COMMUNICATION, GESTUALITY AND THE TRANSLATION OF DRAMA

Gerald Parks
SSLMIT, University of Trieste

1 Introduction

What kind of communication takes place in the theatre? What are the elements that go to make up such communication? How does a change in any of these elements affect the nature of the communication? These are complex questions that can receive no simple, straightforward answer.

It is obvious that any theatre event takes place in space and time. Therefore, any change in the nature of the space or in the use of time must necessarily have an impact on the total communication. A theatre event also involves people who are doing things and saying things; in addition, there may also be other elements, such as music, added from outside or inside the acting space. The total communicative act will involve all of these elements.

The drama text, if it exists (and some theatre events have no fixed text), is normally viewed as regarding mainly what the people in the acting space say, although it obviously cannot be totally separated from the context of all the other elements. A drama text should not be treated as if it were a disembodied and self-contained entity, but should always be considered in the context of an actual or potential theatre event.

What the people do in the acting space is very important and may be also a commentary on what they say. What they say and what they do may be in contradiction. So what they say cannot be understood except in the context of what they do.

A theatre event is very complex from the point of view of communication. Normally, communication involves an exchange of ideas or information between two or more people. Thus, a play text may seem to be like a normal conversation. But it is not a normal conversation, because the people and situations described do not really exist; they are fictitious; and even if they were real, the conversation would exist as a communicative situation only for them. The presence of an audience changes the nature of the communicative situation. The audience is in the position of eavesdropping on a conversation that does not concern it (and yet is intended for its ears by a diabolical author). So there are immediately two levels of communication: the fictional communication that
takes place in the acting space, and the metacommunication that takes place when the audience listens in.

What kind of communication is the audience supposed to receive? Not, obviously, the ‘information’ exchanged by the actors, since such information is fictional. The audience is expected to draw some other type of message out of this complex pseudo-situation. It is not always clear what such a message is or could be, even in the case of a thesis-play, such as Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*. In the case of a text such as *Hamlet*, the situation is desperate.

Compare a play with a speaker at a conference. Let us take the most bare-bones situations: a single speaker addressing an audience, on the one hand, and a single actor reciting a monologue on the other. The difference is at once obvious: the speaker takes responsibility for his statements, he vouches for them; they are his statements and his ideas. The actor takes no such responsibility for the ideas or emotions expressed. They do not belong to him, but to a fictional character. As Keir Elam points out, “Responsibility for the utterance as a full speech act, with all its possible moral and social consequences, is attributed to the dramatic and not the stage speaker” (Elam 1980: 170). How are we to interpret such utterances? What is the actor’s relation to them? Once again, if we were to summarize the conference speaker’s paper, we would produce a sort of abstract, containing in a nutshell the basic idea or ideas that he/she wanted to put across. But in the case of a play, the only possible ‘abstract’ is a plot summary, which leaves us dissatisfied, of course, because even the best of plot summaries misses the real ‘meaning’ of the play. But what is that meaning? What is the play communicating? Probably it is communicating nothing less and nothing more than an experience – a total view of life, a way of living, thinking and acting. A play creates a world, and the world that it creates is what it communicates. As Giuseppe O. Longo has written: “A text, any text, is rooted in the world and translating a text means translating the world (or at least a piece of a world)” (Longo 1998: 68; translation mine).

From the time of the Greeks, it has been a commonplace of criticism that a play also communicates emotions. For Whitehead (1963: 85), the question of the symbolic transfer of emotions lies at the basis of every theory of the aesthetics of art. According to Aristotle, one of the functions of tragedy is that of catharsis. Leaving aside the thorny question of what exactly he meant by this, it is clear that tragedy is intended to make the audience feel powerful emotions, of which pity and fear may indeed be foremost.¹ Likewise, comedy has traditionally been associated with the release of tensions consequent on a therapeutic laughter. That is, drama, like music, involves more than the

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¹ See Else (1967: 6-7, 97-99) for a brief discussion of the issues.
communication of ideas; it is largely concerned with the communication of emotions. That is why the theatre event is always a concentrated experience; the emotional intensity is not to be interrupted by extended breaks (in some theatrical traditions, there are no breaks at all). This concentration of effect is one of the reasons Aristotle adduces for the superiority of tragic over epic poetry (Else 1967: 74).

The communication of emotions would seem to be central to the theatrical experience. To quote Peter Brook:

I know of one acid test in the theatre. It is literally an acid test. When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself – then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture. It's the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are highly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. (Brook 1979: 152)

Emotion and argument together, blended with images and impressions: the communication may be powerful, but it is largely non-rational. In the final analysis, it is the audience that determines the play's meaning.

