

Dramatic Text is a Fully Rounded Unit Only When it is Performed, since it is Only in the Performance that its Full Potential is Realized

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Abstract

The study focuses on different approaches to the study of drama put forward by different semioticians. It also demonstrates how all theater semioticians' agreement that the dramatic text (written text) is radically conditioned by its performability (*miseen scène*) has had a great impact upon translation studies and has led some theoreticians of translation studies to reexamine their position towards translating theater texts. It dwells upon the interface of two theoretical frameworks—the Semiotics of Theater and Theater Translation—as well as on the theoretical polarization between the notions of performability and readability in Theater Translation since the mid-1980s. A dramatic text is a fully rounded unit only when it is performed, since it is only in the performance that its full potential is realized. Real translation takes place on the level of the *miseen scène* as a whole according to Patrice Pavis (1989, 41; author's emphasis) in his article "Problems of Translation for the Stage: Intercultural and Post-Modern Theatre. The second part of the paper presents how Susan Bassnett and Patrice Pavis, a translation theoretician and a theater semiotician, respectively, have polarized the theory of theater translation into the notions of performability (or playability) and readability since the mid-1980s. In conclusion, the research endeavors to explicate the current theoretical polarization between performability and readability and suggests that this polarization is merely a reductionist illusion.

Key words: Performability/*miseen scène*, qualitative data, Intercultural and Post-Modern Theatre, interface of two theoretical frameworks, theoretical polarization.

Semiotics of Drama

The earliest works that discuss theater in semiotic terms can be traced to Czechoslovakia in the 1930s. During that period, literary critics like Otomar Zich, Jan Mukařovský, Jiří Veltruský, Jindřich Honzl and Peter Bogatyřev attempted to analyze the components of theater in terms of structures and sign systems. It was as early as 1931 when Zich's *Aesthetics of the Art of Drama* and Mukařovský's "An Attempted Structural Analysis for the Phenomena of the Actor" were published, destined to change the analysis of theater and drama (Elam 1980, 5-6 and 233). These two pioneering works laid the foundations for the rich corpus of theatrical and dramatic theory produced by the semioticians of the Prague School in the 1930s.

Translation practical experiences

Though the semioticians of the Prague School, as well as Kowzan and Ubersfeld, offer different approaches to the study of theater, they all agree that the dramatic text (the written text or literature proper) is only an optional system among other interrelated systems that comprise the spectacle, and see it as radically conditioned by its performability. This attitude towards the dramatic text in theater semiotics has not only opened new perspectives in drama studies and theatrical practice but has also had a great impact on the field of translation studies. The challenging notion of playability or performability, especially, has led some theoreticians of translation studies to reexamine their position towards translating theater texts. Bassnett in the early 1980s. In the 1980s, Susan Bassnett, following current tendencies in the semiotics of theater and drama, argued that theater has been one of the most neglected areas in translation

studies, mainly because it has become common practice to translate dramatic texts in the same way as prose texts (1991b, 120-132).

Assuming that a theater text should be read differently, Bassnett asserts that a dramatic text is a fully rounded unit only when it is performed, since it is only in the performance that its full potential is realized. But if a theater text must be read differently, wonders Bassnett, then does the theater translator translate the playtext as a purely literary text or does he or she try to translate it with respect to its function within the complex system of the spectacle? (1991b, 120) Trying to answer this fundamental question, Bassnett asserts that it is impossible to separate text from performance because theater is constituted by the dialectical relation between these two components. Following Ubersfeld's argument against the supremacy of the literary text and the perception of performance as merely a "translation," Bassnett, too, maintains that when a literary text acquires a higher status than its performance counterpart, there results the misconception that there is a single right way of reading, and hence performing, the text (1981, 38). If this were so, then the translator would be bound to a rigid preconceived model of translation and should be judged according to how "faithful" to or deviant from the written text his or her translation is (1991b, 121).

