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Stage Text Translation: Navigating Between Arabic and Western Theatrical Traditions

Traduction du texte scénique : Navigation entre les traditions théâtrales arabes et occidentales

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Abstract :

This study analyzes the complexity of theatrical translation, balancing fidelity to the source text and cultural adaptation. Drawing on translation pragmatics and cultural adaptation theories, it examines linguistic and textual challenges. Through case studies, including "Hamlet" and contemporary Arab playwrights, it highlights obstacles related to cultural references and socio-political sensitivities. The research underscores the role of theatrical translation in fostering intercultural dialogue and advocates for greater translator awareness of cultural nuances.

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Résumé:

Cette étude analyse la traduction théâtrale entre fidélité au texte source et adaptation culturelle. À travers des théories pragmatiques et des études de cas ("Hamlet", dramaturges arabes contemporains), elle explore les défis linguistiques, référentiels et sociopolitiques. Elle souligne l'importance de la traduction pour le dialogue interculturel et appelle à une sensibilité accrue des traducteurs aux nuances culturelles

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1. Introduction

The Theatrical translation between Arab and Western cultures raises important questions concerning fidelity to cultural, social, and historical nuances while navigating different temporal and sociocultural contexts. The research problem of this study is to determine how to reconcile fidelity to the original text and cultural adaptation, while taking into account linguistic challenges and political sensitivities.

The hypotheses put forward are that theatrical translations must balance cultural authenticity with relevance for the target audience, and that successful adaptations enrich intercultural dialogue (Baker, 2018. p: 78). The objective is to analyze how concrete examples, such as the works of Wajdi Mouawad, Tawfiq al-Hakim, and Saadallah Wannous (Yahya, 2015. p: 20), illustrate these challenges and opportunities. The methodology includes a comparative approach to theatrical adaptations, examination of linguistic and cultural issues, and evaluation of critical reception in Western and Arab contexts.

The study aims to illuminate how these translations contribute to global theatrical diversity and strengthen intercultural understanding, while offering recommendations for improving translation practices in this field.

2. Theoretical Framework

Theories of theatrical translation encompass various frameworks and approaches that guide how dramatic texts are transposed from one language and culture to another. Here are some key theories in this field.

2.1 Key Approaches in the Field of Theatrical Translation

In the complex and multifaceted field of theatrical translation, four major theoretical approaches structure the understanding and practice of this demanding discipline. The fundamental theory of tension between loyalty and freedom, developed by (Khamis, 2023. p: 71), explores the complex dynamics between fidelity to the source text and the translator's necessary creative freedom, highlighting the inherent challenges in preserving the original artistic intent while ensuring the work resonates with the target audience; this approach particularly emphasizes the importance of finding a subtle balance between textual authenticity and the cultural adaptation needed to maintain dramatic impact. Speech act theory, developed by (Fatah, 2019. p: 05) and adapted to the theatrical context, brings an essential dimension by analyzing how performative elements of language - from simple lines to complex monologues must be carefully recalibrated to maintain their illocutionary force and emotional impact in the new linguistic and cultural context, taking into account the subtleties of dramatic expression and accompanying gestures. The pragmatic approach, elaborated by (Hatim and Mason, 1990. p: 85), significantly enriches the theoretical framework by meticulously examining the interaction between multiple layers of theatrical communication: characters' social roles, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships on stage, cultural implications of dramatic actions, and varied audience expectations, highlighting how these elements interweave to create a complex fabric that the translator must unravel and reconstruct with precision. Finally, cultural adaptation theory, developed by (Bassnett, 1992. p: 10), proves particularly relevant in the context of transferring theatrical works between the Arab world and the West, where it examines how translators can skillfully negotiate profound differences in social norms, cultural values, and contextual references while preserving the essence and authenticity of the original work; this approach illuminates the specific challenges of adapting cultural metaphors, distinct theatrical traditions, and dramaturgical conventions, thus demonstrating how theatrical translation, far from

being a simple linguistic transfer, constitutes a true intercultural bridge capable of transcending barriers while celebrating the richness and diversity of theatrical expressions across cultures.