It is notoriously difficult to define what is meant by the communication of emotions. Still, no one would recognize the power of King Lear or Oedipus Rex without feeling the powerful emotions aroused by these experiences. But if tears may come after seeing a performance of these tragedies, it is not the tears themselves that constitute their greatness. King Lear cannot be reduced to the level of a soap opera.

Emotions are also communicated through gestures, hence the importance of what the actors do in the acting space. If words are dominant and powerful in much of the Western tradition, still actions may be even more eloquent. But here the situation becomes very complex. Many modern theatre texts specify, sometimes in great detail, the major and often also the minor actions or gestures of the actors. Classic texts generally do not. It is true, however, that many of the actions are inherent in the text itself, and can be deduced from what the characters say. The rest, however, is left to the imagination of the actors and director. This is not the case with films: in a film, the gestures are fixed once and for all, and can never be changed, though the words pronounced may change when the film is dubbed. In the theatre the gestures are re-created every night, and are probably never the same on any two nights running. Thus the communication achieved in the theatre is more immediate than in a film, but also more fluid.
There is another difference. The one type of gesture absolutely fixed by a theatre text is the movements of the lips and tongue: the gestures needed to pronounce the words. But when the text is translated, these labial and tongue movements may change radically, unlike in films, where they always remain the same. Thus it is possible to conceive of two productions of ‘the same’ play in which the gestures are ALL different. But is it then ‘the same’ play?

Gestures have meaning, very often a powerful emotional significance. But is it universal? The anthropological answer would seem to be an obvious no, and yet the experience of international cinema would seem to indicate that the meaning of most gestures is universal enough. Or is this just another aspect of the Americanization of the world?

2 The Translation of Drama

Let us now turn from these basic theoretical considerations to the vexed question of theatre translation.

Though the translator has to deal specifically with the text of the play, and thus with what the actors say, he cannot afford to ignore what they must or might do, as this may clarify or even determine the meaning of their words. This is one reason why it is helpful for the translator to work in collaboration with the director of a production, and/or with the actors. But even in those cases where this is not possible, the translator has to try to imagine what the scene looks like and what is going on physically in it.

From the point of view of the communication of emotions, obviously the translator will aim at what is called equivalent effect; that is, he will aim to move the audience in the same way as the original audience will have been moved. In practice, this aim is very elusive and difficult to achieve, or even to define clearly. But a few remarks may be in order.

On the stage there are only actions and words to tell the story. The words, then, are very important, and must be adequate to the feeling to be conveyed. Thus a translator cannot afford to render only the basic meaning of the text, but must also try to create a language that is equal in effectiveness to that of the original. Here the nature of the languages involved may be an obstacle. For instance, the power of an utterance also depends on the sound of it, on its phonic qualities. Though this has always been recognised in the case of poetry, it has not always been given due importance in the case of theatre translation. A perfectly adequate translation from the semantic point of view, and one which is also fluent and speakable, may yet sound so different from the original that the effect achieved is quite different. Meaning is always embodied in certain sounds, and though the ‘meaning’ of such sounds is controversial, yet it can be felt. For a Nordic soul, at least, it is difficult to conceive of anyone expressing
anger without using a high number of guttural sounds. For this reason, Latinate ‘anger’ may sound even funny.

Let me draw an example, and some theoretical comfort, from an authoritative source. Steiner writes:

I believe that the communication of information, of ostensive and verifiable ‘facts’, constitutes only one part, and perhaps a secondary part, of human discourse. The potentials of fiction, of counterfactuality, of undecidable futurity profoundly characterize both the origins and nature of speech. They differentiate it ontologically from the many signal systems available to the animal world. They determine the unique, often ambiguous tenor of human consciousness and make the relations of that consciousness to ‘reality’ creative. Through language, so much of which is focused inward to our private selves, we reject the empirical inevitability of the world. [...] To a greater or lesser degree, every language offers its own reading of life. To move between languages, to translate, even within the restrictions of totality, is to experience the almost bewildering bias of the human spirit towards freedom. (Steiner 1975: 473)

He goes on to quote Beckett’s self-translation of a passage from Endgame. He comments:

The transfer is flawless […]. Yet the differences in cadence, in tone, in association are considerable. The English slopes to a dying fall via long o sounds; the French spirals to a final nervous pitch. Set the two passages side by side, and a curious effect follows. Their claustrophobic bleakness remains, but the measure of distance between them is sufficient to create a sense of liberation, of almost irresponsible alternative. ‘That rising corn’ and ‘ce blé qui lève’ speak of worlds different enough to allow the mind both space and wonder. (Steiner 1975: 473-474)

