Article

Theater Translation Research Methodologies

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Abstract

Theater translation is an emerging area of research. However, to date, there has been no detailed consideration of the type of methodologies required to conduct such research. This article examines methods and practices in both theater and translation studies in order to discuss their applicability to study theater translation specifically. It categorizes existing research into output-oriented and process-oriented elaborating the specificities of each. The methods include comparative analysis of the translated texts with their source texts and production reviews. This article also outlines ethical issues in conducting research into theater translation.

Keywords

performing arts, theater translation, intercultural transfers, research methodologies, mixed methods

Introduction

Theater translation has emerged as a discrete area of research at the confluence of translation and theater studies. Bassnett (1991), Johnston (1996), and Aaltonen (2000) produced early pioneering studies; however, it is really since 2010 that theater scholarship has put the Translator on Stage (Brodie, 2017). Recent work of significance includes that of Baines et al. (2010), Bigliazzi et al. (2013), and Laera (2019). Concurrently, there has been an increasing number of publications concerning theater in translation studies journals (e.g., Battist on,´ 2019; Marinetti, 2018). Yet, while theater studies has developed an array of qualitative methodologies to analyze performance, and translation studies has done likewise to study texts in transla-tion, neither has done much to advance reflection on the spe-cific methodologies required to analyze theater translation. The prime aim of this article is to address the gap in the literature. It does so by surveying research methodologies in theater and translation studies, highlighting convergences. It then moves on to discuss their relevance to the study of theater translation, and to comment on ethical issues, in order to offer a clear framework for conducting research in this area.

Defining Theater and Translation Research

Research in translation. Metaphorically speaking, all acts of interpretation can be described as translation (Steiner, 1975). From a more literal, restrictive perspective, translation is



considered a procedure in which a written text is replaced by another in a different language (House, 2018, p. 10). In an important paper in the early days of the discipline, Holmes (1988) divided research in translation studies into two branches: “pure” and “applied.” Pure research describes trans-lation phenomena and scaffolds theoretical apparatuses in order to conceptualize such phenomena (e.g., Robinson, 2011). Applied research looks to improve translator training and translation aids (Fl orez´ & Alcina, 2011), as well as to assess translations for quality in professional contexts (Colina, 2008). According to this division of the field, the pure branch asks how “does” translation happen, whereas the applied branch outlines how it “should” happen. Arguably, Holmes’s division is somewhat dated (Munday, 2016, pp. 19–20), and not all applied research is necessarily prescriptive. A more recent mapping has been provided by van Doorslaer (2007) who divides research into “translation” and “translation studies,” with the former being more practically focused, and the latter considering conceptual issues. However, both maps highlight



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divergences in research interests and methodologies. Both maps also suggest a division between research with theoretical and practical concerns.

Historically, key debates in translation studies have included whether a translated text may be deemed “equivalent” to its source text (Newmark, 1981; Nida, 1964). Such a notion has been closely related to the question of the “translatability” of concepts, utterances, and metaphors (Hatim & Munday, 2004; Mounin, 1963). Since the so-called cultural turn (Bass-nett & Lefevere, 1990), discussion of translation is no-longer conceived in purely linguistic terms but rather as culturally embedded (Maitland, 2017). The concept of equivalence has lost sway and is only championed by a minority of scholars (e.g., Pym, 2007). In recent years, activist translation strategies that promote a specific agenda have been much discussed (Tymoczko, 2000). There has also been considerable debate about the applicability of translation concepts to global con-texts and, in particular, the implicit Eurocentric bias of models and theories (Chang, 2015). Moreover, there has been a signif-icant number of studies that consider the role and working conditions of translators, to the extent that Chesterman (2017) has argued that it may even be relevant to speak of the development of a separate subfield called “translator studies.”

