

Misiou, Vasiliki and Kostopoulou, Loukia (Eds.) (2024). *New Paths in Theatre Translation and Surtitling*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 264, £135.00. ISBN 978-1-032-21330-9.

The translation of theatrical texts constitutes a rapidly expanding field of research that explores the intricate relationship between skills and the art of performance itself. The field has evolved dramatically in recent years, with technology playing a pivotal role in shaping theatre translation in the digital age. Surtitling has proven to be an integral part of operatic contexts. Although this aspect of theatre translation remains under-explored, it significantly enhances the audience's understanding and experience of linguistic content during a live performance.

Focusing on surtitling and theatre translation, the volume entitled *New Paths in Theatre Translation and Surtitling*, edited by Vasiliki Misiou and Loukia Kostopoulou, represents a commendable effort in its compilation of the latest research on a relatively neglected topic. The volume is divided into three parts. Part I, "Rethinking theatre translation: Text, performance, translator," offers an overview of how surtitling is interpreted and represented in different contexts, as well as its current applications in various theatrical settings. In Chapter 1, entitled "Music and sub(sur)titing: Paradoxes and inconsistencies in today's live performances," Lucile Desblache affirms that surtitles are widely utilised and are becoming valuable tools in live shows in recent years. The blending of digital and traditional theatre has brought about mutual enhancement, resulting in more inclusive shows, offering audiences exposure to and experiences of diverse cultures. Sarah Maitland, in Chapter 2, "Coming to terms: Towards a hermeneutics of expectation in theatre surtitling," examines the role of 'audience expectation' in theatre translation from the perspective of hermeneutics by cojoining the concepts 'expectation,' 'spectatorship' and 'knowledge,' which suggest the spectators' critical observation and interpretation of the performance. In Chapter 3, entitled "At the crossroad of translation and performance: Theatre translation and *Practice as Research*", applying the PaR model, Angela T. Tarantini examines how translation impacts the staging of the Spanish play *Mendoza* by referring to its English and Italian versions, in which performance gestures, co-speech gestures and the actors' positioning on stage are emphasised. Tarantini also advocates the methodology of 'performance as a translation and a research methodology' while incorporating performance into theatre translation projects using the PaR paradigm. In Chapter 4, "Post-dramatic mediaturgy in translation: The trials of technotexts," by putting a focus on the digital opera *Echo and Narcissus*, Titika Dimitroulia underscores that this production features a complex intermedial mediaturgy that reinterprets the myth within a contemporary, mediatised culture. In accordance with this context, she broadens the concept of 'theatre translation' to make the idea of 'media-based dramaturgy' inclusive. As a result, more cross-disciplinary approaches in research and collaborations in translation are encouraged.

Part II, "Surtitling(s) taking the stage," investigates the various intricacies of surtitling translation, discussing different musicals and plays across Europe as illustrative case studies. Marta Mateo, in her Chapter 5, "*Chicago*: A musical on stage and screen in Spanish translation," delves into the particulars of translating musical drama and cinema, using the musical *Chicago* and its stage and screen adaptations as an illustrative example. By exploring multimodality and by juxtaposing the original playscript with *Chicago*'s translated film and stage versions, she examines the

challenges of translating a text across different media from a textual perspective and focusing on various translation techniques. Eva Espasa puts focus on the diverse voices involved in theatre surtitling in Chapter 6, entitled “Multiple voices in surtitling on contemporary Catalan stages”. This contribution suggests that surtitlers play a vital role in the performance by ‘negotiating’ with various participants in the production, and that they should be effectively integrated into the process of stage performance. In Chapter 7, which is entitled “The acrobatics of theatre surtitling: The case of *The Lehman Trilogy*,” Marisa S. Trubiano analyses the issue of the multiple languages and cultures featured in the play *The Lehman Trilogy* by Stefano Massini (2015), highlighting that the intricate nature of the play, in a way, enhances comprehension of translation and facilitates a scrutiny of language hierarchies.

The final part, “Catering for diverse audiences: Minority groups, accessibility, and immersive experience,” explores the practical facets of surtitling in theatre performances, focusing on aspects such as audience reception, accessibility and digital transformations. Chapter 8, entitled “On target: Surtitles, translation strategies and audience reception”, by Louise Ladouceur and Milane Pridmore-Franz, deals with surtitling in Canada in a case study which investigates the challenges and limitations involved in creating surtitles for both Anglophone monolingual and Francophone bilingual audiences. The reception and perception of surtitles by these audiences are analysed to highlight the importance of taking into account audience and context diversity. Similarly, Estella Oncins addresses the need to accommodate diverse audiences in theatre (with a particular stress on ‘accessibility’) in Chapter 9, “From stage to screen: Digital transformations and accessibility in the scenic arts.” Exploring the concepts of ‘access to the platform’ and ‘access to content’ through new theatrical technologies, Oncins highlights a recent focus shift on ‘disabilities to capabilities’, as well as a broader perception of accessibility in the media. Pierre-Alexis Mével, Joanna Robinson and Paul Tennent, in the following Chapter, “Integrated immersive inclusiveness: Rethinking captioning for creative accessibility,” argue for seamless integration of theatre surtitles in order to preserve the aesthetics of the performances and to ensure an uninterrupted experience for the audience. The potential of new digital technologies is advocated to ensure inclusivity, accessibility and aesthetic immersion in theatrical experiences. The last chapter (Chapter 11), entitled “Breaking the conventions about surtitles: The case of *Buona la Prima*” by Antonia M. Scordia, transforms surtitles into an effective and independent communicative tool through advanced technology and multimedia platforms, which extend the aesthetic experience both to offline audiences and online viewers.