2.2 Particularities of Arab-Western Translation

Theatrical translation between Arabic and Western languages represents a multidimensional challenge that illustrates the complexity of contemporary cultural exchanges, as (Zerhouni, 2024. p: 69) emphasize, stating that "theatrical translation transcends mere linguistic transposition to become an act of complex cultural mediation." This complexity manifests primarily at the linguistic and stylistic level, where Arabic structures require creative reinvention in Western languages. (Baker, 2018. p: 45) observes that "the morphosyntactic peculiarities of Arabic create stylistic effects impossible to directly reproduce in Indo-European languages," while he emphasizes that "the inherent musicality of the Arabic language necessitates a complete reconstruction of sound patterns in the target language.

The density of cultural references constitutes a second major level of complexity. Hilal explains that "each Arabic theatrical text is a dense fabric of historical, religious, and social references that form a complex signifying network", (Hilal, 2007. p: 87). This observation is complemented by Ahid, who note that "the translation of cultural references requires not only comprehensive knowledge of both cultures but also a subtle understanding of reception dynamics in the target culture"; (Ahid, 2020, p: 165) The challenge is particularly significant when the value systems involved can be radically different.

Venuti deepens this problematic by analyzing how "translators must negotiate between fidelity to the source text and acceptability in the target culture, particularly when dealing with sensitive themes such as religion, politics, or social relations"; (Venuti (2017, p: 208). This negotiation becomes especially critical in the theatrical context where, as Carlson remarks, "dramaturgical conventions themselves can carry specific cultural meanings that require thoughtful adaptation", (Carlson, 2010. p: 87)

Political and religious sensitivities add an additional layer of complexity. Ahid emphasize that "theatrical translation between Arabic and Western languages occurs within a charged geopolitical context that inevitably influences translation choices", (Ahid, 2020. p: 170) This political dimension is closely tied to the question of adapting theatrical forms. As Carlson explains, "Arabic and Western theatrical traditions have developed distinct codes and conventions that cannot be simply transposed without deep reflection on their cultural significance", (Carlson, 2010. p: 91).

The question of adapting theatrical forms also reveals profound aesthetic issues. Hilal notes that "the different conceptions of time, space, and dramatic action between Arabic and Western theatrical traditions necessitate genuine formal reinvention", (Hilal, 2007. p: 126) This observation is reinforced by Venuti, who argues that "theatrical adaptation between distant cultures involves a complete reconstruction of modes of representation and reception", (Venuti, 2017. p: 212).

Kazi-Tani conclude by emphasizing that "Arabic-Western theatrical translation constitutes a paradigm of contemporary intercultural dialogue, where each aspect of translation - linguistic, cultural, political, and aesthetic - participates in building a bridge between civilizations", (Kazi-Tani, 2023. p: 502). This holistic approach thus reveals the fundamentally intercultural nature of contemporary theater and its crucial role in the dialogue between cultures.

This analysis demonstrates how theatrical translation between Arabic and Western languages encompasses multiple interconnected challenges that require sophisticated solutions. The process involves not just linguistic expertise but also deep cultural understanding, political awareness, and aesthetic sensitivity. Each translation decision must consider these multiple dimensions to create a work that resonates authentically in its new context while preserving the depth and complexity of the original. This complex mediation process illustrates the vital role of theatrical translation in facilitating meaningful cultural exchange and understanding between Arabic and Western societies.

2.3Key concepts in theatre translation, particularly between Arabic and Western languages

These notions encompass a complex set of linguistic and cultural considerations. According to Baker, careful adaptation of references and idiomatic expressions is essential to ensure cultural equivalence while preserving the emotional weight of the text, (Baker, 2018. p: 75). Furthermore, Bassnett emphasizes that this cultural equivalence requires careful adaptation of idiomatic expressions, (Bassnett, 2002. p: 22).

Cultural equivalence is paramount, requiring meticulous adaptation of references and idiomatic expressions while preserving the text's emotional weight. Hatim and Mason reinforce this idea by noting that translators must also consider the socio-historical context for accurate transposition, (Hatim and Mason, 1990. p: 64).

Orality and performativity play a crucial role in theatrical translation, demanding particular attention to dialogue rhythm and implicit gestures. Kazi-Tani et al. also emphasizes the importance of performativity in theatrical translation.

