# Theatre

## In brief

**SPA** *Teatro*

### ⏴⏴ origins

Etymologically, the Greek *theatron* means "the place from which the audience watches an action that is presented in another place", as theatre semiotician Patrice Pavis reminds us (1998: 396). This meaning is present in the idea of theatre as a perspective, as "a point of view on an event", and, through "a shift in the relationship between the gaze and the object contemplated", *theatre* also becomes the building where the performance takes place, and, finally, acquires the abstract sense of theatre art (Pavis 1998: 396).

### ⏴⏴ other names

In English, a distinction is made between *drama translation*, which usually refers to written texts, to dramatic literature,) and *theatre translation*, to refer to performance texts, thus expressing the double nature of theatre, which is commented on below. Here*, theatre translation* is mostly used, except when we specifically refer to written translated drama.

### ☰ abstract

Theatre translation can be defined as the set of linguistic, scenic, ideological and cultural transpositions of drama texts which have been written in a language, or language variety, with a view to their performance or publication in another linguistic or cultural setting. The specificity of theatre translation is related to the double nature of text, as a written dramatic text or as a performed theatre text. This, in turn, is connected to the inscription of translation in the literary or theatre systems of the source and target cultures, although the limits between drama or theatre translation are often blurred.

The semiotic complexity of theatre texts, given the combination of verbal and non-verbal signs, aural and visual, proxemic and kinetic, creates polyphony of information. This is both a source of

restrictions and possibilities for theatre translation, especially in experimental or postdramatic contexts, which defy usual notions of consistency, narrativity or character building. Besides, multilingualism in contemporary societies and in their cultural productions often questions the role of translation in contemporary theatre.

This entry presents an overview of discussions in theatre translation studies: the blurred boundaries between (literal) translation, version and adaptation: the notion of performability and its connections with extratextual factors; the connections between translation and other phases of theatre production, and acculturation, i. e. the inscription of translation in specific cultural or ideological contexts. It also explores the connections between theatre translation and related modes and disciplines, such as audiovisual, literary and musical translation. It addresses the challenges of linguistic or sensory accessibility, by means of audio description, surtitling or sign language interpreting. Finally, it presents some avenues for research in this field.

## 🖾 record

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# Entry

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## 📖 Introduction: specificity and interdisciplinarity

Theatre translation can be briefly defined as the linguistic, cultural, ideological and performance transposition of a drama text written in a language or linguistic variety, with a view to its performance or publication in another language and/or theatrical context.

Drama texts are characterised by semiotic complexity. The combination of linguistic and paralinguistic elements along with proxemic, kinetic, visual and aural signs create a polyphony of information (Barthes 1971), since theatrical language reaches its full realization through different semiotic systems (verbal language, gestures, props, costumes, scenery, music, lighting, etc.). This polyphony of information is an enormous source of restrictions, but also of possibilities, for translation (Mateo 1995). As a consequence, verbal problems can be solved by resorting to non-verbal signs and vice versa.

The specificity of theatre translation comes from the double nature of theatre, as literature and as performance. That is, we need to take into account the distinction drawn by semiotician Keir Elam between "dramatic texts", those written for the stage, and "theatrical or performance texts" (1980: 3). When we translate, we depart from and arrive at writing. That is, we read a dramatic text and produce another dramatic text. However, by virtue of the inevitably interpretative act involved in all reading and writing, we imagine a theatre text, a mise-en-scène. The theatre director, in turn, creates a new theatre text from a translated drama text.

The philological or theatre priorities of publications condition the inscription of translation into the literary or theatrical systems of the target cultures, that is, translating "for the page" or "for the stage". Some philological translation of classics, for example, can greatly differ from theatre translation in a postdramatic context, where narrativity, coherence or psychological building of character are challenged (Marinetti 2013). In published translations, philological priorities usually prevail and follow the norm of text "fidelity" with a view to achieving a certain durability. Take, for example, the publication of complete works in translation of classics, such as Shakespeare or Bertolt Brecht. With these, there is the possibility of slow reading, and the presence of paratexts,

such as prologues and footnotes, may clarify specific aspects of the text or its possible interpretations.