The volume explains that creating surtitles for theatrical performances is a meticulous and multifaceted process that involves various practical challenges and is subject to constraints. However, the objectives and coverage of this book could have been further expanded to include a more critical analysis of these challenges and limitations in the real world, so that real-life viewers can also be inspired on how to make the best use of surtitles to enrich their theatrical experiences. Additional analyses could explore several facets: cultural nuances and references in the original text (which make it necessary to determine whether to domesticate or foreignise the target text); spatial and temporal constraints (which condition decisions for being more inclusive in theatres in different geographical locations); synchronisation and coordination of texts and performances; methods for avoiding audience distraction, and technical limitations, among others. These issues could be further discussed and strategies for overcoming



them could be proposed, using case studies and practical examples from festivals, musicals and theatre performances. While specific methods of implementing surtitles on stage are discussed and acknowledged by some authors in the book, there is a lack of in-depth argument of potential pitfalls or drawbacks, with most authors focusing on the constructive aspects of promoting surtitles. For instance, given that surtitles can be distracting for the audience, the book could have delved deeper into how this problem can be mitigated. While the book has certainly addressed the role of different agents in the theatrical space, a more detailed scrutiny of the collaborative process of surtitle creation, perhaps in parallel with technological advances in today's societies, could have been favoured.

The book also addresses issues related to reception and invisibility of surtitles. The problem of determining the need to create surtitles in other languages has been a matter of debate, especially in some local contexts such as that of Cantonese opera (a branch of Chinese opera mainly flourishing in southern China and Hong Kong), the area of my research interests. The main reason for this debate is that local audiences in some contexts are often accustomed to listening to lyrics in their mother tongue and to absorbing the content of the opera intuitively. However, the effects of globalisation have sparked a desire to promote operatic art on the world stage. Translation is therefore necessary to involve different spectators and increase their level of receptivity. Interest in "reception" has been reflected in a more prominent relevance of issues related to inclusivity, which means "developing productions that include people with sensory impairments in the process and addressing all target groups equally" (Mälzer & Wünsche, 2024, pp. 563-564), and of issues related to accessibility in theatres, meaning performances with "no barriers [...] through subtitling for people with hearing impairments and/or simultaneous with sign language" (Aiello, 2014, p. 336). Specialised literature has defined reception as the process by which "the reader and the text interact with each other" (D'Egidio, 2015, p. 70). Reception Theory plays an essential role in the operatic context because it "focuses on the role of the reader in the interpretation of a text and not on the text itself" (D'Egidio, 2015, p. 70). Furthermore, "with its emphasis on the agency of the audience/reader in the process of making meaning from the experience of a work," Reception Theory puts forward the idea that theatre should focus "on the means by which performance itself should evoke the proper aesthetic pleasures" (Zarrilli et al., 2010, p. 139). Certainly, as discussed in this book, an in-depth understanding of theatrical lyrics by foreign audiences through translation is almost impossible. As stressed by Desblache in Chapter 1, interpretations of the translation of sub/surtitles are subject to the capabilities of the receptors and their cultural literacy, given that some lyrics refer to allusive and figurative cultural elements.

The volume stresses that sub/surtitles during live performances, once met with scepticism, are now more widely accepted and ingeniously integrated into productions, making theatre more accessible to international audiences and audiences with special needs (such as D/deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences, as discussed in Chapters 1, 6, 8 and 9). The "invisibility" of sub/surtitles is constantly debated in this book (as in Chapters 5, 6 and 7), although it can be argued that surtitles can almost never be invisible. As some expressions of the lyrical lines are difficult to understand, the audience can hardly stop from looking at the surtitles as long as they are available. The audience's compelling need to shift their attention to read surtitles and the split-attention effect that ensues (as mentioned in Chapter 8) are two major problems that

disrupt audience reception and attention. The volume highlights that their attention to the performance is ‘invaded’ as a result, leading to a violation of the original purpose of surtitles, which is to aid comprehension.

The volume also focuses on issues related to inclusivity and accessibility. Considered as a means of facilitating communication between performers and spectators, surtitling helps to eliminate language barriers and to clarify semiotic symbols and figurative functions. To address the diverse needs and expectations of audience members, the drive to deliver more inclusive live performances has gained momentum, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the contributions to this volume (such as Chapters 2, 4, 6 and 9) reiterate the complexities and challenges of surtitling, which, as has been argued, must be unobtrusive but accessible, which creates a “visibility paradox,” as referred to by Jeremy Munday (quoted in Chapters 2 and 8). Emphasis is placed on the fact that the problem with displaying surtitles usually lies in the delivery speed of the performers, in the cognitive load that this speed places on audience members, and in the inability to pause or rewind live actions of the play itself.