The socio-historical context must be carefully transposed, while language registers, ranging from classical Arabic to dialects, require thoughtful adaptation. Theses authors discusses specific challenges related to this linguistic diversity in theatrical translation, (Kazi-Tani, 2023. p: 501).

The challenges of intertextuality and cultural allusions require delicate management between adaptation and fidelity to the source text. Kristeva explores how these elements enrich intercultural understanding in theatrical translation, (Kristeva, 1986. p: 23).

The poetic dimension, particularly significant in the Arab tradition, demands special sensitivity from translators. Faiq argues that this sensitivity is crucial for capturing the linguistic beauty of Arab theatrical texts, (Faiq, 2004. p: 102).

Translators must navigate between cultural taboos and censorship issues while preserving the artistic integrity of theatrical works. Baker analyze the influence of cultural issues on theatrical translation. Their study highlights the challenges of transposing dramatic works between cultures, emphasizing the importance of cultural nuances and target audience expectations in this complex process, (Baker, 2018. p: 45).

The approach to peripheral elements of the main text, stage directions, as well as mastery of temporal flow and theatrical cadence, are also essential for successful theatrical translation (Genette, 1997. p: 45). Together, these concepts form a complex framework that guides translators in their arduous task of transposing not only words but also the cultural and dramatic essence of theatrical works between these two distinct linguistic and cultural worlds (Lefevere, 1992. p: 137).

3. Methodology

In a study on dramatic transcription between Arabic and European literatures, selecting examples carefully is essential to ensure a comprehensive and representative analysis of the challenges and practices in translation. Considering linguistic and cultural diversity is crucial, including various language pairings such as Arabic-French, Arabic-English, and Arabic-German, to explore the specific nuances of each language combination (Cachia, 1982. p: 42). Cultural complexity in texts, often rich with references and allusions specific to the source culture, must also be taken into account, as it highlights translators' creative strategies in addressing intercultural challenges. Furthermore, examining a variety of theatrical genres, from classical tragedy to experimental theater, enables an analysis of how each genre's unique characteristics influence the translation process. Finally, the cultural significance and critical reception of the selected works are fundamental aspects, as choosing pieces with substantial impact and diverse reactions allows exploration of the issues of intercultural reception and the influence of translation on how a work is perceived within a different cultural context.

4. Analysis of Selected Examples

The analysis of theatrical translations between the West and the Arab world reveals how literary works cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. Each translation poses unique challenges, balancing fidelity to the original work with adaptation to the sensibilities of contemporary Arab audiences. This section focuses on landmark works such as "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare, "Les Fourberies de Scapin" by Molière, "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett, "A Streetcar Named Desire" by Tennessee Williams, and "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller. Each example illustrates the translators' strategies and choices to retain the essence of the plays while making them accessible and relevant within a modern Arab cultural context (Chergui senouci & Baba, 2021. p: 190).

4.1 Translating a Western Play into Arabic

a. "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare

The Arabic translation of «Hamlet» seeks to adapt the Elizabethan poetic style while preserving universal themes such as betrayal and fate. Translators like Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Khalil Mutran strive to make Shakespeare's linguistic complexity accessible to Arabic-speaking readers. These well-received translations have enriched the Arab perspective on European classics (Shomali, 2003. p: 180) and (Jabra, 2016. p: 66).

b. «Les Fourberies de Scapin» by Molière

Molière's comedy has been translated into modern Arabic to capture the humor and social satire of 17th-century France. Translators like Saadallah Wannous have adapted cultural references while preserving the comic essence, making the play relevant to contemporary audiences. The translation has been well received, facilitating the introduction of European comedic classics into the Arab world (Yahya, 2015. p: 20) and (Amine, 2018. p: 21).

c. «Waiting for Godot» by Samuel Beckett

This existential work has been translated into Arabic with the intention of preserving the essence of the absurd and the human condition. Translators such as Menouer Badra have adapted the dialogues while retaining the play's philosophical depth. Its reception in the Arab world reflects an interest in themes of existence and despair, fostering relevant discussions (Menouer, 2020. p: 121).

d. «A Streetcar Named Desire» by Tennessee Williams

The translation of this tragedy aims to reflect social tensions within the Arab world. Shomali has adapted American idiomatic expressions to ensure cultural relevance. This version was well received, allowing for the exploration of universal human dilemmas within a specific cultural context (Sabéha, 2016. p: 30).

e. «Death of a Salesman» by Arthur Miller

The translation of this play examines individual aspirations and family struggles in a modern Arab context. Mohamed Enani has skillfully adapted cultural references while retaining the emotional impact of the original. The play has been well received in the Arab world, facilitating the exploration of universal themes like the American Dream (Shomali, 2003. p: 180).