Research in theater. Theater refers to a multitude of social and artistic representational practices that pertain to performance. Goody (1997, p. 31) outlines representation in three ways: bringing into presence something previously absent, embody-ing an abstraction in an object, and presenting something in a different way. The idea of theater (re)presenting (Glynn, 2015) something in a different way is particularly relevant when thinking about translations, given that translations rewrite texts in a new language (Lefevere, 1992). Theater studies is a vast discipline with many different areas of enquiry. One research domain considers how texts have been staged in different cul-tural (Gilbert & Lo, 2009) and temporal contexts (Silverstone, 2011). There are also many case studies of specific directors (e.g., Boenisch & Finburgh, 2018), playwrights (Delgado et al., 2020), or productions (Rodosthenous, 2017). In addition, there is research on intermedial practices (Crossley, 2019) as well as on performance traditions from around the world (e.g., Thorpe, 2018). There is no structural division between pure and applied research as in translation studies, though there is research that is specifically geared toward educational, social, and therapeu-tic applications (e.g., Hughes & Nicholson, 2016). There is also a divide between theater studies as an area of academic enquiry and training for theater provided at drama schools and conservatories.

Major discussions in theater studies include how to perform works with long interpretative and stage histories (Glynn, 2017; Laera, 2013). Key theoretical notions include that of “performativity” (Cull & Lagaay, 2014) which, when applied to theater productions, consider how plays are invested with “performative force” (Worthen, 2003, pp. 9–13) when trans-ferred to the stage. In addition, theater studies are at the critical juncture of performance studies, which has developed out of

work by Schechner and Turner (1985), and which seeks to describe cultural rituals through the lens of theatrical meta-phors and terminology.

Research in theater translation. As for “theater translation,” the term may be understood in different ways. For a start, meta-phorically at least, all productions that stage a preexisting text may be considered types of “intersemiotic translation,” as a play is transferred from page to stage (Zuber-Skerritt, 1984). Viewed from this angle, most research in theater studies that looks at the staging of dramatic literature bears some relation-ship to translation. Here, the role of the director in translating a text intersemiotically to the stage is equated with that of the translator, and directorial intention is akin to a translator’s strategy. From the perspective of a more restrictive understand-ing of translation, there is scholarship on translated plays in performance (Chan, 2015). There are also detailed investiga-tions of the processes of translating for the theater (Brodie, 2017) and of the international circulation of productions and networks (Bollen, 2020), which investigate theater from a transnational angle (Schweitzer, 2015) or that examine inter-cultural connections (Fischer-Lichte, 2014). Finally, there are studies of sur-titling (Oncins, 2015) and audio description prac-tices (Roofthooft et al., 2018) that highlight the multimodality of theater. From a theoretical angle, the notion of “performability” (Bassnett, 1991; Glynn & Hadley, 2020) has been investigated at the intersection of theater and translation studies. Furthermore, the study of both the intralingual and interlingual “adaptation” of texts to the stage is itself a flour-ishing area of investigation, and there is a considerable body of research that theorizes adaptation in relation to translation practices (Brodie & Cole, 2017; Krebs, 2014; Laera, 2014).

Research Methods

A range of different methods are used to study theater transla-tion depending on the focus of the enquiry. In the following, these methods are classified and discussed in relation to two main orientations identified in current research. They are not toward pure or applied research. Rather, the first is toward the output and the second is toward the process. An output can be a published text as in other forms of literary translation. It can also be a production of a translated text. Depending on the orientation of the research, different methodologies derived from translation, theater studies or cogent disciplines may be utilized. It may be argued that in the context of theater, it is not helpful to distinguish between outputs and processes as many book-length studies combine analysis of both. However, shorter research items (performance reviews and research arti-cles) tend to focus on one or other aspect. It is this focus that characterizes their research orientation.

Output-Oriented Research

In the following, output-oriented research is grouped into three subcategories (comparative analysis, contextual analysis, and

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production analysis) in accordance with the main methodolo-gies used. Translations can be analyzed in relation to their sources. Translations can also be studied within the contexts in which they were produced. In addition, in the case of theater translations that are produced on stage, they can be analyzed in relation to their productions, and their productions can be ana-lyzed within the context of what else is staged in a given culture at a given point in time. These methods are not mutually exclu-sive but may usefully be combined.

