of Translation Studies. The field has grown internationally so that today right across the world there are hundreds of publications, journals, university courses, translator training programmes, ongoing conferences and workshops. The role played by translators in intercultural communication is finally being recognised and more actual translations are being undertaken, notably assisted with the contribution made by small publishers in many countries, who are perhaps more likely to take risks than the big commercial publishers.

Despite this positive outlook, of all the areas that have received critical and scholarly attention, translating for the theatre has been the least studied, though thankfully this situation of absence is starting to change. Since the special issue of *Target* on translation in the theatre (2013) edited by Cristina Marinetti, one of the few scholars whose research focusses on theatre translation, there have been more publications by scholars such as Geraldine Brodie, Massimiliano Morini, and David Johnston, to name just a few of the best known. Marinetti & De Francisci (2022) coordinated a

special issue of the journal *Translation Studies* dedicated a special issue to Translation and Performance Cultures, and recently they have collaborated on a book entitled *Translation in the Performing Arts: Embodiment, Materiality and Inclusion* (De Francisci & Marinetti 2025). This new research broadens out the idea of theatre translation to include performance and what Marinetti terms ‘performativity.’ In the introductory essay to the special issue of *Target*, Marinetti argues that the notion of performativity should be used alongside the more familiar analytical tools deriving from linguistics, semiotics and cultural analysis. In addition, a performative understanding of translation in the theatre must involve reconceptualising the role played by spectators as well as more general notions of reception.

In that same issue of *Target* there is an essay by David Johnston (2013), entitled “Professing translation. The acts-in-between.” Johnston is a well-known translation theorist, but what makes his work distinctive is that he is also an award-winning translator and creative writer. Among his many translations are plays by Calderon, Lope de Vega, Garcia Lorca and, most recently in 2024 (Johnston & Johnston 2024), Juan Mayorga. Johnson’s view of translation is that it involves:

a series of relations, of created relatedness, between embodied selves, interacting with different cognitive, affective and sensorial environments, and other equally embodied selves’ (Johnston 2013: 369).

Translation, especially in the theatre, is therefore pluralistic, involving much more than one person’s engagement with a text written by another person. Actors and audiences bring to the translated text a different cultural baggage, and the potential for new interpretations is therefore unlimited.

Johnston has developed the notion of “writing forward,” which he defines as the process whereby an act of translation grants new life to its source:

relocating it within a new stage language designed specifically to reactivate the semantic charge and hermeneutic potential of the original text (Johnston 2013: 373).

The theatre translator has first to establish a relationship with that original and then work with actors in a new theatrical context so as to highlight the potential for another kind of engagement. In his book on translating

the theatre of the Spanish Golden Age, Johnston draws attention to the importance of understanding the very different physical, political and psychological dimensions in which seventeenth century playwrights, actors and audiences operated. This then enables the translator to craft a work that will resonate with a new twenty-first century audience whilst retaining traces of the memory of the source text world. As Johnston puts it:

A play, for example, moves like a comet, through time and space, accruing new potentials for meaning and relevance as it does, until someone- a reader, a translator, a director- draws it down into their own ambit and makes it their own. Temporarily at least (Johnston 2015: 10).

Some very important points are being made here; firstly, that theatre is plastic and mobile and the movement of a play across both time and space creates the potential for new meanings. Secondly, that such potential will be realised by many more people than just one translator, since theatre is a collaborative form and involves more than one individual and thirdly, whatever claims are made on a play will only be temporary. Tastes change, aesthetic norms change, theatre practice changes and can never be fixed.

As Tony Harrison, poet and translator of Ancient Greek theatre has said, an original is fluid, and a translation is merely a static moment in that fluidity. Harrison puts it succinctly:

Translations are not built to survive, though their original survives through translation's many flowerings and decays. The illusion of pedantry if that a text is fixed. It cannot be fixed once and for all. The translation is fixed but it reinvigorates its original by its decay (Harrison 1991: 146).

This is very similar to the notion of translation as writing forward and shows how far thinking about translation in general has come from the old idea that translation involved no more than linguistic substitution across a binary divide. Translating involves more than knowledge of a language; it involves understanding both of the cultural context in which the original was first produced and of the designated target audience for which the translation is intended.