4.2 Translating an Arab Play into Western Languages

Theatrical translation between Western and Arab cultures presents cultural, literary, and social challenges. This section examines several significant examples of this adaptation, illustrating translators' decisions in addressing cultural difficulties.

a. «Ritual for a Metamorphosis» by Saadallah Wannous

Published in 1971, this play addresses tensions between authoritarian regimes and individual aspirations. The English translation aims to preserve the work's poetic richness while adapting it to Western audience expectations. Translators have employed various techniques to contextualize Syrian cultural references while maintaining the emotional impact of the dialogue. This translation has been well received for its ability to address universal themes of freedom and political resistance, though challenges remain in translating cultural nuances, (Yahya, 2015. p: 23).

b. «Les Justes» by Albert Camus (adapted as «La Juste»)

Though Camus was not Arab, his work has been translated and adapted into Arabic and other languages. Written in 1949, the play deals with justice and ethical dilemmas. English translations seek to preserve the historical context while making philosophical concepts accessible. Translators must balance fidelity to the original with adaptation for Western audiences, with critics acknowledging the depth of themes explored, (Sabo & Musa, 2022. p: 125).

c. «One Thousand and One Nights»

These folk tales have been translated into multiple Western languages since the 18th century, influencing literature and theater. Translations face challenges in linguistic and cultural fidelity, requiring adaptations to make the stories accessible. «One Thousand and One Nights» has evolved in Western perception from exotic curiosity to critical examination of universal themes, (Mizan, 2020. p: 55).

d. «Antigone» by Sophocles (Arab adaptation)

Arab playwrights have adapted this tragedy, exploring classical themes from a contemporary perspective. Challenges include adapting Greek moral concepts to modern Arab values, often through explanatory dialogue. Western reception of these adaptations varies, highlighting the impact of tragedy on different cultures, (Abd-Aun, 2020. p: 460).

e. «I Am Yusuf and This Is My Brother» by Jawad Al Assadi

This play addresses themes of family and resilience in modern Iraq. Its translation into Western languages has facilitated international recognition, despite cultural challenges. Translators have often employed contextualization strategies to enhance Western audience engagement. The play has been well received for its nuanced portrayal of the human condition in Iraq, sparking significant intercultural dialogue, (Lentin & Grand'Henry, 2022. p: 23) and (Al Assadi, 2004. p: 85).

4.3. Adaptations Across Cultures

Adapting a theatrical play across cultures involves reinterpreting an original work to make it accessible to a new audience, adjusting dialogue, narrative structure, and themes while preserving artistic integrity. This process enriches global theater by fostering cultural exchange, (Reilly, 2018. p: 45).

a. Chinese Adaptation of «The Good Woman of Setzuan»

Yu Shui has transformed Brecht's work to reflect contemporary Chinese culture, including adjustments to character names, cultural references, and social dynamics. The adaptation emphasizes traditional Chinese values and addresses contemporary themes such as corruption and social inequality, making the play more relevant for Chinese audiences while retaining universal themes (Tsui, 2015. p: 13).

b. American Adaptation (Tony Kushner)

Tony Kushner reinterpreted «The Good Person of Szechwan» within a contemporary American context, incorporating American cultural and social references. His adaptation explores themes such as individualism and social justice, contextualizing moral dilemmas within modern political issues. This makes the play more engaging for American audiences while retaining the moral themes of the original (Aleks, 2001. p: 68).

c. Indian Adaptation (Rustom Bharucha)

Rustom Bharucha merged «The Good Person of Szechwan» with Indian theatrical traditions, integrating local narrative and stage styles while respecting Brecht's moral dilemmas. His adaptation addresses concepts of karma and social responsibility, exploring tensions between altruism and survival in modern Indian society. This enriches the play by rooting it in contemporary Indian culture, facilitating a deeper emotional resonance (Bharucha, 2005. p: 155).

