CONTEXTUAL RELEVANCE IN TRANSLATING DRAMA THE CASE OF TENOR VARIETIES IN ROMANIAN VERSIONS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' PLAYS

Ana-Cristina CHIRILĂ ŞERBAN, PhD Candidate, "Ştefan cel Mare" University of Suceava

Abstract: Relating systemic functional theory to cognitive models of communication, the present paper assumes that an appropriate evaluation of discourse parameters contributes to achieving identity between the contextual knowledge of the sender and that of the listener (the fundamental principle of successful communication). Representing a communicative act based on inference, itself (in a cognitive perspective), translation needs relate to these three dimensions of discourse in all its stages as a process (going from the perception and comprehension of the author's intention to the reconstruction of the message addressed to a second-degree receiver). In our particular study, the object of translation is a challenging text at all three situational levels. With an awareness of their hierarchical interdependence, we investigate some of the most distinctive features, with a focus on tenor, which proves exceptionally challenging in the source-texts under scrutiny.

Keywords: communicative translation, contextual relevance, field of discourse, mode of discourse, tenor varieties

Introduction

The aim of this article is to illustrate what we consider to be an essential episode in Translation Studies, marking an evolution from norm-governed linguistic theories towards function-governed communicative theories of translation. The functional approach proves extremely beneficial to the sub-domain of Drama Translation, whose object of investigation is a complex semiotic system (a polyphonic macro-unit of communication, called *performance*) integrating the dramatic text as a signifying unit. The semiotic perspective of a dramatic text entails the need to relate theatre translation to principles of functional, pragmatic and relevant equivalence, thus proving the case of a dynamic communicative approach to literary translation, in general.

Communicative standards revisited

Traditional theories in translation studies regarded translation as a linguistic activity performed on texts. The significant factors controlling translation were, thus, abstract structures of equivalence, defined lexically, syntactically and semantically, without any regard to extra-linguistic factors. The latter were not taken into consideration as controlling, to a large extent, the communicative instances which constitute the material of translation. The only real issue was *accuracy*, and accuracy was defined both narrowly, in terms of linguistic equivalence, and universally, with no attention to the differing needs and demands and expectations of real people in real-world situations. This period of stagnation in translation studies is considered to be coming from "an understanding of text merely as a self-contained and self-generating entity,

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)

instead of a decision-making procedure and an instance of communication between language users" (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 3). In our own view, translation, at this point, was approached as a product-to-product comparison between the source-text (ST) and the target-text (TT).

From the perspective of more recent theories in Translation Studies, what is needed is a systematic study of problems and solutions, by a close comparison of ST and TT procedures: Which techniques produce which effects? What are the regularities of the translation process in particular genres, cultures and historical periods, that is, in particular contexts of communication? Prescriptive as well as descriptive models in drama translation are built on such relevant questions to be considered by the science of translating.

To such views, Eugene Nida's reformulation of the notion of translation in terms of "types of equivalence" appropriate to "particular circumstances" can be considered a fundamental step. A founding father of the domain, the American researcher states that "the relative adequacy of different translations of the same text can only be determined in terms of the extent to which each translation successfully fulfils the purpose for which it was intended" (Nida, *apud* Nord, 1997: 13). By distinguishing between "formal correspondence"(as the closest possible match of form and content between ST and TT) and "dynamic equivalence"(as a principle of equivalence of effect on reader of TT), Nida shifts attention away from the sterile debate on free versus literal translation towards the *effects* of different translation strategies, and through them, introduces an awareness of the complex *communicative* dimension of the *process.* The sets of priorities established in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969) include: "contextual consistency" (relating to semantic appropriateness) over "verbal consistency" (word for word concordance); oral over written forms of the language; audience-adapted forms of language over traditionally prestigious forms. In our interpretation, such an approach is sensitive to several communicative aspects of language: forms of actual *performance* (use of the language); distinction between purely *designative/denotative* and *associative / connotative meaning* (emotional response to the message); and last but not least, socio-cultural elements of *context* (which play the dominant part in specifying meaning and relate to the historical settings in which the text was produced - time, place, source, addressee and circumstances – and its culture, as well as to the target language, audience and culture). Thus, Nida's "equivalence of response" is a pragmatic and sociolinguistic notion in translation.

