Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 4 (53) No.1- 2011

A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ON DRAMA TRANSLATION

Oana TATU[1]

Abstract: *The translation of literary texts is, as a rule, a difficult task, and it basically requires talent, patience, linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, drama translation compounds the issue and claims, besides all the above mentioned qualities, the translator's awareness of the dual nature that drama displays: a text written for an audience and performed on stage, or a text written for readers and laid down on page. This dual nature will necessarily be rendered in translation.*

Keywords: *drama, translation, performance, book form.*

1. Introduction

The activity of translation is by no means a derivative or secondary one. As a form of inter-literary communication, the translation is a unique act, yielding signs by means of which the translator must choose between different sets of cultural norms and values.

Literary translation can actually be viewed as a domesticating process, a creative and controlled process, in that the translators may take a source text and adapt it to a dominant poetics or ideology in the target culture. Also, translators might author a sort of compromise between the two different sets of poetics and ideologies.

Unlike any other form of literature, translations have the enormous advantage of simultaneously intensifying the features of both the source literature and the target one, providing thus readers and theoreticians with valuable study material on cultural interaction.

However, let us not forget that the initiator of the literary contact in question is the target culture, and this initiative is certainly the result of some special interest the target culture manifests towards the source culture.

Consequently, we are not talking here about a simple transplantation of a foreign literary model in a receptor culture, but rather about a metamorphosis and a selection of components in the original text, in view of adapting it to the role it will ultimately fulfill in the receptor culture.

We therefore reassert that fact that the mere linguistic substitution of a code with another is insufficient when it comes to translation; in real fact, this substitution is not the true difficulty a translator might be confronted with, if we are only to consider the wider picture of historical and socio-cultural backgrounds of the source and target cultures.

We must also never overlook the fact that while they are trying to integrate the

[1] Dept. of Foreign Languages and Literatures, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

BDD-A20188 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:49:46 UTC)

translated work as *literature* in the receptor culture, translators must always relate to the *expectancy horizon* in the target culture, as Hans Robert Jauss would put it (in Ricoeur, 95).

Thus, translators will be most sensitive to whatever constitutes critical, historical, encyclopaedic references regarding current literary debate. Such references unmistakably point out the features that any piece of writing might possess in order to be deemed as literature, as well as the means to ensure its acceptance.

When the translation eventually reaches the readers in the target culture, it will find itself in one of the following three stances: it will be regarded as exotic and bizarre and probably rejected by the majority of those who get into contact with it; it will be directly assimilated among the works in the target culture, passing unnoticed as translation because of the lack of specificity and originality. Or, the best case scenario would be for the translation to have an unexpected but pleasant impact resulting from the negotiating process and the felicitous compromise that the receptor literature initiated with the original.

There is no doubt that this last variant is a goal for any translation, and is, at the same time, very difficult to accomplish. If the translator is also a person of culture and a skilful negotiator, the privileged position of the translation is ensured.

2. Drama Translation as a Particular Case of Literature Translation

Generally, most studies on translation are predominantly concerned with issues regarding the translation of poetry versus prose, thus overlooking almost entirely the area of drama and its inherent translation obstacles.

More often than not, it is assumed that the methodology employed in prose translation is applicable in drama translation, too. By adopting this line of thought, one omits entirely the dual nature of the dramatic text which actually consists of it being simultaneously a literary text and a screenplay. From this point of view, we might quote Susan Bassnett according to whom approaching a dramatic text involves a series of elements among which *'the linguistic system is only one optional component in a set of interrelated systems that comprise the spectacle'* (Bassnett, 120).

Drama translators must always be aware of the fact that the eventual accomplishment of dramatic meaning originates in the perfect understanding of a complex set of textual codes and indicators which interrelates with a pragmatic and situational context, as well as with an oral communication: grammatical and semantic pauses, iterative structures, deliberate flouting of lexical norms, and so on.

The mere act of turning and returning excessively to the written text leads to the erroneous assumption that there is only a single way of reading and acting out the play, which compels the translator to fit into a preconceived translation pattern. Furthermore, any transgression from the director or the translator will be the object of criticism deeming both 'translations' as more or less infringements of the norm.

It would then be useful to emphasize two basic features that the dual nature of drama displays: on the one hand, there is the co-presence of internal and external communication, and, on the other hand, the fact that the dramatic language refers to two distinct codes and traditions - oral communication and literature.

In other words, the dramatic language can be related both with the spontaneous discourse and with the conventions of aesthetic communication.

The co-presence of internal and external communication might require several normative translating decisions. Sometimes, translators need to decide whether it is the

BDD-A20188 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:49:46 UTC)

characters viewpoint they will adopt, or the projected viewpoint subsequently adopted by readers or audiences.