4.4. Discussion

a. Observed Trends in Arab-Western Theatrical Translation

Theatrical translation between Arab and Western literatures reveals several trends. It requires a deep cultural adaptation to make works relevant in different contexts, often involving adjustments to historical, religious, and social references (Amine, 2018. p: 15). This practice examines cultural identities and intercultural tensions, highlighting convergences and divergences between Arab-Muslim and Western civilizations (Vinuesa Muñoz, 2017. p: 200). Finally, it stimulates artistic innovation by encouraging creative adaptations that merge narrative and aesthetic styles, creating hybrid works.

b. Effective Strategies for Overcoming Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

Addressing theatrical translation challenges requires collaboration between translators, playwrights, and artists, enabling navigation of cultural nuances (Lefevere, 1992. p: 155). Extensive research into historical and social contexts is also essential to ensure faithful translations (Baker, 2018. p: 46). Creative adaptation, which finds cultural equivalences while preserving the integrity of original works, plays a crucial role (Venuti, 2017. p: 213). These methods not only enrich the translation process but also foster mutual understanding between cultures.

c. Implications for Intercultural Understanding Through Theater

Theatrical translation is a significant vector for intercultural understanding. It fosters critical dialogue among people, exposes audiences to diverse experiences, and broadens their worldviews. By raising awareness of cultural diversity, theater promotes mutual respect and encourages reflection on shared universal values, thereby strengthening intercultural bonds.

5. Challenges and Solutions in Theatrical Translation

Theatrical translation is a complex process requiring fidelity to the original work while conveying cultural nuances and tone in the target language. Translators face several challenges, including:

5.1. Wordplay

Preserving humor and double meanings is crucial. For example, in The Bald Soprano by Eugène Ionesco, the line "On ne fait pas briller ses lunettes avec du cirage noir" was adapted into English while maintaining its absurdity (Linford, 2023. p: 32). The solution lies in prioritizing the comic effect over literal translation.

5.2. Culture-specific references

Adapting cultural references to make them understandable while retaining authenticity is essential. In Cyrano de Bergerac by Edmond Rostand, references to French cuisine were subtly adjusted. This might involve using cultural equivalents or explaining certain references.

5.3. Regional dialects

Translating the sociolinguistic nuances of a dialect poses a unique challenge. For instance, the Cockney dialect in Pygmalion by Madisyn Beilowitz was represented using Parisian slang (Beilowitz, 1912. p: 55). Finding a sociolinguistic equivalent in the target language is key. (Al-Khanji & Ennasser, 2022. p: 145).

5.4. Rhythm and musicality

Maintaining the rhythm and musicality of the original text is vital for performance. In Romeo and Juliet by Shakespeare, adjustments were made to retain the musical dimension of the text (Bousta & Majahi, 2021. p. 551).

5.5. Idiomatic expressions

Translating idiomatic expressions while preserving their meaning and nature is often necessary. For example, the French saying "Tant va la cruche à l'eau qu'à la fin elle se casse" was adapted into English, preserving its meaning and proverbial nature. Translators may seek equivalents or create new phrases to capture the original spirit.

Collaboration between translators, directors, and actors is essential to ensure that the translation respects the original work's intent while remaining accessible to the target audience.

6. Conclusion

The study of theatrical translation between Arab and Western cultures reveals that this practice goes beyond mere linguistic transfer, requiring both cultural and contextual adaptation. These adaptations navigate a balance between fidelity to the original work and modifications to meet audience expectations, highlighting cultural identities in both conflict and convergence.

Theatrical translation plays a key role in intercultural dialogue, enriching our understanding of the world and facilitating access to diverse narratives. It also contributes to the preservation of dramatic works and stimulates artistic innovation through stylistic experimentation.

Looking ahead, it is crucial to explore the ethical and political implications of translation within a diverse context, focusing on stereotypical representations and biases. The impact of technology and digital platforms on the dissemination of translations is another important consideration. Finally, comparative studies of specific adaptations could reveal effective and ethical practices, underscoring the intellectual and cultural potential of theatrical translation in fostering global diversity appreciation.

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