Peter Newmark, in *A Textbook of Translation* (1998), also defines translation procedures on the basis of contextual dimension, classified as: linguistic, referential, cultural and individual. According to these, Newmark describes several types of translation, each representing a possible strategy in certain circumstances (depending on the text type, aim of translation or the receptor audience). Among them, "*communicative translation*" represents, next to *semantic translation*, the ideal model, attempting to render the same "contextual meaning in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership" (Newmark, 1998: 31). The former is "personal and individual and tends to over-translate in order to reproduce pragmatic impact" while the latter is "social, tends to under-translate while concentrating on the message and being simple and natural." (Newmark, 1998: 40).

The translation models we have exposed build up an image of the translator as *a negotiator of meaning* between producers and receivers of text, assigning to him the central role in a *process of cross-cultural communication* and cease to regard equivalence in static,

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)

purely linguistic terms. Such perspectives can be directly related to principles of text linguistics. If we accept that meaning is something that is negotiated between producers and receivers of texts, it follows that the translator, as a special kind of text user, intervenes in this process of negotiation, to relay it across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In doing so, the translator "tries to retrieve the intended meaning and effects of the ST producer and aims at facilitating retrieval of these intentions by the reader of the target text, in conformity with TL norms" (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 33). The various domains of pragmatics, discourse linguistics and sociolinguistics are all areas of study which are germane to this process, bringing insights into the nature of *intended meaning* and *effect*, the relation of meaning to the communicative environment or *situation of communication* and ultimately into the notion of *functional meaning*. The models I have presented mean to illustrate an early, much needed recognition of the role of contextual factors in translation. The following part of this paper focuses on explicit theories of the notion, which account for even more complex, socio-cultural aware models of translation.

Contextual relevance in translation

A theory of communicative context in translation was produced by M.A.K. Halliday and the London School, who approach the notions of text and context as expressions of a fundamental relationship of mutual determination between language and society. Halliday offers a *systemic functional theory* which attempts to explain linguistic structure and linguistic phenomena based on the assumption that language is required to serve certain universal types of social demand. On the basis of these functions, a further description of three features of the "context of situation" is given:

- the *field* of discourse refers to *what* is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place; to what it is that the participants are engaged in, in which language figures as some essential component. The field is expressed through "ideational meanings" (language as reflection of reality, representational);
- the *tenor* of discourse refers to *who* is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles and the relationship among them (referring to both the types of speech roles that they take on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved); it corresponds to interpersonal meaning (language as action, expressive and imperative);
- the *mode* of discourse refers to the *role* that language is playing "(language as texture in relation to the environment), to what it is that the participants expect language to do for them in a particular situation: the symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has, its function in the context, including the channel (spoken or written text) and the rhetorical mode (didactic, argumentative, etc.).

We are to understand that by assigning a text these features, one may construct a model of the social context of a text. It is what participants in a culture do throughout their interactions, thus being able to make predictions about the meanings exchanged (based on inferences from the situation to the text and from the text to the situation) and communicate.

Relating this type of textual interpretation to Sperber and Wilson's model of communication (1986), one may conclude that an appropriate evaluation of discourse

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)

parameters contributes to achieving identity between the contextual knowledge of the sender and that of the listener (the fundamental principle of successful communication). Representing a communicative act based on inference, itself (in a cognitive perspective), translation needs relate to these three dimensions of discourse in all its stages as a process (going from the perception and comprehension of the author's intention to the reconstruction of the message addressed to a second-degree receiver). In our particular study, the object of translation is a challenging text at all three situational levels. With an awareness of their hierarchical interdependence, we will further investigate some of the most distinctive features in isolation, for methodological reasons.

From the perspective of field, the corpus, consisting of two plays translated from English into Romanian, belongs to specific literary discourse, identified as the *dramatic genre*. The experiential component of context thus relates primarily to the norms of the dramatic discourse, as an integrated element in theatrical communication, a macro-model characterised by semiotic density, in which meaning results from a particular combination of verbal and non-verbal signs. Due to its semiotic co-functionality, this type of discourse is also described by a fundamental deictic orientation and a *performative, proairectic* aspect. As Elam (1980: 157) notices, the speech event is, in its own right, the chief form of interaction in the drama, while dramatic discourse is a "network of complementary and conflicting illocutions and perlocutions" (1980: 159) and *deixis* is instituted at the origins of drama as the necessary condition of a non-narrative form of world-creating discourse (1980: 139). The implications for the act of translation concern essential principles postulated by prescriptive approaches in Drama Translation Studies, such as the theory of "performability" (Bassnett, 1980, 1985, 2011).