By contrast, in theatre translations, "for the stage", performance is their main priority. This often involves the requirement to enhance the present relevance of the text, to produce a translation which impacts audiences or is immediately understood  - without resorting to footnotes -, so that the only paratexts accompanying translations would be hand programmes. Alternatively, the inclusion of non-verbal theatrical elements may contribute to understanding the text and its insertion in the global concept of the theatrical production. Sometimes, the translation brief includes also dramaturgical work, where a play is adapted to a specific time and to the cast needs (such as a reduction of characters). This was the case, for example, in a Catalan adaptation of *An Ideal Husband*, by Oscar Wilde, 2009. The translator, Jordi Sala, was asked to change the Victorian context of the play to one of the new millennium, where messages came from mobile phones, not from letters, and the characters of servants were eliminated.



*Un marit ideal in its adaptation for Teatre Goya in Barcelona.*

*UBC Theatre's modernization of Much Ado About Nothing.*

The limits between translating for the page and for the stage are often blurred: many published translations are performed; they are considered to work on stage and are used to train actors in theatre schools. Similarly, translations for the stage are eventually published and can be read with relative independence from their origin in a specific production.

So far we have considered the connections between drama translation and theatre translation. Let us now compare theatre translation and audiovisual translation. Both share the semiotic density which allows for negotiating what sign (verbal or non-verbal, visual or aural), is prioritised in translation. Theatre translation, like translation for dubbing, has the paradoxical task of (re)creating plausible texts, which seem oral, even if they are initially written, in what has been conceptualized as prefabricated orality. Theatre translation differs, however, from audiovisual translation in that theatre is a live, ephemeral event, which may change in every performance, and is not initially conceived for its transmission through a screen. Nevertheless, due to the growing demands of accessibility, be it technological, sensory or cultural, theatre shows are increasingly video recorded and broadcast through the screen.

The following table summarizes the main similarities and differences between literary translation (drama), theatre translation and audiovisual translation.

| Feature | Literary Translation | Theatre Translation | Audiovisual Translation |
|---|---|---|---|

**(drama)**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Performance as unrepeatable, unique event | | x | |
| Immediate feedback from audience/Two-way communication | | x | |
| Immediate reception by audience | | x | x |
| Translation negotiated by a complex communicative chain of agents | x | x | x |
| Intersemiotic translation | | x | x |
| Pre-existing audio visual material | | | x |
| Simultaneous reception through two channels (audio and visual) | | x | x |
| Presence of verbal and non-verbal signs | | x | x |
| Precise synchrony between verbal and non-verbal signs | | | x |
| Transmission/reproducibility by means of a screen | | | x |
| Prefabricated orality | x | x | x |
| Concision | x | x | x |
| Possibility of general | x | x | |

cultural adaptation in the
text

Connection between
translation and construction          x              x
of production

From this table, we can highlight the following communicative features, which are specific to theatre translation:

- The performance as a unique event. In contrast to audiovisual translation, this means that potentially any event during the show may affect it.
- Immediate feedback from audiences. Reactions from the audiences - laughter in a comedy, silences in a tragedy - may generate effects in the translated text, which will have to adjust to the global conception of the show and potential reception from audiences (Mateo 1995).
- Potential cultural adaptation generated by the translated text. In the process of translating the text, decisions on cultural adaptation can be taken, which will affect its mise-en-scène. In contrast, in audiovisual translation, cultural adaptation is mostly inscribed in the source film text. Only in certain types of creative, amateur or humoristic film translation, some cultural adaptation can be incorporated into target texts.
- Connection between translation and construction of production/mise-en-scène. In audiovisual translation there is generally more fragmentation of work. In contrast, in theatre translation there can be interaction between translation and the general construction of the mise-en-scène throughout its different phases, which will be commented on later.

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# ¶ Usual terms and concepts relating to theatre translation

Here we will deal briefly with the different names given to theatre translation, and then we will consider the notion of performability.

The limits between the terms *translation, version, adaptation*, *recreation*, are very variable in both professional and academic use (Espasa 2009; Braga Riera 2011; Brodie 2018: 3-5). Academically, there is consensus on the need to research and delimit the meaning of each concept in the context in which they are used, according to such parameters as the following: the type of translation (interlinguistic, intralinguistic or intersemiotic); the relations with the source text(s); the overt or covert mention of the sources; the relative distance between the linguistic, geographical or historical contexts, and the change of genre or format. It should be noted that in theatrical translation there is no binary relationship between source and target texts. As regards the source texts, from a historical perspective it is often difficult to determine what source texts or editions have been used, the role of indirect translations, or even if there are traces of what nowadays would be considered as plagiarism (a historically changing concept). Regarding target texts, the afore-mentioned distinction between translations for the page or for the stage is relevant, and is usually a criterion for choosing a specific label.