The Italian theatrical tradition has always lacked a language of tragedy. The language of Alfieri and Manzoni is not viable theatrically and never has been; D’Annunzio did not do much better. The only real tragedies in the Italian tradition are those of Verdi; his Otello can stand alongside Shakespeare’s as no other Italian text can. But in this case the music and words are inseparable, and Verdi’s example is of no use to the modern translator. The lack of any kind of tragic language in the Italian theatrical tradition means that the translator has to invent a language of his own, and it will necessarily seem inadequate when compared to the original text. Neither the experiments of Testori with dialect nor the revival of rhetoric made by Pasolini offer viable solutions for the translator of a tragic text into some sort of modern language.

This is only one kind of language problem. With modern texts, a different sort of problem may occur. The English and American theatre traditions, at least
in the 20th century, have often been influenced by a trend towards naturalism, also in the acting style. Thus the language used on the stage is not necessarily the ‘standard’ language (whatever that may be); it may be full of solecisms, regionalisms, slang, vulgarisms, etc. It is not easy to transpose such a naturalistic language onto the Italian stage, where naturalism is unnatural. Likewise, the naturalistic gestures indicated by English and American texts often become overemphasized, and hence rhetorical, on the Italian stage. The problem is one of cultural traditions and expectations.

Every playtext, like every work of art, creates a world. The use of a different language necessarily changes that world. But the world of the theatre also points to a world outside, taken for granted by both the author and the audience. This is the external reality of the society in which the theatre event takes place.

What exactly is the reality referred to in a theatre text? Even the most fantastic texts presuppose some sort of ‘normal’ world to be taken as reference. Even Peter Pan could not be understood without reference to a real world that is held hovering in the background. Here I hardly have time or space enough to investigate this epistemological question. But it is clear that the theatrical “world” is created also by words, so the closest attention needs to be paid to them. They are the actor’s most important gestures. As Keir Elam notes,

> The speech event is, in its own right, the chief form of interaction in the drama. The dialogic exchange, that is, does not merely, in Honzl’s terms, refer deictically to the dramatic action but directly constitutes it. The proairetic (or “action”) dynamic of the play is carried, above all, by the intersubjective force of discourse. (Elam 1980: 157)

3 Some practical examples

In the second part of this essay, I would like to illustrate some of the problems connected with the translation of theatrical texts, seen from the perspective of vocal sounds and gestures. The passages I have chosen come from a radio play written by Anthony Burgess (1986), Blooms of Dublin, based on James Joyce’s Ulysses. The Teatro Stabile del Friuli-Venezia Giulia commissioned me to translate the text in 1982. The translated text was never staged or published. For this essay, I have chosen some significant passages that have been carefully

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2 For a discussion of dramatic “worlds”, see Elam (1980: especially pp. 98-117), and also for a general semiotic discussion, Eco (1990: 193-212, about “Piccoli mondi”).

3 This translation was made and revised without consulting the existing Italian translations of Ulysses, although reference was made to Joyce’s original text to clarify some points, particularly in Molly Bloom’s monologue.
revised for this purpose together with my colleague Silvia Campanini. I shall now try to highlight the problems described in the theoretical part of this paper.

Passage no. 1 (from Scene One)

_Burgess’s text:_

MULLIGAN: Asperges me Domine hyssopo et deleabor super nivem... Introibo ad altare Dei... Come up, Dedalus. Come up, you fearful Jesuit. [...] For this, O dearly beloved, is the genuine Christine, body and soul and blood and ouns. Shut your eyes, gents. One moment. A little trouble about those white corpuscles... Ah well, shave off the bristles. Greet the new day. [...] Stephan Dedalus. Stephanos Daidalos. The mockery of it. Your name, an ancient Greek. Mine too, when you come to view it rhythmically. Malachi Mulligan, Malachi Mulligan. Two dactyls. Ah, we must go to Athens. Will you come if I can get the aunt to fork out twenty quid? We might learn how to do something for this benighted green isle. Hellenise it.

_Translation:_


_Comment:_ Here there is an obvious (and quite ironic) contrast in tone and rhythm between the Latin phrases at the beginning and the sentences that follow. It is certainly important to maintain the name of Malachi Mulligan, in order to respect the rhythm indicated (two dactyls). In the main, the translation attempts to reproduce the tone of the original text, while keeping its fluency.

Passage no. 2 (from Scene One)

_Burgess’s text:_

MULLIGAN: Scutter. Lend us a loan of your noserag to wipe my razor. The bard’s noserag. A new art colour for our Irish poets – snotgreen. You can almost taste it, can’t you? God, isn’t the sea what Algys Swinburne
calls it – a grey sweet mother. The snotgreen sea. The scrotum-tightening sea. Epi oinopasponpon. Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks. I must teach you. Thalatta, thalatta! Our great sweet mother... The aunt thinks you killed your mother.