The parameter of mode implies a consideration of the special configuration of dramatic dialogue as non-oral spoken discourse, presenting conversational features (while having a mimetic character) combined with textual characteristics such as its syntactic orderliness, its informational intensity or its illocutionary purity. Adding to the challenge of translation in our corpus is the particular style and art of composition used by Tennessee Williams, a playwright who combined naturalist and expressionist techniques in an approach described as "poetic realism". Naturalist tendencies in his dramatic dialogues are manifest in specific writing techniques which confer a high degree of spontaneity and naturalness to character discourse, such as the use of spoken discourse markers or connectors, which require an activation of various translational strategies in order to achieve pragmatic equivalence, such as in the case below:

Table 1: Discourse marker translation

…well, I was surprised.....	**să-ţi spun drept**, (...), am fost surprinsă
Well, I wasn't surprised…	**Ba** eu nu am fost surprinsă
Oh, my law, **well….**,	**Da**, pe legea mea, ...
well, that spring, no, it was …	**Deci,** în primăvara aceea, *ba nu,* a fost ...
well,...that was a long time ago	**Ei**, asta s-a petrecut de mult ...
(Williams, 2000, *Orpheus descending*)	(Williams, 1978, *Orfeu în infern*)

A faithful, direct translation of such pragmatic particles is admitted to result in a loss of conversational features, since an impression of spontaneous speech relates to stereotypical

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)

models of verbal interaction. The theatre translator is therefore to consider the distinctive elements of conversational styles and strategies across cultures in his or her attempt to render dialogue which should sound natural while being performed on stage and should thus create an immediate illusion that the characters belong to the same culture as the audience.

Functional equivalence in translating tenor varieties

Accounting for the same fundamental dimension of dramatic *mimesis* is the tenor mode of its fictional discourse or dialogue. The concept can be discussed with particular reference to the notion of *register*, a concept relating to variation in language that goes with variation in the context of situation.

Tennessee Williams' dialogue achieves realistic notes by the use of language variation forms, tenor varieties often expressing the social stratifications of his dramatic world or social character opposition, based on the assumption that the use of situational levels of the language at an individual level can reflect the systemic opposition between standard and non-standard varieties of a language. To this view, most of the dialogue in the well-known *A Streetcar Named Desire* covers levels of the English language going from intimate and casual to informal in order to reflect the petty world of the immigrant slums of New Orleans. In *Orpheus Descending*, register associated regional dialect builds up the image of a limited provincial South. Character discourse is consequently marked at the phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic level to express a general note of colloquialism.

We will here select some of the more relevant features, starting with the graphic marks of elision in the pronunciation of the phoneme ŋ: *nothin'a-tall, snoopin'around, courtin', lookin', watchin'*. Compensation and transposition, as well as transfer, here understood as a change from one mark of variation to another, are the most frequent translational techniques. For example, the various (phonological and lexical) marks of register in the source text instance „He starts **courtin**' **some chick**" (ST1)[1] find an equivalent in a target text idiomatic phrase, which creates equivalent contextual effects in terms of tenor as well as in diachronic variation: „Începe să tragă clopotele la puştoaice" (TT1). For instances in which compensation occurs in macro-textual units and not within a sentence or a complex sentence, contractions are sometimes used to stand for the frequent phonological marks of register in the source: *nu-i, bărbatu-său, se-ntîmpla, n-ai decît*.