A highly-discussed concept in theatre translation is *performability*, which can be generally defined as the quality which makes drama texts feasible on stage. In theatre translation studies, the discussion has focused on two questions: on the one hand, what is meant by performability and, on the other, what function this has in theatre translation (Espasa 2001, 2009, 2013).

Firstly, performability is usually related to orality, which is often equated to the requirement, in acting, of speakability, or ease of pronunciation. However, this is not a precise characterisation of theatre texts, which need not be simple or easy to pronounce (Aaltonen 2000: 42-43). Dramatic discourse is stylized and presents a very limited resemblance to everyday linguistic encounters (Elam 1980: 178). Performability has also been related to the importance of rhythm, a key element that can provide energy and agility to the translated text.

Secondly, the relative importance of performability in the practice of theatre translation. When translation and theatre practice are considered as closely connected, performability is considered as the basis of decision-taking in translating plays. Susan Bassnett had subscribed to this view in pioneering writings (1988) but later she considered, in an article bearing the eloquent title "Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability", that the only instrument translators have is verbal text (Bassnett 1991).

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# ¶ Phases of theatre translation

The phases of work involved in theatre translation are, succinctly, those of writing, rehearsing and performing the translated play, with a progressive gradation from individual to collaborative or collective work. In the phase of writing the translation, the practices are diverse in different contexts. Thus, in Britain it is common to order a so-called, "literal", i.e., a translation whose main requirement is "fidelity" to the source text. This version is often uncredited and, in turn, becomes the source text of an "adaptation" by a prestigious, often monolingual playwright, who is credited for it (Bassnett 1991). Even though in the Spanish-speaking context this practice is not established with those terms and conditions, there is a wide range of practices where the processes, sources or authorship of translations are not clear, and usually only the theatre director is credited. In our context it is also common to order informative translations. When a theatre or a director needs to read plays in a language they do not fully command, they order such informative translations, not always done by professionals. Perteghella (2004) provides a detailed analysis of the multiplicity of processes involved in this phase of writing.



*Anna Alarcón in the production of Psicosi de les 4.48 at Sala*

It is worth noting that the interaction between translation and the construction of the mise-en-scène is more common in the phase of rehearsals, especially in the first phase, the so called table work. In this phase the translated text is read aloud by the actors, in the presence of the director and, ideally, the translator. There, translation proposals often dialogue with the interpretations of the actors, who try to understand the text in order to act it, and with the director, especially when it is necessary to find connections between the translation and the mise-en-scène.

*Joan Brossa (Barcelona, 2015) © Toni Giró.* [Source]

The relationships between translation and mise-en-scène have been explored by Aaltonen 2000, Espasa 2001, Cole & Brodie 2017, among others. Here we will briefly present an example from the table work and rehearsals of the 2015 Catalan production of 4.48 Psychosis by Sarah Kane. The type of play (a monologue) and the context of creation, in a small, tight artistic team, allowed for a fruitful dialogue between the translator Anna Soler-Horta, the actress Anna Alarcón, the director Moisès Maicàs, the assistant directorAlbert Massanas, the choreographer Guille Vidal-Ribas, and the creator of the scenic space Toni Giró, to see how they interpreted Sarah Kane's drama. This is open, polysemic, and breaks lineal dramatic structures. 4.48 Psychosis has no stage directions and poses interpretative challenges for the translator, the director and the actress. For example, in fragments evoking the relationship between the main character and her therapist, the text does not make it clear where the replies of the two characters begin, as the play is presented as a monologue by the protagonist. This ambiguity is maintained in the Catalan production. Throughout the table work, Anna Soler-Horta's well-researched proposals for translation were discussed on the basis of the interpretations of the actress Anna Alarcón and the artistic team.

During rehearsals on stage, specific changes to the translation can still be proposed, ratified by the director and ideally by the translator. Then, too, it is still possible to cut fragments or even whole scenes to fit the dramaturgy or a set length for the show.

Once the texts have been translated and rehearsed, they are put to the final test when they are presented to audiences. At this stage, the translated text is usually fixed and changes little. Significant modifications are only made when adaptation to new theatrical contexts is required, to suit new settings or casts. A test for performed theatrical translations is the immediate feedback effect of the audience, discussed above (Mateo 1995). Audience reaction, for example laughter in a comedy, can lead to occasional changes in the translated text by the acting team, often without seeking the approval of the translator. An extreme case would be the performances of Neil Simon's The Odd Couple (1965), in which the actors Paco Morán and Joan Pera introduced constant changes in the adaptation signed by Ángel Alonso, during the long stage life of the production at the Borrás theatre in Barcelona (1994-1999).

