Translation for Performance: Oscar Wilde in China

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Abstract
In theatre translation, ‘performability’ of the translated text in the host culture is an issue of great significance. This paper studies the staging of Oscar Wilde’s comedies in China, taking into consideration the specific historical and cultural contexts and linguistic and stylistic features of the Chinese language. It begins with a summary of existing theories of theatre translation, discussing the criteria of ‘adequacy’ in reproducing the original and ‘acceptability’ for the audiences. It then analyses various challenges and methods in translating Wilde, especially his humour. Special attention is paid to the techniques of adaptation and compensation. It proceeds to analyse the two staged versions, namely, Lady Windermere’s Fan adapted by Hong Shen in 1924, and The Importance of Being Earnest translated by Yu Kuang-chung in 1983. Shifts between the original and the translated texts are compared concerning the aspects of language, style and culture. The paper suggests that a performable text is the compromise of ‘adequacy’ and conformation to ‘acceptability’. It involves a certain degree of adaptation, which is the combined result of the features of the original text, the translator’s priorities and the recipient culture at the given historical period.

Keywords
theatre translation, adequacy and acceptability, Oscar Wilde, humour

1. Introduction

There are two approaches to translating theatre texts: to produce a literary work solely for reading, and to translate “performability” (Bassnett 1985: 90-91). Thus distinctions have been made between drama translation and theatre translation (Aaltonen 2000: 17). Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the playtext is incomplete in itself until realised in performance (Bassnett 2001: 91). When translating a dramatic text from one language to another for performance, the translator is not only confronted with the conventional difficulties of bridging linguistic and cultural gaps in the written form, but the challenges of producing a script comprehensible, readable and playable for the performers, as well as instantaneously understandable for the audience (Yu 1983: 151). Since communication takes place through the actors between the translator and the audience, the translator needs to take into consideration the matter of ‘playability’. It includes the ‘speakability’ of the text, or the conformity to verbal conventions; the match between the text, image and action (Griffith 1985: 162), constituted by various signals such as word, tone, mimic, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, props, setting,
lighting, music and sound (Kowzan, quoted in Marco 2002: 57); and, in dialogue, the speech rhythms, the pauses and silences, the shifts of tone or of register, and the problems of intonation patterns that render emotions (Bassnett 2001: 106).

Restrained by the complex “semiotics of theatre” (Elam 1988), the translator has to balance “adequacy” of reproducing the original and “acceptability” for the audiences (Even-Zohar 1978/1990: 51). The former is determined by adherence to the norms of the original, whereas the latter depends on the “target linguistic and/or literary polysystems as well as its exact position within them” (Toury 1980: 55). On the one hand, the translator should avoid too literal a translation that is unperformable, and adapt as and when required to conform to the established conventions in the target society. On the other hand, the translator needs to refrain from a free approach that “radically changes” the original (Bassnett 1991: 108), and maintain the meanings, connotations and style. An equivalent dramatic effect is, in the final analysis, what a translator should seek to reproduce.

Although a translator’s behaviour cannot be expected to be fully systematic (Toury 1995: 67), the degree of adaptation in a given text deserves study. When it comes to a particular dramatist and a specific genre of play, such as Oscar Wilde’s (1854-1900) comedies, the special challenges lie in the language, his “finest achievement”, and wit, which “lays claim to arrogance” but “seeks to please us”, which is “an agent of renewal, as pertinent now as a hundred years ago” (Ellmann 1987: xiv). In order to generate an equivalent humorous effect, it is the translator’s duty to make necessary adaptations with regard to cultural references and rhetorical devices to be appreciated by the audience, and to conform to the target language in terms of expression, syntax and speech pattern to be performed by actors. All the time provided that linguistic features and intended meanings are adequately rendered.

2. Theatre translation: Performability

Unlike other genres such as fiction and poetry, theatre imposes extra constrains apart from linguistic and cultural ones. In Zuber-Skerritt’s (1980: 92) words:

A play is written for performance and must be actable. The audience must be able to understand it immediately and directly, and to accept it as an organic piece of work. The translation of a play requires more consideration of non-verbal and non-literary aspects than does the translation of novels or poetry. A play depends on additional elements, such as movements, gestures, postures, mimicry, speech rhythms, intonations, music and other sound effects, lights, stage scenery. In particular, a play is dependent on the immediacy of the impact on the audience.