Comparative analysis. In translation studies, a translated text is commonly referred to as a “target text” and the original as a “source text,” though this nomenclature has been contested, notably in relation to translation in the digital sphere (Pym, 2004). Studying translations is traditionally done by comparing a source text with a target text. This method requires analysis of the linguistic features of both to identify lexical, semantic, and stylistic changes or “shifts” (Catford, 1965). Such shifts may be due to differences in the grammars of two languages. For, instance, unlike English, Mandarin Chinese does not have a system of definite articles (Robertson, 2000, p. 140). Translat-ing between English and Chinese will thus require omitting the definite articles (Zhang & Li, 2009). Shifts may also be due to the fact that languages express ideas using different idiomatic phrases and conceptual metaphors (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995).

Shifts might additionally be imputed to the overall strategy adopted by the translator. The literature (Newmark, 1981; Nida, 1964; Venuti, 1995) typically identifies two orientations, one that aims to preserve as much as possible the structure and lexis of the source text and the other that aims to communicate its message in the most effective manner for the target audi-ence. The decision to adopt a particular strategy depends in part on the material to be translated and the extent to which its features are deemed to be specific to the source culture (Franco Aixel´a, 1996; Leppihalme, 1997). It also depends on the norms (Chesterman, 1997) of the industry or publishing outlet where the translation is produced. Specifically concerning theater, when translations are produced for performance, the transla-tor’s strategy is often influenced, if not directly guided by, the director of the stage production.

A preliminary framework for comparatively analyzing translated plays was developed by Ladouceur (1995, especially

1. 35–36). It involves comparing macrostructural (division into acts and scenes, number of characters) and microstructural (register, lexis, and style) elements of the texts. Analysis of individual scenes provides information about the various pro-cedures used by translators, which can include, but are not limited to, the omission of passages, the explicitation of com-plex concepts or metaphors either within the text or in foot-notes, and the universalization of culture-specific references. An example of the latter is how “a Chesterfield” may be ren-dered as “un sof´a” [a sofa] in Spanish translations of British spy novels (Franco Aixel´a, 1996, p. 63). The comparison of the different procedures helps to determine the overall strategy used by a translator. Moreover, detailed analysis of the differ-ent features of a translation can be compared with those of

other translations, if they exist. Such information is also use-fully supplemented by considering the context in which the translation was produced.

Contextual analysis. There has been a paradigm shift in transla-tion studies to consider translated texts within the context of the target cultures rather than solely in relation to their source texts. If a translated text represents a language, culture, and place in another language, culture, and place (Toury, 2012, p. 69), its difference compared to nontranslated texts can be more or less apparent, depending on whether the translator considers mak-ing its otherness a virtue to be displayed or an inconvenience to be hidden. In Venuti’s (1995, pp. 21–25) terms, the former approach is “foreignization,” whereas the latter is “domestication.” Venuti is a firm advocate of foreignization as a practice that brings attention to the fact that a text has been mediated and rewritten by a translator. He makes the grand claim that a foreignized translation “can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism” (p. 20). Primarily, his under-standing of foreignization is conceptualized in terms of resis-tance to the norms of stylistic fluency in Anglo-American publishing culture. Indeed, in general terms, research suggests a growing trend toward “domestication” in European literature (Franco Aixel´a, 1996, p. 54; Polizzotti, 2018, pp. 68–69). Yet, as Chang (2018) has argued, this is not necessarily the case everywhere, since in China, the translation norm is to “foreignize,” meaning that “domestication,” in this context, might be conceived as a “form of resistance.”

The extent to which a particular culture is hospitable to translation determines the extent to which it is inclined to mod-ify its own norms (Even-Zohar, 1990). In other words, the higher the percentage of translated texts published or, in the case of theater, performed on stage, in a particular context, the more likely that context is to publish or stage translations that do not resemble nontranslated texts in terms of style and content. An example of a particularly hospitable environment to translation (not necessarily theater related) is Greece in the 1990s, where translations accounted for 45% of the national book production (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2016, p. 317). A hostile environment, by contrast, is the UK theater scene, where trans-lations are infrequently performed for a range of issues includ-ing financial considerations (Brodie, 2017, p. 6). Plays that do not correspond to what translations are expected to look like, such as foreignized translations, are deemed unperformable (Glynn & Hadley, 2020, p. 5).