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# ¶↳ Accessibility

An important area of study is the accessibility of theatrical performances, which has developed especially since the turn of the millennium. Today, accessibility is considered part of translation studies, and includes both intersemiotic translation (e.g. in the audio description of non-verbal elements of performances for the blind and visually impaired) and intralinguistic translation (e.g. in the surtitles of performances for the deaf and hard of hearing).



*Performance with surtitles and sign language interpreting.* [Source: Aptent].

Ideally, accessibility in theatre should be comprehensively considered from the initial conception of the show, so that a joint construction of the mise-en-scène is established. However, accessibility is often a later addition or insufficient, as users or those responsible for providing

accessibility support services often denounce. We will now briefly discuss the most common forms of accessibility: surtitling, audio description and sign language interpretation. In addition, it is important to note that there are other means of providing more integrated accessibility in the performance, among which SV Flys (2013) considers the following: enriching the interpretation, the sound space, including audio description in the narration and dialogue, and the release of smells. Likewise, the CESyA Guide to Accessibility in Theatre (Ruiz, Quintana, García Crespo et al. 2013) establishes the range of elements involved in accessible performances, not forgetting publicizing, ticket sales, arrival and access to events.

Interlingual surtitles were created to provide access to the text of opera performances in foreign languages, in a context of increasing internationalisation of productions. Their use generated new audiences for opera and soon spread to theatrical performances, so that they became a modality of accessibility, in the form of intralinguistic surtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing (Mateo 2007). Research on both intra- and interlingual surtitles includes studies by Bartoll (2012), Carlson (2006), Griesel (2009), Mateo (2007) and Oncins (2015) amongst others.



Surtitles have sometimes been considered intrusive and have been rejected by some opera or theatre directors. However, they are now well established as a tool for linguistic or sensory accessibility. They can even be considered as defamiliarising theatrical elements that reincorporate the written text into the theatrical experience, thus opening up the possibility of varying meanings in heteroglossia (Carlson 2006: 18). From these perspectives, different lines of research have emerged: 1. the creative use of surtitles; 2. the analysis of the different professional profiles involved; and 3. technical issues, as rapid technological advances have a great impact on the production and use of surtitles, as shown in the research of Oncins (2015), with special attention to the technologies related to the different modes of accessibility.

*Touch tour to provide access to scenography, costume and props.* [Source: Aptent]

Audio description (AD) is "a verbal commentary providing visual information for those unable to perceive it themselves" (Fryer 2016: 1). In theatre it involves the description of actions, scenery and props. It is worth remembering that AD was created for theatre, in the 1980s, but has received less academic attention than film AD, with exceptions, most notably Fryer (2016), Holland (2009), Hutchinson, Thompson & Cock (2020), SV Flys (2013) or Udo & Fels (2010). Fryer (2016) builds on her outstanding experience of audiodescribing in London theatres to investigate how AD can interact with the overall theatrical concept in creating a multisensory experience. Hutchinson, Thompson & Cock's (2020) research pays attention to the description of cultural diversity and systematically incorporates the perspective of end-users.

It should be noted that an accessible theatre experience for blind people can - and should - include the following: a) Audio introductions: locutions with general information about the theatre performance, available online or in the theatre before the performance; b) Playbills in Braille or with macro-characters: although not technically audio descriptions, these programs are often provided for blind people in accessible theatre sessions; c) Touch tours: pre- or post-show tours, where

access to the stage and tactile access and explanations of scenic elements, costumes or props are provided.

Recent studies on accessibility in opera include Orero, Bestard, Edo et al. ([2019](#)). Sign language interpreting in theatre has received less attention, with the notable exceptions of McDonald (2012) and Rocks (2019). Drawing on their experience as sign language interpreters, they emphasise the need for dialogue with stakeholders in theatre practices. They also advocate the inclusion of specific elements of sign language (such as the different body positions of the interpreter depending on the type of information being conveyed), in order to recreate the three-dimensional space of the theatre. Rocks (2019) also proposes a method for analysing British Sign Language performances.