## 2. Progress and absences in the field of Translation for the Theatre

Events such as the symposium “Translating Theatre: Migrating Text(s),” held in 2010 at the University of Warwick, which brought together academics and practitioners, inspired this volume into embracing a number of present and past issues. Research throughout the past two decades has revealed several points in which theatre translation intersects migration studies and intercultural (artistic) communication, leading to a number of directions in which multidisciplinary efforts have been made. For instance, under the sociological turn Krebs (2007) envisages the translator as a social agent, whereas from the field of anthropology Perteghella (2004) proposes a frame based on “diffusion” and “osmosis.” In her descriptive anthropological model, Perteghella (2004) places the “migration of cultural bearers” (referring to the translations made or prompted by diaspora in their desire to promote their own culture) as the first means of diffusion of the cultural Other, a view shared by Rose & Marinetti (2010).

On the other hand, intercultural theatre is tackled by Pavis (1996); Espasa Borrás (2009); Ezpeleta (2007); and O’Toole (2013), but it is Marinetti (2013) whose representations of migration in contemporary theatre bring into discussion the multiple agencies that mediate reception in translated theatre. Marinetti & Rose (2013) present experiments in which she combines self-reflection and ethnography (Buzelin 2006; Sturge 2007), to analyse the scholar’s own self-involvement in the translation and staging of a play. The ethnographic methodology is also used by Madison (2011).

Later, Marinetti (2018) describes a “cross-cultural” experiment at the *Teatro delle Albe* performing in two minor languages (Romagnolo and Wolof) and constructing new identities on stage. The issue of hybridization has been tackled by Pavis (1992; 1996), or Marinetti (2018). The cultural turn has offered insights in multiculturalism and multilingualism (Komporalý 2014); identity (Sidiropoulou 2004); cultural minority (Pavis 1992); acculturation (Taviano or Aaltonen in Coelsch-Foisner & Klein 2004); or Bourdieu’s cultural capital (O’Toole 2013). A number of issues have been addressed by the postcolonial paradigm, for instance power (Krebs based on previous work by Wolf on conflict, ideology, negotiation), dialects and heteroglossia (Carlson 2009; Marinetti 2018) Eurocentrism, otherness;

tradaptation and collaborative translation (Upton 2000; Cameron 2000; Espasa Borrás 2000; Che Suh 2002).

A series of meta-theoretical issues are being constantly discussed such as: performability (Poyatos 2008; Espasa Borrás 2009 reviewing Bassnett's contributions; Hsiung 2012); the page/stage (false?) dichotomy (Baines, Marinetti & Perteghella 2011); the translation/adaptation debate (Anderman 2005; Krebs 2013; Minier 2013 in Krebs); performativity (Marinetti 2013); metaphors (Pavis' "hourglass"; Bassnett's "labyrinth"); and methodological proposals like Eaton's (rehearsal room as a tool for research).

One of the least approached issues is children's theatre. Born from a genre (children's literature) itself marginal and non-canonical, children's theatre is even more a genre underexplored by scholarly communities. Its limited production and uneven quality in Spain, explains, but does not justify its marginalisation (Tejerina Lobo 2007: 57-58).

Gender issues (women playwrights, translators, directors and dramaturgs) have also been underexplored in relation to the foreign text and scenic product. This volume vouches for a balance in this respect. According to Aaltonen (1993; 2013), theatre translation is a collective work in which the amount of decision-making depends on each participant's power. For instance, in the British theatre praxis, the translator has been granted a professional role: to anchor the text to the present space, time and culture.

Finally, this picture is completed by a number of new realities derived from international or intercultural theatre, such as accessibility (subtitling, interpreting, signing, audio description), reception (Hardwick 2003; Wiles 2010; Hsiung 2012), or negotiation (Hardwick 2013).

### 3. Redressing imbalances

When the editors put out a call for papers for this special issue of *MonTI*, we spread the net wide, hoping to encourage contributors to send in essays reflecting some of the diverse aspects of translation and theatre and we have not been disappointed. The essays collected here include work in Spanish, French and English covering a wide range of topics. What connects these very diverse essays is an emphasis on theatre as performance and an awareness of the socio-historical context.