Having discovered the Prague School Semioticians' and Kowzan's discussions of the extralinguistic and paralinguistic dimensions of the theater text, Bassnett was one of the first scholars in translation studies to point out that the theater translator must meet two criteria more than the translator of prose or poetry. The first criterion is that of playability or performability, and the second is that of the function of the text (translation) itself. The second criterion is a derivative of the first, since the function of a theater text presupposes the written text as a constituent of performance. Examining the extent to which the notion of performability can be applied to theater translation, Bassnett describes the importance of this concept in its implications for theater translation. On the one hand, performability implies a distinction between the idea of the written text and the physical aspect of the performance, and, on the other hand, it presupposes that the theater text contains within its structure some features that make it performable: a coded gestural patterning. Then Bassnett postulates that if performability is seen as a prerequisite for the theater translator, then the translator must determine which structures are performable and translate them into the target language (TL)—even though major linguistic and stylistic changes may occur. This is, of course, something different from what the translator of other types of text does.

Nevertheless, the theater translator encounters another side of performability: its continual change. According to Bassnett, since performance is determined by the various developments in acting style, playing space, the role of the audience, the altered concepts of theater and the national context, the translator has to consider time and place as variables in the changing concept of performance. In other words, continues Bassnett, the theater translator must consider the performance aspect of the written text (its gestural patterning) as well as its relationship to its contemporary audience. Yet the presence of the audience itself indicates that the function of theater transcends the strictly linguistic level and reveals the public dimension of the challenges a theater translator faces when attempting to achieve an effect: "the translator must take into account the function of the text as an element for and of performance" (Bassnett 1991b, 132; emphasis added).

Bassnett in the mid-1980s

These were Bassnett's attitudes in the early 1980s towards translating theater texts, but in 1985 her position changed drastically. In her article "Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts," she calls performability a "very vexed term" and dismisses it as "the implicit, undefined and undefinable quality of a theatre text that so many translators latch on to as a justification for their various linguistic strategies" (Bassnett 1985a, 90 and 101-102, respectively). Moreover, she disregards her own previous position acknowledging the translator's need to consider the undertextual rhythms and gestural language that are discernable within the written text (1978, 161-76; 1981, 37-48; and 1991b, 120-32).

In this article, Bassnett admits that her early theory of the theater translator considering an existing undertext within the written text, decoded by the actor and encoded into gestural form, is "a loose and woolly concept" (1985a, 98). The solution she now favors is to enquire into the deictic units of the text and analyze how deixis operates in both source-language (SL) and target-language (TL) texts (see also Elam 1980, 138-48; and Aston and Savona 1991, 152-55 and 116-17). In Bassnett's opinion, an investigation of the function of the deictic units in the SL text will help translation scholars discern which units are preserved in the TL text, what their presence or absence may signify and what happens to the dynamics of the scene when these units are altered during the transfer from the SL into the TL (Bassnett 1985a, 98). She further emphasizes that it is not the presence of the deictic units per se, but their function in the text which is of great importance (Bassnett 1985a, 101).

The most surprising aspect of this article might be Bassnett's concluding remarks:

"It seems to me that the time has come to set aside "performability" as a criterion for translating too, and to focus more closely on the linguistic structures of the text itself. For, after all, it is only within the written that the performable can be encoded and there are infinite performance decodings possible in any playtext. The written text, troué though it may be, is the raw material on which the translator has to work and it is with the written text, rather than with a hypothetical performance, that the translator must begin." (1985a, 102).

For a translation theoretician, who in the early 1980s cautioned against the danger lurking in asserting the preeminence of the written text in the spectacle, to write an article a few years later asserting the supremacy of the literary text is a drastic as well as dramatic change of position.

Bassnett and Pavis theoretical contributions

So much for the attitude towards theater texts in the 1980s. In the 1990s it seemed that the theories of theater translation were polarized between two extremes: that of performability (*mise en scène*) and that of readability (written text). At the one extreme, Patrice Pavis, in his article "Problems of Translation for the Stage: Intercultural and Post-Modern Theatre," claimed that translation for the stage goes beyond the interlingual translation of the dramatic text; he advocated that "a real translation takes place on the level of the *mise en scène* as a whole" (1989, 41; author's emphasis).