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# ¶↳ Translation of musicals

Because of its specificity, the translation of musicals in the form of singable texts in the target language, as distinct from surtitling, mentioned above, deserves a separate section. An influential author in the field of musical translation is Low (2017). His research on the various relations between text and music in translation is relevant to the study of musicals. Low metaphorises musical translation as a pentathlon test in which the priority is the overall balance between the different components (singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme). Low's emphasis is not on the categorisation of these elements, but on flexibility, the relative prioritisation of one over the other in order to achieve a globally satisfactory end product. Low has lately (2017: 110) considered that his pentathlon model could be extended to a hexathlon, to incorporate scenic aspects into music production. In this line, Mateo (2008, 2019) and Espasa (2022, in press) have devoted attention to systemic aspects in the translation of musicals, such as the tension between local and global music production policies, or the advantages and disadvantages of importing so-called "mega-musicals" through licensing contracts which are comparable to commercial franchises. They also pay attention to the different agents involved (agencies, production companies, stage directors, singers, actors and actresses) with unequal power dynamics and status. They examine examples of musical productions that show how musical and linguistic criteria are dealt with jointly.



*The [cast of Rent](#) in the 2019 Barcelona production. Marc Gómez, lyricist, translator and actor, on the far right.© David Ruano.*

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# ⧉ Research potential

Regardless of the disciplinary and methodological approach, theatrical translation can be investigated from three, often interrelated, perspectives: 1) taking into account its production process; 2) as an end product; or 3) analysing the function played by translations in the contexts that host them. In reality, process, product and function form a complex that can only be separated

for methodological reasons. The potential function of the translation and its staging condition the process and the product that will reach the audience.

Firstly, the specificity of theatre translation invites us to research into the processes through which a translated dramatic text becomes a performed theatrical text. From this perspective, the extent to which translation is integrated into the overall construction of the performance can be investigated. Studies by Johnston (1996), Baines, Marinetti & Perteghella (2011) or Cole & Brodie (2017) offer suggestive avenues. The studies by translators and researchers such as Joan Sellent or David Johnston are relevant, and they provide insight into their relationship with the often inaccessible production of the performances.

The ephemeral nature of theatre poses a challenge for research focused on production processes, because of the difficulty of accessing all the variable and volatile materials. Where collaboration between research and the profession is feasible, the interaction between translation and the verbal and non-verbal codes involved in theatrical creations can be investigated. Access to performance recordings is an advance for both research, and professional practice (e.g. they are a source text for surtitles or audio descriptions), although the codes of meaning and production, which are different in live and recorded products, should not be forgotten.

From the perspective of translation as a product, the studies focusing on original authorship (for example, the studies by Delabastita, Ezpeleta, Heylen, Pujol, Sanderson and Zaro on Shakespearean translations), or on the work of specific translators, are noteworthy. Studies on indirect translations, common in the theatrical context, are also relevant, as shown by Palomo's research in the Catalan context or Zurbach's in Portugal.

It is relevant to consider the function of theatre translation and its insertion into specific theatrical or literary systems. In this context, the place of translation in the construction of national theatres is often debated, and dichotomous distinctions have often been drawn between translation and indigenous theatre. Such distinctions may be false in today's cultures, where many essences have been destabilised and the plural, transnational or multilingual character of theatre has been recognised, which contributes to visibilizing or problematising the place of translation in theatre (Marinetti 2013).

A fruitful avenue of research is to examine the cultural and ideological affiliations of translated and performed dramatic texts. For this type of research, the critical study of paratexts, in the form of prologues or footnotes, is useful. Lafarga's research on Spanish translations of 18th century French-language plays and Braga's research on English translations of Spanish comedies of the Golden Age are of particular interest. Interesting avenues are the studies of retranslations, or the role of censorship, along the lines of the studies by Gallén, Merino or Pérez-L. de Heredia in relation to Franco's regime. The study of banned or censored translations allows us to test the (un)performability of a translation. There are ideological or political contexts in which uncomfortable works are not considered representable, as Amit-Kochavi's research on the (absence of) translation between Palestine and Israel shows. Similarly, there are language combinations that are censored or rendered invisible in bilingual or multilingual contexts.

In research, as in theatre practice, cultural exchanges are unequal. While many studies have made relevant contributions about Western cultures and languages - to the studies cited above we would

add the relevant research by Kohlmayer in the Germanic context - there have been pioneering studies, such as those by Lefevére, on theatrical translation in post-colonial or decolonial African contexts since the 1980s. These paved the way for later studies by Che on Cameroon, Lindsay on Southeast Asia, Curran on Japan or Liu on the translation of traditional Chinese theatre.

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# Credits

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