In order to determine the expectancy norms of a target cul-ture (Chesterman, 1997), both translated texts and nontrans-lated texts need to be analyzed. By analyzing structural divisions (number of acts, and scenes) in both translated and untranslated plays, the number of characters, stylistic, lexical, and thematic components, it is possible to establish whether there are significant differences between plays originally writ-ten in the language of the target culture and those that have been translated. In addition, translated texts can be situated in their discursive contexts by consulting relevant secondary lit-erature and by means of literary discourse analysis

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(Maingueneau, 2010). Such an approach involves consulting paratextual materials (Genette, 1997), such as prefaces (Snell-Hornby, 1988), book covers (Mossop, 2018), press, and promo-tional materials (Marin-Lacarta, 2019) but also materials held in archives, including personal correspondence. Regarding older translations, it is useful to consider whether they have been (re)printed and whether they have been used as part of school programs. This indicates the extent to which the source texts and the translations have been accepted by the target cultures (Casanova, 1999).

Production analysis. Not all translations of theater plays are intended to be staged (Aaltonen, 2000). However, for those that are, a production on stage represents the final output of the translation process. Analyzing theater translations in their target context thus requires studying how they are performed on stage. This means using methods developed within theater studies to provide production analysis. Production reviews in theater studies journals typically describe the action that takes place on stage, interpreting actors’ movements, delivery, and scenographic elements of the mise-en-sc`ene (e.g., Delgado, 2017). The most common method of conducting performance reviews is to use Geertz’s (1973) method of “thick description,” which situates action in its context and locates the subjectivity of the observer. This includes providing details of the observer’s impressions of entering the performance space and the social and political context in which a production is presented. An important part of a theater reviewer’s report of a production consists of analyzing the reactions of fellow audi-ence members, for going to the theater means simultaneously watching a play through one’s own eyes and as part of a group (Biet & Triau, 2006, p. 62). However, there are inherent meth-odological difficulties in this owing to the fact that audiences do not react in the same way to a same production night after night (Viala & Bordier, 1997). It is also difficult to identify whether the audience is reacting first and foremost to the text, to the text as a translation, or to the performance of the actors. What is more, such an approach to studying audience reactions is, for obvious reasons, limited to contemporary performance. For older sources, it is possible to comment on the critical reception of a production, by analyzing discourse in various written sources, such as reviews.

Concerning contemporary productions, there are, however, other methods for analyzing the reception of a translated play even though, as Canton (2011, p. 123) has noted, audience research has been until recently (e.g., Sedgman, 2016, 2018) a neglected area of theater studies. Critical reception can be gauged by analyzing reviews in newspapers, academics, blogs, and social media, for instance. In addition, social sciences methodologies for collecting feedback such as audience sur-veys and focus groups may be used. The integration of such methodologies is more common in translation than in theater studies, as surveys have been used to measure reaction to dif-ferent translation strategies (Zhong & Lin, 2007). Focus groups are another potential way of measuring reaction to particular

texts (Mack et al., 2013), though there are issues in assembling representative groups.

Process-Oriented Research

The methodologies considered above analyze translation as an output. They study target texts in relation to source texts (com-parative analysis) or in relation to other translations and non-translations (contextual analysis). They also determine how and why certain decisions have been taken by translators. How-ever, they do not discuss in detail the process of producing a translation, outlining the stages and people involved. This is what process-oriented research aims to do. Regarding transla-tion, and theater translation in particular, process-oriented research can be grouped into two main types. The first describes how (theater) translations circulate from a systemic perspective, theorizing general laws. The second considers individual case studies. While case studies can be used to for-mulate general theories, the general process-oriented research theories consider a range of examples from contexts pertinent to translation and theater.