Translation:


Comment: Here it is mainly important to respect the sudden changes in register, since the text mixes colloquialisms with ancient Greek phrases, archaisms such as “bard’” and pseudo-Homeric inventions such as “scrotum-tightening,” and word play (“lend us a loan”). The need to respect the rhythm and sound of the text has led to the choice of certain words or expressions in the translation (“Sbrigati” for “Scutter”, “prestami in prestito” for “lend us a loan”, and the reinforcing of “Dio” with the addition of the adjective “buono”).

Passage no. 3: (from Scene One)

Burgess’s text:

STEPHEN: I sang it alone in the house, holding down the long dark chords. Her door was open. She wanted to hear my song. She was crying in her wretched bed. For those words, Stephen: love’s bitter mystery. Her glazing eyes, staring out of death, to shake and bend my soul. On me alone. The ghostcandle to light her agony. Her hoarse loud breath rattling in horror, while all prayed on their knees. Her eyes on me to strike me down. Ghoul; chews of corpses!

Translation:

STEPHEN: La cantavo da solo in casa, tenendo a lungo gli accordi scuri. La sua porta era aperta. Lei voleva sentire la mia canzone. Piangeva nel suo misero letto. Per quelle parole, Stephen: il mistero amaro dell’amore. I suoi occhi vitrei mi fissavano dal profondo della morte, per scuotere e piegare la mia anima. Fissi su me solo. La candela-fantasma per illuminare la sua agonia. Il suo forte respiro raucò rantolava inorridito, mentre tutti pregavano in ginocchio. I suoi occhi su di me per abattermi. Donna-sciacallo: masticatrice di cadaveri!
Comment: The whole text must be translated with close attention, in order to respect the rhythm (the length of the phrases), certain vowel sounds (as in “glazing... staring... shake”, etc.), the alliterations (“her hoarse... horror” rendered with “respiro rauco rantolava inorridito”), and the shocking force of “ghoul” (rendered with “sciacallo”).

Passage no. 4 (from Act II - Scene Eight)

Burgess’s text:

STUDENTS: Deshil Holles eamus. (SUNG THREE TIMES)

WOMEN: Send us, bright one, light one, horhorn, quickening and wombfruit. (SUNG THREE TIMES)

FATHERS: Hoopsa, boyaboy, hoopsa. (SUNG THREE TIMES)

Translation:

STUDENTI: Deshil Holles eamus. (Cantato tre volte)

DONNE: Mandaci, splendido, lumen, numen, ravviva, frutto del ventre.
    (Cantato tre volte)

PADRI: Oplà, piaoi, oplà. (Cantato tre volte)

Comment: In this passage, only the rhythm and sound of the words are important. It is unlikely that the audience will perceive any meaning in this text (though scholars have delucidated it). In what the women say, the trochaic rhythm at the beginning has been replaced by two dactyls. The use of Latin is justified also by the fact that these lines have been written in (rhythmic) imitation of some verses in archaic Latin of the Arval brothers. (The text of the original Latin can be consulted in Garrod 1912: 1-2)

Passage no. 5 (from Scene Nine)

Burgess’s text:

BURKE: I here present your undoubted Emperor President and King Chairman, the most serene and potent and very puissant ruler of this realm. God save Leopold the First!

CROWD: (SINGS) [...] 

God save King Leo,

Pride of our nation,

Let all creation

Honour his name.
BLOOM: Thanks, somewhat eminent sir.

STEPHEN: Gaudium magnum annuntio vobis. Habemus carneficem. Leopold Patrick Andrew David George, be thou anointed.

ALL THE MEN: We do become your liege men of life and limb to earthly worship.

BLOOM: My beloved subjects, a new era is about to dawn. I, Bloom, tell you verily it is even now at hand. Yea, on the word of a Bloom, ye shall ere long enter into the garden city which is to be, the new Bloomusalem.

Translation:

BURKE: Ora vi presents il vostro indiscusso Imperatore Presidente e Re Direttore, il governatore più sereno, potente e possentissimo di questo regno. Dio salvi Leopold Primo!

FOLLA: (canta) [...] 

Dio salvi Re Leo, orgoglio della nazione; che tutta la creazione onori il suo nome.

BLOOM: Grazie, signore alquanto eminente.

STEPHEN: Gaudium magnum annuntio vobis. Habemus carneficem. Leopold Patrick Andrew David George, che tu sia incoronato.