The volume also reflects on the importance of the translatability of a libretto, an aspect which is highly relevant to its performativity. Translators often meet challenges to revive libretti with literal accuracy, and use different strategies to respond to the challenges of poetically-charged lyrics, and to convey the cultural implications of the original text. However, this volume also stresses that it is possible to take into account “singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme,” as advocated by Peter Low (quoted in Chapter 5 by Marta Mateo, who highlights that these elements are essential in the translation process and expresses a firm belief that aesthetics should be given priority in the whole production). Specialised literature on this subject makes it clear that the concepts of ‘transmediality’ and ‘transcreativity’ do provide food for thought. ‘Transmediality’ refers “to phenomena that occur *across* media” and, as discussed by Irina Rajewsky, can be “*on a par* with intermediality” (qtd. Balestrini, 2023, p. 21). ‘Transcreativity’ has been linked to “a process whereby the translation was considered a retelling by the translator in another language” (Spinzi, 2018, p. 4). As growing transmediality “embraces the broader practice of applying multiple media technologies to tell stories pertaining to a single storyworld” (Gambarato, Alzamora & Tárchia, 2020, n.p.), this should be taken into account to enhance the overall experience when translating and promoting opera libretti.

With all the above in mind, it thus becomes clear that effectivity in the reception of surtitled plays becomes extremely difficult to measure even today, as it is not something readily quantifiable with well-established methodologies or frameworks. Nevertheless, concepts such as *repercussions*, audience *responses*, *readability*, *reaction*, *usability* and *accessibility*, used by Ladouceur and Pridmore-Franz as methodological aids in Chapter 8, offer a workable set of more advanced indicators for evaluating theatre viewers’ receptibility to the repertoire. Despite the fact that readability, usability and accessibility of surtitles in theatre productions can be challenged by various factors such as screen height, actor improvisations, text density, dialogue speed and surtitle brightness, these methodological categories can be very useful for conducting further academic research in this area. Apart from theoretical concerns, readers of this book are also introduced to the concept of ‘Practice as Research’ (PaR) in theatre translation, supported by Angela Tarantini in her work *Theatre Translation: A Practice as Research Model* (2021). In Chapter 3 of this volume,

Tarantini posits that actual translation should be regarded as research, both because it generates knowledge and can be investigated. Tarantini stresses that PaR is not only about creating art or observing a performance but also about deepening the understanding of the practice itself. She furthermore highlights that the importance of replication in PaR does not lie in achieving the same result but in enhancing knowledge about the artistic practice or the research object.

The volume underscores that language and discourse serve important functions in theatre surtitling. As highlighted by Eva Espasa in Chapter 6, the role of surtitling in showcasing different languages in theatre performances has been explored, particularly in bilingual or multilingual societies. In bilingual contexts, subtitles can convey messages that are only accessible to bilingual audiences. It is suggested that presenting language variation in the translation process ensures visibility of multilingualism and accessibility to various types of spectators in the case of dialects and non-standard languages. Attention is drawn to the fact that subtitles play the role of a form of theatrical translation into a minority language, with the aim of attracting the attention of audiences speaking the majority language, although this has also led to some resistance to subtitled performances. Specifically, while subtitles often enhance accessibility, they can also become a barrier to audience enjoyment in theatres if dedicated to a minority language and culture. As Lim (2023) remarks, “[I]inguistic difficulty arises when mixed visual sounds are sometimes abandoned for a singular lingua franca [...], while] code switching is complicated by the presence of multiple languages as text [...]” (p. 68).

The possibilities for surtitling in the digital age, a key topic linking technology and art today, are covered mainly in Part III of this book. Theatres are increasingly leveraging digital and social media platforms. The integration of technology into theatre translation can certainly enhance the performance experience, create innovative narrative forms and attract diverse audiences. Technology has evolved so much that generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not only involved in the translation of subtitles but also in the ‘smart caption glasses’ through which transcripts and lyrics are shown to the audience, as discussed by Mével, Robinson and Tennent in Chapter 10. This reveals a whole new scenario of virtual reality, indicating a collaborative and immersive relationship between human and machines. In the post-COVID era, theatre performances have become accessible online, enabling perception, comprehension and so-called ‘interaction’ between performers and audience (as discussed in Chapter 9).

In conclusion, this book offers an overview of traditional and new perspectives on the use of subtitles as practical elements, which is highly commendable, in addition to theoretical discussions of more relevant and applicable content. This volume therefore constitutes an invaluable contribution to the growing body of research on surtitling, and for anyone interested in the intersection of translation, theatre and performance technology in the digital age. It can also serve as a useful guide for researchers and students of translation or theatre, providing them with a deeper understanding of the complexities and variables involved in surtitling. Its comprehensive analysis of surtitling, taking into account factors ranging from the hybrid nature of theatrical texts to technological advances, expands and extends the possibilities for further research.

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