Furthermore, the fact that the dramatic language is tightly linked with oral communication and literature, can be of paramount importance when the play submitted for translation comes from a different historical period. In such instances, translators might consider shadowing several literary aspects of the play and incorporating elements of spontaneous oral communication pertaining to their contemporary time.

Also, as stated in the introduction, the translator should make some serious decisions when confronted with the transfer of a play from one language into another; he thus may approach the situation in one of these two ways: he might either detach himself from his translation and from his audience or he might appropriate the original play, bring it closer to his audience while translating (Lefevere, 74). Thus, on the one hand there is the phenomenon of foreignizing, which allows the translator to preserve alien hints and references, and, on the other hand, there is the domestication of the original text, which consists of neutralizing all culture-specific items and convert the original text into a familiar one for the target audience (Venuti, 85). We will not dwell upon this any longer, as the topic falls within the scope of a different study.

Let us bear in mind for now that within each dramatic text there is a multitude of literary texts and screenplay texts. Consequently, any unilateral translation, representing the type of translation as result of a single performance, becomes more of an interesting and instructive experiment and less of an 'ideal' translation. On the same line of thought, David Birch upheld that *'To consider a drama text as 'the play' and to assume that it is a single entity rather than a multiplicity of potential performances is to ignore 'the context of circumstance'; is to reduce any critical practice to pointlessness'* (Birch, 30).

Accordingly, one should never overlook the fact that the concept of translation bearing inherent performance potential becomes more intricate as the concept of performance inspires perpetual change. Therefore, putting on an older dramatic text will involve the consideration of various alterations in the acting manner, in the theatrical space, in the audience role, and even in the concepts of comedy and tragedy. Also, the acting styles and the theatrical concepts considerably differ from one national context to another, and this is another aspect that translators should not overlook.

The dynamic essence in a dramatic text will always be the starting point of a successful translation because *'No text is ever completed. It is always meaning in process. Similarly, no matter how thorough and detailed the performance process may be, a production does not complete those processes, it simply creates a new text for a particular time, place and reception'* (Birch, 12).

As partial conclusion, let us just state that, over the last decades, drama translators have committed themselves to employing the cultural technique that actually bears the name *drama translation.* And this involves becoming aware of the fact that the theatre absolutely operates on several other levels than the strictly linguistic one, and that the audience's part in the entire process cannot be assimilated to the individual reader's whose contact with the text is a personal issue.

It does not come as a surprise then to notice that more and more drama translators aim at producing two texts into one, as well as translations bearing the potential of being used in a series of different performances.

BDD-A20188 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:49:46 UTC)

Before moving on to the next section in our paper, let us quote George Mounin and his opinion on the complex nature of drama translation - a special case of skillful adaptation of a source text: *'La vraie traduction théâtrale restera toujours cette espèce de traduction-adaptation difficile [...] Yves Florenne avait raison, lors du débat sur la traduction de Shakespeare, de soutenir que la traduction d'une grande œuvre théâtrale doit être refaite tous les cinquante ans: non seulement pour profiter de toutes les découvertes et de tous les perfectionnements des éditions critiques - mais surtout pour mettre l'œuvre au diapason d'une pensée, d'une sensibilité, d'une société, d'une langue qui, entre-temps, ont évolué, ont changé'* (Mounin, 171).

3. Translating For the Stage *or* Translating For the Page

The entire debate on this issue emerged on the occasion of the reunion of the French Shakespearean Society in 1982, when they thoroughly studied the translation of Shakespearean plays. The topic was clearly formulated by the translation practitioner Jean-Michel Déprats: *'Se traduce diferit în funcţie de menirea traducerii de a fi citită sau reprezentată?'* (Déprats, 277). The unanimous answer was affirmative.

Translators and theatre people seemed to agree upon the fact that most Shakespearean translations became quite problematic when staged, although, when published, they were faithful, literary and readable.

Furthermore, translations drafted for the stage, although perfectly 'performable' were felt just as ephemeral as the performances they were originally meant for.

They strongly upheld the idea that translating for printing and translating for acting were two distinct issues; the translation meant for the stage is immediately subordinated to the idea of screenplay. Or, in Jean-Pierre Villequin's words *'Translations for stage age fast and unrelentlessly... Each new performance requires a new translation'* (Villequin, 281).

All translations meant for the stage were perceived as reflecting the language and sensitivity of a particular moment of receptiveness, and were thus suspected of limiting the potential meaning range in the original work. Nevertheless, even in Germany, where the 'tyranny' of the Shakespearean translations belonging to Schlegel and Tieck was stronger than that of François-Victor Hugo's translations of Shakespeare in France, one could notice a distinct move towards retranslating the plays for new performances.