At the other extreme, Susan Bassnett, in her articles, "Translating for the Theatre-Textual Complexities" and "Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability," argued against any idea of performability and discredited any notion of performance-oriented translation; instead, she emphasized the written theatrical text (1990, 71-83; and 1991a, 99-111, respectively).

Pavis's views on theater translation

Patrice Pavis starts his article "Problems of Translation for the Stage: Intercultural and Post-Modern Theatre" with four problems peculiar to translation for the stage:

- (1) the intersection of situations of enunciation;
- (2) the series of concretizations of a theater text;
- (3) the conditions of theater translation reception; and (4) the *mise en scène* of a translation

(1989, 25-44). Dealing with the first problem, he maintains that there are two situations of enunciation: that which belongs exclusively to either the source or target culture (SC or TC), and that which is a mixture of the two (SC and TC).

Pavis tends to believe that the translator and his or her translation are both situated at the intersection of sets of enunciation of differing degrees, a situation that is a mixture of both source and target cultures (SCs and TCs). For him, the translated text always consists partly of source

text and partly of target text and target culture because any transfer involves the multiple dimensions of the source text (ST) adapted to the TL and TC; as well, it is the written ST that the translator usually uses as a point of departure.

Nevertheless, continues Pavis, the translator knows that the translation cannot preserve the original situation because it is intended for a future situation of enunciation, a situation the translator may not be familiar with at all. It is only when the translated text is staged for the target audience and culture that the text is surrounded by a situation of enunciation belonging exclusively to the TC. Thus, the translation, to varying degrees, occurs at the intersection of the situations of enunciation. Furthermore, Pavis holds that the theater translation is a hermeneutic act, since its main purpose is to pull the ST towards the TL and TC, separating it from its source and origin (1989, 25-27).

Pavis, discussing the series of concretizations—the second problem peculiar to translation for the stage—tries to reconstruct the transformations of the dramatic text in the course of successive concretizations as follows:

To=the original text, which is "the author's interpretation of reality" (Levý 1969, 35, as quoted in Pavis 1989, 27 and 43).

T= the text of the written translation.

T1=T, which depends upon the initial and virtual situation of enunciation of To and on the future audience, who will receive T3 and T4. In this instance, the translator is both a reader and dramaturge making choices from among the potential and possible indications in the text-to-be-translated.

T2=The dramaturgical analysis as a phase of the translation process, e.g., a coherent reading of the plot and the spatio-temporal indications found in the text and the stage directions, either by linguistic translation or by representing them through extralinguistic elements. The most important aspect of this step of the translation process "is the process of concretization (fictionalization and ideologization) that the dramaturge effects on the text" (1989, 28).

T3=Testing the text on the stage; that is, concretization of T1 and T2 by stage enunciation. This stage of *mise en scène*—confrontation of virtual (To) or actual (T1) situations of enunciation—proposes a performance text with all possible relationships between textual and theatrical signs (1989, 29).

T4=The stage concretization of T3 or the recipient concretization/the recipient enunciation during which the ST finally reaches the spectator in the TC (1989, 29; author's emphasis).

Directly related to T4, or the recipient concretization, are the conditions of the reception of the theater translation, which pose the third of the four problems particular to translation for the stage. Pavis asserts that any reception of a theater translation is conditioned solely by the hermeneutic competence of the future audience, as well as the future audience's competence in the rhythmic, psychological or aural spheres. The former stresses the importance of a target-oriented translation that can be understood by the (target) theater audience—thus fulfilling their expectations—and that also makes clear most of the translator's choices. The latter emphasizes the importance not of the "speakability" of the text but rather of the "adequacy of speech and gesture," which Pavis calls "the language-body" (1989, 30; author's emphasis).