General theory. Within translation studies, there is a subset of descriptive research that examines how texts circulate in trans-lation from a systemic perspective (Even-Zohar, 1990; Heil-bron & Sapiro, 2007, 2016). Such research examines how the process of translating is “embedded within the power relations among national states and their languages” (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2007, p. 95) and explains why certain texts are translated to the detriment of others (Tan, 2017). There is also both descriptive and prescriptive research that focuses on procedures to trans-late specific texts or textual features. Such research identifies strategies used by translators to render complex concepts that might be specific to a culture or attributable to an author’s idiosyncratic use of language (Franco Aixel´a, 1996). General theories have highlighted the fact that translation is a purpose-ful activity (Nord, 1997).

Regarding theater specifically, as Aaltonen (2000, p. 4) has argued, whether a translation is produced in order to be staged or to be read will influence its development process but also the translation strategy. A translation produced for publication will involve different intermediaries (editors, graphic designers, etc.) than a translation produced for performance (directors, programmers, actors, etc.). There is currently a lack of sys-tematic modeling of the theater translation process. However, there are general theories of intercultural theater, by Pavis (1990) notably, which collect data and examples from a range of cross-cultural contexts, as well as case studies of specific language contexts (e.g., Tian, 2008).

Case-specific analysis. There is a considerable body of research within translation studies and theater studies, respectively, that details the processes of production in order to test existing theories and paradigms (Collier, 2011, p. 824). Qualitative descriptions of translation processes can be collected through semistructured interviews characterized by emphasis on

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relatively open questions (Leach, 2017, p. 49). They may be conducted with translators but also with various intermediaries involved in the “art world” (Becker, 1982) of theater. These include producers, artistic programmers, festival organizers, directors, agents, and translators. Semistructured interviews are commonly used in ethnographic research in a number of dif-ferent fields and increasingly in translation studies (e.g., Saka-moto, 2017). They are also increasingly a feature of journals such as the Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance.

The value of such interviews lies in their provision of insider views on the process of translating plays. Interview questions can be tailored to foreground translation strategies. Interviews with some of the professionals may be conducted in a different language to the one in which the results are written up. There may be complications in translating interviews across lan-guages owing to the fact that metaphors differ from one lan-guage to another (Ho et al., 2019, p. 2). There are also ethical considerations such as whether to anonymize the interviewees. Research with a sociological bent will tend to anonymize inter-viewees (e.g., Kalinowski, 2002) in order to foreground the processes. It may, however, be useful to name individuals, such as famous directors or translators, in order to situate their declarations in context (Ducournau, 2017, p. 26). This is what has tended to happen in theater translation research where famous translators, such as Christopher Hampton, are inter-viewed as informants (Baines & Perteghella, 2010).

General Framework for Conducting Research

As the previous sections have made clear, there are different approaches to conducting research on theater translation depending on the object of study and the scope of the research project. The utilization of these different approaches and meth-ods come with a set of issues and ethical considerations. Some of these have been alluded to above; however, they will be explored here to provide a clear framework for conducting research in theater translation. Issues to be considered relate to time, access, and visibility constraints. While each issue is not necessarily restricted to conducting research on theater translation, there are ramifications that are specific to this area of investigation.

Ethical considerations. Ethical issues to be considered in this section relate to time, access, and visibility constraints. While each issue is not necessarily restricted to conducting research on theater translation, there are ramifications that are specific to this area of investigation.

Visibility in data collection. Visibility in translation studies is gen-erally considered through the lens of Venuti’s (1995) paradigm of the invisibility of the translator. The issue of a theater trans-lator’s visibility is one that a theater translation researcher may want to investigate. However, in order to do so, the researcher’s own visibility in the process of collecting and interpreting data needs to be considered. The issue of the researcher’s visibility is arguably most problematic when it comes to collecting

information from audiences. For instance, while conducting audience research on National Theatre Wales, Sedgman (2016, p. 191) explains that she was authorized to conduct her research on the condition that she volunteered as a steward. As a result, audience members perceived her to be part of the institution rather than an independent researcher. As Sedgman notes, this has to be “borne in mind when considering the responses gathered” (p. 191).

