

The Linguistic Mediation for the Theatre

Editorial Strategies in a Form of Audiovisual Translation

by Mauro Conti (2014)

1. The audiovisual translation

In the multiform and changeable domain of linguistic mediation, «audiovisual translation» (or «multimedia translation») is considered the most important newcomer of these last two decades. Many of the operators in the field say this is so. And the numerous and qualified Masters offered by European universities are witness to the academic world's attention to this area of study.

But audiovisual translation, despite academic attention, is a specialization that is still shrouded in shadow even for its users – that is, the innumerable viewers of multilingual sub-titles for videos or dubbing *from* and *to* every language, of voice-over commentary, aid for the hard-of-hearing, of fansubbing, of videogames, internet sites, languages teaching. And not only.

To this list of fields that make up the eccentric frontier of audiovisual translation must be added a voice that bears clear cultural responsibilities – sur-titles for the theatre. At Prescott Studio, with almost two decades of experience, we prefer to define them as multi- or mono-linguistic titling for live performing arts: opera, drama, musicals, puppetry, non-European traditions.

2. The linguistic mediation for the theatre

Theatre, being a temporal synthesis of audio, spatial, chromatic, and textual experiences, has the ambition and the instruments to *speak* directly to the public, with no interference. Linguistic, sensory, or fruition barriers may however oblige one to fall back on a written linguistic mediation which, though based on the century-old tradition of sub-titles, must be able to count on specific editorial strategies.

These strategies view the theme of *translation* (whether inter- or intra-linguistic) as central; but this theme, melded by the needs of theatrical fruition and tied to the passing of time, is called *adaptation*. New challenges are added to the usual conditioning of translation, imposed by the unavoidable needs of *functionality* because theatrical titling, we should always remember, is first of all a *service*.

It is a service for the audience (who may follow different linguistic options), which is not foreseen or foreseeable by the author or the performer. It is a service that hits its mark when not talked about, when it follows the rhythm of the staging or the music, when it contains reading times that favour the fruition of the stage which is received through viewing and listening: one does not go to theatre to read.

3. Editorial strategies

The relationship of translator to public in this context is much more mediated by the publishing house than is the case, for example, of printing theatrical works. Beyond testing oneself against a generic but detailed grid of editorial criteria, the translation becomes amply modified from the publisher by means of an editor-director who verifies the functional grafts between the stage event and the titling.

The result of this interaction between editor and translator, as seen by the public, is a style in communication supported by criteria of textual mediation that, in the case of Prescott Studio, by now constitutes a model – a style that even while attempting to avoid subtracting attention from the stage, does not lower its standards of rigor, linguistic research, and graphic elegance.

In order to coordinate the editorial compromise that will serve as a textual compass for the audience one must acquire an ancient working method (completely unknown to traditional editing) that brings together all the collaborators to the staging of a production: *rehearse*. Rehearse all together the harmonization of the various components of the production. Including the titling.

4. Planning and fruition of a new literary genre

As regards the planning, the editor who oversees the service of linguistic mediation in the theatre has margins of project that are entirely *subordinate* to the client. That is, he has no possibility of choosing what works he will deal with. And he is called into play almost exclusively by theatrical institutions that commission the service with not more than a season's preparation time.

Another peculiar aspect of these texts edited for the titling is that they are not *published* in the usual manner (in print or accessible electronic format) because they are useable only during a theatrical event and beyond this special context it is unlikely that they be used without further

editing because their meaning and significance are complete only in the context of the images and action on the stage.

The text that the public reads during operatic or theatrical productions is further fruit of a process of progressive and gradual moving towards a functional version that can mediate among multiple needs: technical, dramaturgical, and of reception. It is this aspect of *functionality*, extraneous to the context of a translation destined for publication, that is shared by every field of audiovisual translation.

5. Divulcation of an European cultural heritage

Dealing with titling for live performing arts and especially musical theatre means promoting the popularization of one of the most precious of European cultural heritages. This is more necessary today in view of the overwhelming competition from television and cinema as well as the increasing audio-video media. Competition that reduces the probabilities of one's going to the theatre.

But the theatre, where one meets other spectators and everything is live, is a prime meeting place: human, cultural, artistic. Thus to surtitle Verdi in English in the Italian theatres alongside the original version of the libretto, means encouraging a cosmopolitan audience to frequent the theatre and allows for more knowledgeable listening on the part of those who know Verdi's librettos.

The example of Verdi is true for all authors. And it also touches on the international circulation of the theatre. One must pay special attention with melodrama which up until mid 20th century was true popular theatre in order to capture the attention of a more distracted contemporary audience and to keep alive the treasury of art and craft that make up the staging of universally recognized masterpieces.

6. Challenges of theatrical titling

Linguistic mediation in the theatre foresees the use of both inter-linguistic translation (where the target language is different from the source language) and intra-linguistic translation (where source and target language are the same): a common practice in audiovisuals and a way to increase the audience or, in the case of musical theatre, to render the sung text more transparent and also accessible to the hard-of-hearing.

The fact that one chooses to speak of *adaptation*, rather than of *translation*, must not make us think that the group working on the textual part of this compass which is represented by titling *adapts* to limits because it suffers them. These limits are the element of strength in this kind of editorial work – as long as one does not lose sight of the spectators' needs and transforms the obstacle into a stimulus.

Referring to a working group implies an eclectic sort of engagement. In fact the expertise at stake may be many-sided: from literary translators to audiovisual translators, from dramaturges and stage directors to musicians. The choices may change from case to case. But the element that must not be missing is a *direction of fruition* - the factor that distinguishes this editorial form from all others.

7. A lively and current debate in Europe

During a day that the Théâtre de l'Odéon of Paris and the Centre International de la Traduction Théâtrale recently dedicated to theatrical sur-titling (*Sur-titrage, l'esprit et la lettre*, February 3, 2014), and to which Prescott Studio was invited because of its involvement in this area, we compared notes about the central and by now decisive role of this practice in international popularization of theatrical productions.

During the discussions it became very clear, especially from the representative of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, that the promotion of theatrical titling must be a *political* one on the European level – a political choice favouring the circulation and co-ordination of languages and tongues that would in turn favour circulation of arts, ideas, and cultures.

A circulation in which the culture of origin, even though of a minority, is preserved by a linguistic mediation that, in this prime *meeting place* (the theatre), communicates the sense, *l'esprit*, without altering the integrity of the original. And in this humanistic challenge of an Europe without hierarchies and hegemonies, whose wealth lies in diversity, theatrical titling – it was said at the Parisian seminary – is the avant-garde.

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