Within the section that contains papers reviewing translational theories, or papers describing a national theatre system and its evolution, or even reflections on transversal issues such as accessibility or gender, Schoer-Granado's work is situated on the borderline between the theoretical debate on the original and the factors that assure its singularity, and the case study dealing with the vicissitudes of *Antigone*, i.e. Hölderlin's canonical translation of Sophocles' classical text and its translations into Spanish, one of which, in particular, has a canonical vocation). The author starts from the recent taxonomic advances of Aaltonen (2010) and his tripartite classification into "introductory translations" (of a more general nature); "glossa translations" (oriented towards the dramaturge) and "staging translations" (whose addressee is the theatre company), in order to tackle the old translational dilemma that has always accompanied this literary genre: "page or stage." Today the dichotomy still exists, although some authors stress the coexistence of both purposes (a play to be read and a play to be staged), although others still separate the "literary play" from the "theatrical script." This paper's author analyses the relationship between several translations from the perspective of the "outward turn" proposed by Bassnett & Johnston (2019). Vidal Claramonte (2022) concludes that theatrical translation is a space in which the concepts of "original" and "translation" can be expanded, although the "original" is conditioned by the existence of translations, the status of the translator and author in a given context and the historical and political moment that a given culture is living.

The following two essays offer a great deal of information about two very different cultures: Iran and Romania. Elmira Soleimanirad's essay on theatre in Iran traces the gradual reception of Western theatre in Iran over time, and encounters with more traditional forms of Iranian theatre and shows the fundamental importance of translation over a transformative period. Daniela Haisăn has taken another approach, and her essay shows the results of a detailed survey of thirteen Romanian PhD dissertations in the twentieth century all of which deal with aspects of theatre translation. Given that both Iran and Romania have undergone massive social changes in the last half century these essays show how significant theatre and translation have been in two very different societies. Haisăn's work shows

the important of Shakespeare in Romania, and in her essay, Purificación Ribes Traver also focuses Shakespeare, this time on a single play. The essay discusses the Spanish reception of the ground-breaking 1992 version of *The Merchant of Venice* by Vicente Molina Foix and Jose Carlos Plaza and consists not only of close analysis of the text, but also studies the paratexts, including reviews that testify to the success of the production.

There are two papers in this volume that deal with the linguistic side of translatology, focusing on the lexical analysis of elements whose presence contributes to the construction of those spheres in which the characters can make sense. One is George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and its translations into Spanish (opposing the Madrid accent, considered prestigious, to the Andalusian accent for a peninsular audience, or the Argentinian accent of a certain neighbourhood in Buenos Aires for a Latin American audience) and into Portuguese (European and Brazilian) where the mark of prestige is given by the language spoken in Lisbon or Coimbra and Rio respectively. These versions have been analysed by Santos-Rovira and Coll, in order to determine whether the markers indicating class membership, social mobility or identity have been altered and if so, to what extent and with what results. These researchers observe that the lexical varieties of the original text (Cockney and RP) accurately mark the social differences that are reconstructed by the translators in their own versions, in which the prestigious variant alternates with the substandard one, and the geographical varieties compete with the adaptations to set the facts to such an extent as to introduce utterances in the play that do not exist in the original text.

The other paper devoted to linguistic matters focuses on the play *Amor por Anexins* by Artur Azevedo and its translations into Spanish, more precisely two recent versions, from 2016 and 2019 respectively, entitled *Amor proverbial* and *Amor (aún más) proverbial*, the latter title recognising an earlier translation. This is an unusual decision, probably due to the short time distance between the two versions. The original, however, dates from 1908, so that intrinsic and external factors intervene in both translations, the most prominent of which is practicality, linked to the staging and the external context, obviously susceptible to updating for the sake of an adequate reception by today's audiences. The authors, Lapeña and Carrero, opt for a qualitative comparative analysis, delving into the translatorial



decisions of versions 1 and 2 that form the target text 1, as well as the modifications that emerge from the staging or what the authors call target text 2. The qualitative comparative analysis is completed with a quantitative one carried out on 104 paroemias detected in the source text, in order to determine the techniques most frequently used by either translator; “omission” is found to be among the most frequent options (used in 41 cases) in the first version and “coined equivalence” in the second version (on 57 occasions).