Access to information. Being asked to give something back in return for information obtained—beyond simply crediting the institution in publications that come out of the research—blurs the boundaries between the researcher and the institution they are investigating. Blurred boundaries can also be an issue when interviewing professionals with whom a researcher has worked in a different professional relationship. As is noted by Brodie and Cole (2017), theater translation researchers often have practical experience as translators. Interpersonal relationships influence the way in which information is collected, and there is danger in the researcher loses their “distance and objectivity” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 655). It can be that certain informa-tion is easier or harder to elicit depending on these relation-ships. It is not always clear from the acknowledgment sections or from the main body of articles how the degree of proximity between researchers and subjects may have facilitated the obtention of information. This is potentially an even greater problem with the anonymization of sources.

In pluriannual research projects, it is possible to study pro-cess and outputs, texts, and productions using comparative and contextual analysis. For smaller projects, this is not feasible as it demands considerable resources in terms of time, finances, and skill sets. For instance, in a theater festival or producing theater, external companies develop work outside the venue and only come a little before the performances. This means that they are not necessarily available on site to discuss their work. In addition, companies are more or less willing to discuss the processes of developing work as researchers are viewed with suspicion or not seen as important. Time constraints are equally a factor on accessing programmers. While modern communication technology facilitates access to companies that are far from researchers, they do little to alleviate the problem of a lack of time available.

Mixed Methodologies

The data to be collected for research projects on theater trans-lation are varied and include factual data about translated plays, qualitative data collected by ethnographic fieldwork, and anal-ysis of various documents, including translated plays, press reviews, and promotional materials.

Quantitative data collection and analysis. There are different types of information relating to theater translation relevant to researchers in this domain. When studying a specific institution or festival, the number of translated plays performed in relation to the number of untranslated plays can help give a sense of the

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importance afforded to translation. Other information of rele-vance that may be collected includes, but is not limited to, the titles of plays in the source and target languages, language and country of provenance, dates of composition and translation, names of writer(s) and translator(s), gender of writer(s) and translator(s), titles of other plays written by the writer, titles of other plays translated by the translator, details of publication in the source and target cultures, if relevant, dates and times of performances in source language, if relevant, and dates and times of performances in target languages. Sapiro (2010) pre-viously used such classification methods to construct a data-base of translated works, published in French and English in the mid-2000s, as did Zurbach (2009), for a case study of transla-tors working with a professional theater group in Portugal in the 1980s. Similar data relating to specific case studies in the domain of theater translation may be collected through internet searches, coded, and classified. Analysis will highlight whether there are countries, writers, or playwrights that are more rep-resented than others in the context being studied.

Qualitative data collection and analysis. Qualitative descriptions of process can be collected through semistructured interviews conducted with theater professionals on site or by remote means. The range of descriptive methodologies outlined previ-ously is applicable to analyzing a range of plays in translation in different contexts. An approach that combines methodolo-gies pertaining to translation and literary studies with “thick descriptions” of performance with surveys distributed to audi-ence members will generate a wide set of usable data. Placing the translated plays in their contexts also involves looking at how plays circulate in translation in other contexts by consult-ing relevant secondary literature. It is of course possible to consider other research directions. However, the above pro-vides a general framework to how to make use of a range of methodological approaches in theater translation.

Conclusion

Research in theater translation sits at the crossroads of theater and translation studies. To undertake research into theater translation requires utilizing conceptual tools and methodolo-gies from both these disciplines as well as conceiving of var-ious subfield specific methods. This article has outlined methodologies in translation and theater studies that are directly applicable to the study of theater translation. It has revealed that depending on the focus of the research project to be undertaken, mapping the process or comparatively study-ing a translation with its source text will be more or less rele-vant. It has also shown that it is possible to combine research methodologies, including qualitative research and quantitative methods. Further research is required to determine yet more methods that may be applicable to theater translation research, particularly regarding sur-titling practices. However, this arti-cle has raised new questions about which tools researchers working on translation in the theater need in their methodolo-gical tool kit.

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