At the lexical level, idiomatic phrases constitute the pre-eminent mark of register in the source texts. As the Romanian scholar Rodica Zafiu (2001: 246) points out, idioms are often characterised by ludic tendencies and a lack of literal motivation in construction. Such features add up to the multiple challenges of translating Tennessee Williams' plays, illustrating the difficulties of comprehension as an initial stage of the inferencial process constituted by translation. Le us take, for instance, the original association of words in the American colloquial phrase „*to give somebody the deep six*"(ST1), in which the reception and understanding of contextual meaning (*to kill, to get rid of somebody*) is based on etymological knowledge (six standing for six feet, which is the standard depth of a grave). The idiom

[1] We use ST1 as an abbreviation of the source text *Orpheus Descending* (included in the volume Tennessee Williams, *Plays 1957 – 1980*, New York, The Library of America, 2000) and TT1 for Mihnea Gheorghiu's Romanian version of the play, which is included in Tennessee Williams, *Teatru* (Bucuresti, Editura Univers, 1978).

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)

produces rich contextual effects in the target language challenging the translator, in the next stage, to find expressive equivalents in the target language. The Romanian translators of Tennessee Williams deal with such challenges in various ways:

- The general tendency of rendering source idioms by target idioms of equal contextual relevance (*Equivalence*[2]*;Relevant equivalence*[3]);

Table 2: Idiom equivalence

TT1	ST1
Apoi a venit prohibiţia şi, ca tot omul, Macaronarul s-a apucat de contrabandă. Asta i-a mers că **i s-a potrivit ca balta la peşte.** (structural, compulsory *modulation*)	Then come prohibition an' first thing ennyone knew, The Wop had took to bootleggin' **like a duck to water!**
exact asta mi-**a trecut** şi mie **prin cap** (concrete – abstract *modulation*)	That's exactly what **passed through my mind**
o **să le tragă** fetelor ăstora bătrîne **o chelfăneală** de să le meargă fulgii (optional expansion)	She'll **give** those two maids **a touch of her tongue**
Le-au făcut felul	**Gave them the deep six**
TT2/TT3[4] Mi se învîrte capul /**Mă zăpăceşti de cap**	ST2/ST3 **My head is swimming**
Asta **i-a închis gura** /A tăcut mâlc	**That shut her up like a clam**

- Rendering idiomatic meaning through „explicitation" while keeping tenor effects: *se aruncă asupra prăzii* (*hauls in the loot), se stîrneau nişte scandaluri* (*they'd **raise** such **Cain***)[5];
- Textual compensation of register (source lexical unit rendered by idiom of superior colloquial force): **să bagi de seamă** dacă au patima banilor („*Notice* their passion for money"); **pun mâna în foc că** ...(I *bet*);
- Target idiom of inferior contextual relevance (inevitable *enthropy*): Let's **cut the re-bop** (TS1)[6] – *să terminăm cu temenelile* (TT2);

[2] One of the seven fundamental translation strategies identified by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), consisting in maintenance in the TL of the SL situation by using completely different language structural and stylistic means (1995: 342).

[3] Cătălina Iliescu Gheorghiu considers that relevant equivalence consists in a high degree of interpretative resemblance between the traget text communicative intentions and the translator''s perceptions of the soource text sender''s intentions, (Iliescu, 2009:141) while keeping the force of contextual effects and requiring equal efforts to decode the message.

[4] ST2 is an abbreviation for the source text *A Streetcar Named Desire* (in *The Northon Anthology of American Literature*, Sixth Edition, Volume E, New York, 2003); ST3 is a second version of the same play, included in *Tennessee Williams, Plays 1937-1955* (The Library of America, New York, 2000); TT2 is the translated version of Dorin Dron, included in *Teatrul american contemporan* (Editura pentru literatură universală, Bucureşti, 1968) and TT3 is a re-translation belonging to Antoaneta Ralian (Tennessee Williams, Bucuresti, Art, 2010).

[5] "Raise hell, cause a disturbance, protest angrily"; "from the biblical son of Adam and Eve, the first murderer. The expression implies bringing or returning that evil to Earth" (*Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*, 2003).

[6] According to editorial footnotes in ST1, the term *re-bop* (whose implied basic meaning is *nonsense*) is an improvisation evoking jazz sounds. These have a particular symbolic relevance in the play's semiotic system (as non-verbal signs) and also function as cultural signs for the dramatic world (New Orleans).