The essay by Vasiliki Misiou on a production of Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* in 1980s’ Greece takes a broad-brush approach and looks at the challenges of staging a feminist play in a cultural context not sympathetic to feminism in general. Gender issues are at the core of Jorge Braga Riera’s essay on gender dynamics in English retranslations of Lope de Vega’s *Fuente Ovejuna*. This essay shows how different translators and directors have interpreted the role of women in seventeenth century Spain very differently and have shifted the balance of the play in some cases to an emphasis on the theme of class resistance.

The papers devoted to the transversal field of gender also include a case study (an author, a play and its translations into Spanish, Galician and Catalan) and a field study (suffragette theatre). The first, signed by Cisneros-Perales, is based on Sarah Kane’s canonical text, *4.48 Psychosis* and its ambiguous treatment of the characters (in gender and number) and analyses the decisions of the female translators, who are, in turn, influenced by their own reflection on visibility and agency, given that in the history of translation there are not many texts that make their female (and even male) translators visible. This study concludes with three findings that confirm the initial hypotheses: (1) the peritexts are biased, with an opaque presence of women translators; (2) in the translations of this play, we can notice a predominance of autobiographical readings related to Kane, although nothing explicitly indicates that the work is autobiographical; (3) the translators choose to disambiguate by feminising the text. As it is well known, this work focuses on its positioning with respect to the protagonist, a patient of mental illness and her (his) voice, that can be one or more than one, masculine or feminine, since no clues are given. The silenced stage directions are indicative of a claim that can be interpreted as queer. The

nature of the text, which the author describes as “post-dramatic,” prompts a reflection on the “post” trend, which, in this case, seems contradictory to us. If Lehmann’s (2006) concept referred to a distancing from the literary event in favour of an approach to the stage event as a negation of the former, just as postmodernism can be interpreted as a negation of modernism, the “post-dramatic” cannot deny its own early 20th century avant-gardes that already integrated multimodality, nor can it establish a text-stage rupture, since one must integrate the other and the other must allow all kinds of codes - including the linguistic - to accommodate the narrated events.

Another paper dealing with genre belongs to Perez-Heredia and Zaragoza-Ninet, who focus on the absence in Spanish theatrical tradition of theatre written by suffragettes, especially British, who, during the first part of the 20th century tried to make visible, on a large scale, in the theatres of the time, a social and political problem and a system based on flagrant inequality and injustice. The British suffragettes managed to reach public spaces, just as the Spanish suffragettes managed to get women to vote for the first time in 1931, during the Second Republic, although they lost this right in 1939 with the establishment of the fascist dictatorship, without any chance to restore it before 1977, when the democratic transition began. It is well known that translation has served over the centuries to highlight or make invisible certain causes. The authors of this study delve into the main reasons (ignorance; lack of entertainment; ideological clash; self-censorship) why suffragette theatre has not been translated (except sporadically) into Spanish and propose a series of strategies to recover it and make it visible, together with the female figures who sign the authorship of the original and the translation.

Gender issues are also discussed by Ruth Bohunovsky about the reception of drama by Elfriede Jelinek in Brazil, but the primary focus of this essay is on the role of the *dramaturg*, or rather, on the dramaturgical function assumed by translator. Bohunovsky draws upon her own experience and offers important insights not only into the reception of Jelinek’s controversial writing in Brazil, but more broadly into the Brazilian theatre culture more generally.

Alinne Balduino P. Fernandes also draws on her own direct theatre experience in Brazil in an essay that discusses her own translation of

*Override* (2013) a play by the Northern Irish playwright Stacey Gregg. She discusses her translation strategies for a staged reading in Sao Paulo in 2023 and examines the way in which the play was received in a post-reading debate.

In her essay on translating disability on stage, the reception of complex and potentially contentious work is taken up in a different way by Stefania Taviano, who writes about a performance by the activist comedian Maysoon Zayid, broadening out her discussion to consider the whole field of disability as a form of art.