Nevertheless, in examining the conditions of the reception of the theater translation, Pavis brings up the issue of *mise en scène* in such a way that the stage performance takes precedence over the linguistic text. In the most controversial section of the same article "Translation and its *mise en scène*," Pavis develops the idea of "taking over the situation of enunciation" (1989, 30; author's emphasis).⁴ He says that an entire deictic system is the link between the translation already inserted in a concrete *mise en scène* (T3) and the theatrical situation of enunciation (T4). Once T3 and T4 are linked, then the dramatic text is comprehensible only in the context of its enunciation. But this context is realized by the use of deictics that are fully realized only in the *mise en scène*. To clarify the functioning of this theatrical economy, Pavis gives the following example: "[O]ne might for example translate: "I want you to put the hat on the table" by "Put it

there" accompanied by a look or gesture, thus reducing the sentence to its deictic elements." (1989, 31)

Hence, for Pavis, it is the economy of the dramatic text and its translation for the stage that allows the actor to supplement the text by extralingual (i.e., intonation, pitch, etc.) and paralingual (i.e., gestures, mime, kinesics, etc.) means, which ensures the exchange between word and body, or what he calls the language-body.

At this point, it would be interesting to compare the way Bassnett and Pavis use the deictic system (deixis). As noted earlier, in her "Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts," Bassnett calls for an inquiry into the deictic units in the text and an analysis of their functions in both SL and TL texts as the best method for comparing the ST and the target text (TT) (1985a, 85-102). Nevertheless, she perceives the deictic units more as linguistic structures of the text itself than as gestural patterning. Conversely, Pavis views the entire deictic system primarily as an encoded gestural patterning in the written text, a position that was held by Susan Bassnett herself in the early stages of her career as a theoretician of theater translation. (For Bassnett's earlier position, see Bassnett 1978, 161-76; 1981, 37-48; and 1991b, 120-32.)

In "Problems of Translation for the Stage: Intercultural and Post-Modern Theatre," after presenting his hypothesis of the series of concretizations (To, T, T1, T2, T3 and T4), Pavis tries to show how it is related to an exchange between the spoken text and the speaking body, as well as to the hermeneutic act of intercultural exchange. Most interesting is the section, "Intercultural Translation," in which Pavis gives a semiotic definition of culture (1989, 37-39), presents two contemporary opposing approaches to the translation of culture and, finally, introduces his own view. Presenting the two conflicting approaches, he states that the first one is to try too hard to maintain the SC in the translation in order to accentuate the difference between the SC and the TC. The result of this effort is the creation of an incomprehensible and unreadable text, which is unacceptable to the TC. On the other hand, says Pavis, the second approach is to try to smooth out differences to the point where one cannot comprehend the origin of the translated text. Dissatisfied with these approaches, he offers his own solution: a middle road consisting "of producing a translation that would be a "conductor" between the two cultures and which would cope with proximity as well as distance" (1989, 38).

Finally, although he recognizes the diversity of ethnic and national origins, Pavis argues for a gestural universality and a universality of culture. To reinforce his point of view, he uses as an example the Mahabharata and explains how Carrière and Brook—the translator and the stage director, respectively—treated the mythic aspect of this Sanskrit text. He says that Carrière and Brook were able to translate the myth only by the theatrical discourse during which the actor's body is shown in action and speech or, in Brook's words, "the language of the stage" (1989, 40). In this case, Pavis assures us that gesture is not limited to a social function (a social *gestus*) but rather "a universal encounter among actors of different cultures" (1989, 40). In this phenomenon of intergestural and intercultural translation, Pavis sees culture intervening at every level of social life, "in all the nooks and crannies of the text" (1989, 42), and arrives at the following mythic conception of culture and translation:

"Culture thus becomes this vague notion whose identity, determination, and precise place within infra- and superstructure we no longer know. Translation is this undiscoverable mythic text attempting to take account of the source text—all the while with the awareness that such a text exists only with reference to a source-text-to-be-translated. Added to this disturbing circularity is the fact that theater translation is never where one expects it to be: not in words, but in gesture, not in the letter, but in the spirit of a culture, ineffable but omnipresent." (1989, 42; emphasis added)

Bassnett's recent theories regarding theater translation

Bassnett holds the opposite thesis as far as theater translation and culture are concerned. In her articles "Translating for the Theatre—Textual Complexities" (1990) and "Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability" (1991a), Bassnett refutes the encoded spatial or gestural dimension of the language of a theater text, and claims that any such notion is problematic for the interlingual translator because it makes his task "superhuman" (1991a, 100).

Her main argument against the notion of the gestic text is that the theater translator is expected to translate a SL text, which is incomplete and which a priori once contained a concealed gestic text, into a TL text, which should also contain a concealed gestural undertext. To emphasize her position, she states that if this concept is taken seriously, then the assumption is that during the translation process it is the translator's responsibility to decode the gestic text while he sits at a desk and imagines the performance dimension; and, in Bassnett's opinion, this situation does not make any sense at all! (1991a, 100).⁵

It is in Bassnett's "The Case Against Performability," however, that the theoretical polarization between Bassnett's and Pavis's positions can be seen more clearly. In this article, Bassnett discusses Pavis's "Problems of Translation for the Stage: Intercultural and Post-Modern Theater" and his view that real translation takes place on the level of the *mise en scène* as a whole. Although she agrees with his statement that translation theory has followed the general trend of theater semiotics to reorient its objectives, Bassnett charges Pavis on the grounds that he favors *mise en scène* (performability) to the written text in his hierarchical system, and that he considers the written theater text an incomplete entity. Moreover, she concludes that "[Pavis's] interlingual translator is still left with the task of transforming unrealized text A into unrealized text B and the assumption here is that the task at hand is somehow of a lower status than that of a person who effects the transposition of written text into performance" (1991a, 101).

Then Bassnett raises three arguments to refute any notion of performability. Her first argument is that performability has been used by English translators, directors and impresarios as justification for their various linguistic strategies—first, to excuse the practice of handing over a supposedly literal translation to a monolingual playwright; second, to justify substantial variations in the TL text, including cuts and additions (see also Bassnett 1990, 77); third, to describe the "supposedly" existing gestural text within the written; and, last but not least, to describe what may be called a translator's ad hoc decision of what constitutes a speakable text for performers.

Her second argument against performability comes from a different angle: its association with the "old-fashioned notion of universality" (1991a, 107). As an advocate of what is loosely referred to as "theater anthropology,"⁶ Bassnett disagrees in principle with the assumption lurking in the notion of universality or, put differently, the perception of the multilayered structure of the play as the constant (invariable/universal) elements that cross cultural boundaries. Instead, she holds that the starting point of any investigation must be the inconstant (the variables, or the particulars). According to that school of thought, Bassnett states that "the written text ceases to appear as the quintessential yet incomplete component of theater, and may be perceived rather as an entity in its own right that has a particular function at a given point in the development of culturally individualistic theatres" (1991a, 110). To validate her argument, Bassnett summarizes Susan Melrose's two arguments against the notion of universality in the theater text. Melrose's first argument against the idea of a universal *gestus* is that *gestus* can only be culture-bound. Then she attacks what she calls "the neo-Platonic cringe" of certain theater people who yearn after "oneness" and its hypothetical access to "truth" and "sincerity" or "deep meaning" or "inscribed undertext." In this way, Melrose discredits the assumption that the playtext contains a series of signs that may transcend cultural boundaries. Agreeing wholeheartedly with Melrose's arguments, Bassnett concludes that performability is "a term without credibility" or "seen as nothing more than a liberal humanist illusion" (1990, 77 and 1991a, 110, respectively).