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)

Compensation of idiomatic register relevance through other marks of tenor variation (lexical, morphological or pragmatic marks):

> Aw, I'll **make myself scarce**, in that case (ST2) - A, atunci **o să dispar**. (TT3) – Ah! …În cazul ăsta, **o şterg** (TT2).
>
> We used to go up there an' **court up a storm**, ha, ha, just **court up a storm** (ST1)– obişnuiam să mergem acolo să petrecem, **he, he, cum ne mai petreceam**!

– *Translation loss* by alteration of idiomatic meaning and neutralisation of register.

The phrase *to be on a kick , to be on a benny kick* belongs to the American slang of the 50's , when *benny* stood for the stimulant medicine known as "benzedrine". In our opinion, the Romanian solution suggests not so much a lack of adequate perception of meaning but rather the influence of a preliminary norm on translation. We believe the constraints of editorial censorship, describing the Communist era in which the translation was performed, imposed euphemistic tendencies, here manifested in a translation solution which comes down to micro-textual rephrasing and changes in illocutionary acts (shifts in performative orientation):

> **What kick are you on**, Lady, **are you on a benny kick**?...you've washed down a couple of bennies with a pot of black coffee t' make you come on strong for th' three o'clock show? (ST1)
> **Mi se pare că eşti adormită**! Ce zici, Lady, nu vrei poate să-ţi fac o ceaşcă dublă de cafea neagră pentru a te întrema puţin pentru reprezentaţia de la ora trei? (TT1).

Conclusion

The recognition of function in translation has brought about specific methodologies of descriptive approaches in Translation Studies, which have turned good old *equivalence* into a more dynamic principle, covering both *adequacy* and *acceptability*. At the core of such complex paradigms stands the simple observation that the translation of an administrative memorandum is regulated by different norms from those regulating literary translation. By the same token, the translation of theatre requires specific strategies within the general norms of literary translation. The recognition of these differences must serve to incorporate diversity of function within an overall model of the translation process.

Bibliography

Bassnett, Susan, 1980/1991. *Translation Studies*, London, Routledge.
Bassnett, Susan, 1985. "Ways Through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts" in Theo Hermans (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, ,Londra, Croom Helm, pp. 87- 102.
Bassnett, Susan, 1990. "Translating for the Theatre-Textual Complexities", în *Essays in poetics*, Vol.15, nr.1, 71-83.

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)

Bassnett, Susan, 2011. *Reflections on Translation*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters.
Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged, 2003. HarperCollins Publishers.
Elam, Keir, 1980. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Londra, Methuen.
Halliday, M.A.K., R., Hasan, 1989. *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Halliday, M. A. K., 1978. *Language as Social Semiotic*, Londra, Edward Arnold.
Hatim, B. şi I. Mason, 1990. *Discourse and the Translator*, Londra si New York, Longman.
Iliescu Gheorghiu, Cătălina , 2009. *Traducerea textului dramatic. O abordare cognitivă*, Iaşi, Institutul European.
Levițchi, Leon, (ed.), 1974. *Dicţionar Englez-Român*, Editura Academiei .
Newmark, Peter, 1998. *A Textbook of Translation*, London: Prentice Hall International.
Nida, Eugene, Taber, Charles, 1974. *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, New York: The United Bible Society.
Nord, Christiane, 1997. *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, Manchester: St. Jerome Publishers.
Sperber, D., Wilson. D., 1986. *Relevance : Communication and Cognition*, Oxford, Blackwell.
Vinay, Jean-Paul, Darbelnet, Jean, (1958) 1995. *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation*, transl. by Juan C. Sager, M-J. Hamel, John Benjamins Publishing.
Zafiu, Rodica, 2001. *Diversitate stilistică în româna actuală*, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti

Corpus de studiu

Williams, Tennessee, 1978. *Teatru*, Bucuresti, Editura Univers.
Williams, Tennessee, 2000. *Plays 1937 – 1955*, New York, The Library of America.
Williams, Tennessee, 2000. *Plays 1957 – 1980*, New York, The Library of America.
Williams, Tennessee , 2010. *Un tramvai numit Dorinţă*, trad. Antoaneta Ralian, Bucureşti: Art.
*** *Teatrul american contemporan, 1968.* Editura pentru literatură universală, Bucureşti.
The Norton Anthology of American literature, 2003. vol.E, New York, Norton and Company.

BDD-V472 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:00:50 UTC)