4. Translating For the Stage *and* For the Page

A more thorough analysis of drama translation has diverged from the unproblematic opposition between translations for readers and translations for actors. The truth is that there is a strong, dynamic relationship between drama translation and its representation. As Susan Bassnett aptly puts it, *'One of the functions of theatre is to operate on other levels than the strictly linguistic, and the role of the audience assumes a public dimension not shared by the individual reader whose contact with the text is essentially a private affair'* (Bassnett, 132).

When a translation is drawn up for a specific performance, it becomes part of the script. In other words, the choices - as inherent feature of each translation - are altered by the interpretative strategies involved in the dramatic process and interact with them. The translation is fleshed out by the production, the translated text becomes part and parcel of the stage diary belonging to a given production, and its publication and distribution are tightly linked to the representational event.

BDD-A20188 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:49:46 UTC)

At the same time, successful performances are proprietary, in that they require a text which should exclusively belong to them. These translations live on their own as texts published following their representation, and can even become subject to subsequent performances. As a result, translating for a certain performance does not take for granted a further performance of the same translation, but does not exclude it either.

Recent Shakespearean translations share a translation philosophy which emphasizes the nature of the dramatic language, besides the meaning of words. They strive to preserve the representational potential of the text, leaving room in translations for those non-verbal codes that pertain to the theatre performance.

Thus, a theatre production in itself is a *reading* - also called *translation* - of a dramatic text. The words of any dramatic text are part of its staging (although alterations have been operated), but are turned into a performance through intonation, gestures, facial expression, sound effects and music, relationship between the protagonist and other actors, as well as between actors and public. The performance changes a dramatic text, but it does it in a preferred manner. There is no doubt that a certain performance belongs to a precise moment and a precise place.

Similarly, when a play is performed in the original language, it will, more often than not, be faithful to a single reading or interpretation excluding many other potential ones. A performance of a translated text will make no exception.

Nevertheless, since there are numerous ways of transposing on scene a certain language unit in the source text, one may select from a wide range of gestures and intonations to express a concept in the source language text, as well as from a wide range of words and expressions in the target language.

Drama translations represent the result of a series of options. What really sets apart two different translations of the same play are the reasons for taking those options and the consistency of applying them. Since no translation can be unbiased, it is only logical that a certain director, opting for a certain translation, is quite aware of its potential to be shaped according to his dramatic intention.

5. Conclusions

The most successful drama translations, written either for actors or for readers, have always been those which never neglected the dramatic substance of the original text, and strived to convey it in translation too.

We have already showed that the text of a play represents just one element in the entirety of the theatre discourse. The language of the original text is also a sign in the complex network of oral and visual signs. And, as the dramatic piece is drafted mainly for voices, the literary text also contains a set of linguistic systems where tone, intonation, accent and rhythm are signifiers.

Furthermore, the text of the play represents the cover for a subtext, or, what they call the gestural text, which yields the movements that an actor uttering the text may display on stage.

Also, the translator must possess thorough knowledge both at a paralinguistic level - involving elements of history and culture belonging to the source language -, as well as at a linguistic level - where deep knowledge of source and target linguistic systems is mandatory.

By fulfilling these requirements, the translator is sure to accomplish the intricate task of a drama translation, which, either read or staged, will reverberate in readers, spectators or actors alike, influencing the target language as to a quality surge at all its levels.

BDD-A20188 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:49:46 UTC)

References

1. Bassnett, S.: *Translation Studies.* Routledge, 1988, p. 120.
2. Birch, D.: *The Language of Drama. Critical Theory and Practice.* London, Macmillan, 1991.
3. Déprats, J.M.: Cited in *Du texte à la scène: Langages du theater.* Ed. M.T. Jones-Davies, Paris: Jean Touzot, 1983.
4. Iliescu, C.: *Traducerea textului dramatic. O abordare cognitivă* (*Translating the Dramatic Text. A Cognitive Approach*). Editura Institutului European, Iaşi, 2009.
5. Lefevere, A.: *Translating literature: the German tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig*. Amsterdam and Assen: van Gorcum, 1977.
6. Nida, E.: *Towards a Science of Translation*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964.
7. Mounin, G.: *Linguistique et traduction.* Dessart et Mardaga, eds, Bruxelles, 1976.
8. Ricoeur, P.: *Despre traducere* (*On Translation*). Iaşi. Editura Polirom, 2005.
9. Venuti, L.: *The translator's invisibility*. London: Routledge, 1995.
10. Villequin, J.P.: Cited in *Du texte à la scène: Langages du theater.* Ed. M.T. Jones-Davies, Paris: Jean Touzot, 1983.

BDD-A20188 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:49:46 UTC)