Accessibility is one of the growing fields of current translatology and theatre studies, in fact, the performing and visual arts in general are intrinsically linked to signed interpretation or audio-description for inclusive purposes, as well as to other modalities conducive to the desideratum of universal accessibility. Some countries (such as France) are more advanced in offering accessible cultural products for all audiences, others (such as Spain) are at the beginning of the road, with efforts and initiatives that do not yet constitute a state directive, although they follow the supranational precepts set by the EU or the SDGs. The authors of this paper, Lujan, Rojo and Ramos, investigate an almost unexplored branch of accessibility, namely audio-description for dance, whose target audience is people with blindness or low vision. Based on a field study with audio descriptors from a dozen countries and different working languages, the authors analyse the challenges and strategies involved in this type of translation, understood in a broad sense, beyond strictly linguistic codes and encompassing scenic, corporal and highly symbolic languages, such as dance. The strategies employed by these ten audio descriptors, as well as the information they provide in their semi-open interview on the preparation of the script, difficulties and solutions, languages, or additional elements such as tactile visits prior to the event, constitute the corpus of data for this analysis which aims, among other things, to see where they are aligned and where they diverge, depending on the socio-cultural context and the point of progress in which a given country finds itself in the application of the principles of accessibility. The study provides a comprehensive presentation of this specialised sub-branch of audio description, in which clarity and conciseness are essential, with a detailed explanation of each of its phases.

Two other papers in this monographic volume focus on the theatrical-musical translation, i.e. the translation of songs that form part of theatrical performances of the musical genre. First, Villanueva-Jordán and Sangay propose a comparative multimodal analysis of four versions of the well-known song “I am what I am” (1983) belonging to the Broadway musical *La cage aux Folles*, which portrays the life of a male couple and their difficulties amidst the conservative resurgence in the US and the stigma of HIV in the 1980s. The song’s lyrics, in their various translations, reach a greater or lesser engagement with the discourse of sexuality. The authors propose analyse the musical and linguistic structure of this product of the American culture industry, with its inevitable dynamics of consumerism (and not activism, as they warn us) that acts intrinsically. In doing so, they intend to observe how these “artefacts” can come to influence the shaping of the queer imaginaries of an entire generation. Thus, a mismatch calls our attention between the source text and its translations in aspects such as the discourse of “coming out,” since equivalents are not always viable in those target countries where cultural and social norms, legislation or religious convictions are different. Even in the same country mismatches arise when it comes to different social strata and unequal economic means. Another illustrative example is the discourse on the “drag” phenomenon, considered to be central to the self-identification of transvestite trends, but the existence of underlying tensions, the authors warn, is undeniable, which is why translational research can, in addition to exploring forms and modalities of translation from new angles such as queer theory, also contribute to raising awareness of certain realities.

In turn, Robaux focuses on the translation of “singable” texts, a field neglected by translatology, except for studies on opera translations or certain culturally transcendental pop themes. The author proposes an analytical tool called “pentathlon,” which is based on the controversial concept of “fidelity,” and advocates “flexibility” in this type of translation in order to accommodate these songs naturally in the final stage product. His analysis of a series of songs from musicals of the 2000s looks at categories such as: form, background, characters, staging and effects on the spectator. Despite the fact that for a large part of the academy the concept of fidelity remains distant and relegated, this study argues that the proposed analytical tool is

capable of identifying aspects that can be optimised through a process of revision and translational re-evaluation.

#### 4. Instead of conclusion

As we pointed out, this volume is made up of a more holistic and abstract section which tackles theatre and its manifestations and receptions in different latitudes, and another section, more atomised and practical, encompassing studies of specific cases in which translation plays an important role in the creation and dissemination of culture, as well as in the reflection aroused and influence exerted on society over the years, whether or not alien to the primary intention of the source text and its synchronic and diachronic translations.

Panoramic views and comparisons of these translations as well as the analysis of their evolution are comprised in this volume. The translator's role in society and in the cultural, equality and inclusion policies of a country, the diverse theatrical traditions from different cultures, including the relationship between the physical and the textual have been foci of direct or indirect interest in this volume too.

From Shakespeare to Arab comedy based on characters with disabilities, from Golden Age Spanish theatre to avant-garde contemporary Brazilian theatre, the essays in this volume bring new insights into the complex world of theatre translations.

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## BIONOTES / NOTAS BIOGRÁFICAS

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