In her third and last argument against performability, Bassnett holds that the very core of this notion derives from the naturalist theater and the effort of the interlingual translator to escape the domineering presence of both the playwright and the performance text. In her opinion, it was the naturalist drama that imposed the idea of the scripted text, or the performance text, which both actors and directors have to study carefully and reproduce with some fidelity. It was also in the naturalist theater that the role of the playwright increased tremendously, and as a direct result, the idea of fidelity was established and imposed on theater texts and all participants in a performance. According to Bassnett, the implications of the increasing power of the playwright were significant for the interlingual translator, too; if the performers were bound in a servant-master relationship to the written text, "so also should translators be" (1991a, 105).

Finally, she concludes that the notion of performability was invented by translators in order to escape from that servile relationship and to exercise greater liberties with the written text than naturalist conventions allowed. In the last but most condensed paragraph of her article, "The Case Against Performability," Bassnett, having refuted the ideas of both undertext and performability, goes a step further by inviting scholars to limit their investigations to two main avenues of study only: a historiography of theater translation and a further investigation into the linguistic structure of existing theater texts (1991a, 111).

Concluding Remarks Towards an explanation

To explain the current theoretical polarization between performability (*mise en scène*) and readability (written text), it should be considered that Patrice Pavis and Susan Bassnett belong to two different "schools" whose focus of investigation differs significantly. On the one hand, having started as a theater semiotician, Patrice Pavis has only recently started dealing with issues related to theater translation. He has directed all his efforts towards, and has focused on, an understanding of the process of translating, staging and receiving a theater text. He also believes in the universals of gestures (a gestural universality) as well as in a universalization of culture or, as he puts it, in the "universalisation of a notion of culture ... which suggests a return to the religious and to the mystical, and to ritual and ceremony in the theatre" (1989, 42).

On the other hand, and unlike Pavis, Bassnett started within the field of translation studies and soon became a proponent of the "Manipulation School." The main focus of this school is on the description of any translational phenomena that have occurred in the final product (the actual translation), and, consequently, on the ideological shifts in the TC. Recently, Bassnett has also adopted the position of theater anthropology, which supports the idea that each culture is unique, and for this reason there are different performance conventions in different cultures. Whereas Pavis believes that cultural differences can be overcome by the transcendental presence of universals, Bassnett holds that cultural differences are accentuated by the presence of particulars. Instead of the universality of gestures and cultures, she firmly believes in the particularity of each culture and, therefore, in the particularity of gestures within cultures.

A blurring of borderlines

Nonetheless, the theoretical polarization of performability and readability is not very convincing when examining the extent to which postulates such as performability and readability can be applied and compared to the historical functioning of actual translations and theatrical performances. In her dissertation (1994a) and in one of her published articles (1994b), Ekaterini Nikolarea has demonstrated that when a theatrical play like Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*,⁷ is examined as a translated, published and produced playtext, it defies any theoretical polarization of performability and readability; and she proves that this polarization is a reductionist illusion. Examination shows that, in practice, there are no precise divisions between a performance-oriented translation and a reader-oriented translation, but rather there exists a

blurring of borderlines.⁸ It also indicates that the blurring of the theoretical notions of performability and readability has two main causes.

First, intercultural communication always depends on varied and complex processes, which influence not only the production of a theater translation but also its distribution and reception by a multifaceted target public. In order to determine what is involved in these processes and to propose a sound working hypothesis for theater translation (Nikolarea 1999, 183-202), Nikolarea took an interdisciplinary approach that went beyond a strict "investigation into the linguistic structuring of extant theater texts" or a limited "historiography of theatre translation" (Bassnett 1991a, 111); she also included extratextual, paratextual and peritextual evidence (Nikolarea 1994a, 82-217).

The second reason for the blurring of the borders between the theoretical constructs of performability and readability points to the fact that these two extreme positions, no matter how different they are, seem to share, in principle, the weakness of all prescriptive approaches in translation studies. This common characteristic (or fallacy, as it may be called), becomes clear whenever postulates such as performability and readability are either applied or compared to actual translations and theatrical performances and their historical functioning.

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