TUTTI GLI UOMINI: Ecco i tuoi devoti seguaci per la vita, dinanzi a te in terrena adorazione.

BLOOM: Miei sudditi beneamati, siamo all’alba di una nuova era. Io, Bloom, in verità vi dico che essa è ormai prossima. Ebbene sì, sulla parola di un Bloom, tra non molto voi entrerete nella città-giardino che sarà, la nuova Bloomusalemme.

Comment: In this case, too, it is necessary to respect the mixing of different registers and rhythms. There is also the problem of the song, which in this passage can be easily solved. The other songs present in Burgess’s text have been omitted from this paper because they present very complex problems, which are hard to solve without having access to the music that should accompany the lyrics. Even if songs frequently appear in theatrical texts, they can be considered separately from ‘normal’ discourse.
Passage no. 6 (from Scene Nine)

*Burgess’s text:*

MULLIGAN: Born out of bedlock, hereditary epilepsy is present, the consequence of unbridled lust. He is prematurely bald from self-abuse, perversely idealistic in consequence, and has metal teeth. I have made a prevaginal examination and, after application of the acid test to 5,427 anal, axillary and pubic hairs, I declare him to be virgo intacta.

*Translation:*

MULLIGAN: Nata fuori dal vincolo del letto nuziale, l'epilessia ereditaria è presente, conseguenza di lussuria sfrenata. L'onianismo l'ha reso precocemente calvo e, di conseguenza, perfidamente idealista, con denti di metallo. Gli ho fatto un esame prevaginale e dopo l'esecuzione della prova dell'acidità su cinquemilaquattrocentoventisette peli dell’ano, dell’ascella e del pube, io lo dichiaro virgo intacta.

*Comment:* Here it is important to reproduce the play of alliterations: that on the letter *b* (born... bedlock) has been replaced by an equivalent wordplay with *n* (nata... nuziale), while the alliteration on *p* has been kept and even reinforced (prematurely... perversely... prevaginal... pubic / precocemente... perfidamente... prevaginale... prova... peli... pube). The assonance in “hereditary epilepsy” has been reproduced in “epilessia ereditaria”. (Unfortunately, there was no way of transferring the pun in “bedlock” except by a sort of semantic expansion and paraphrase).

Passage no. 7 (from Scene Nine)

*Burgess’s text:*

CARR: I don’t give a bugger who he is.

COMPTON: We don’t give a bugger who he is.

[...]

CARR: I’ll wring the neck of any bugger says a word against my fucking king.

[...]

COMPTON: Here, let’s bugger off, Harry. They’ll have us in the lockup.

CARR: God fuck ‘em. I don’t give a shit for any of them.
Translation:

CARR: Non mi importa un cazzo chi è.

COMPTON: Non ci importa un cazzo chi è.

[...]

CARR: Torcerò il collo a qualunque brutto ceffo dica una parola contro il mio fottuto re.

[...]

COMPTON: Suvvia, tagliamo la corda, Harry. Ci sbatteranno in galera.

CARR: Che vadano nel casino. Non me ne frega un cazzo di nessuno di loro.

Comment: It is well known that vulgarisms have an important emotive and connotative role in spoken discourse, and a significant part of their effectiveness comes from the sound of the words themselves, since their precise meaning is often not clear. In the cases given here, it is important to find an expression that is equivalent not so much from the semantic point of view as from the standpoint of expressive and emotive effectiveness. That is, the phrases must be expressive of ‘strong’ feelings, and hit the listener like a slap in the face.

Passage no. 8 (from Scene Eleven, end)

Burgess’s text:

MOLLY: When I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used, or shall I wear a red, yes, and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I - yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down in me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will... (THE MUSIC RISES TO A FORTISSIMO C MAJOR TRIAD THEN SINKS BACK TO PIANISSIMO FOR MOLLY’S LAST WORD) Yes.

Translation:

MOLLY: Quando mi misi una rosa fra i capelli come usavano le ragazze andaluse, o dovrei mettermi una rossa, sì, e come lui mi baciò sotto il muro moresco e pensavo lui vale quanto un altro e poi gli chiesi con gli occhi di chiedermelo ancora sì e allora mi chiese se io...sì, dico sì mio fiore di montagna e per prima cosa lo abbracciai e lo tirai sopra di me perché potesse sentire i miei seni tutti profumati sì e il suo cuore batteva impazzito e si dissi sì lo dirò... (La musica aumenta di volume fino a
raggiungere un fortissimo accordo di do maggiore, poi diventa di nuovo pianissimo per l’ultima parola di Molly) Si.

Comment: In this case it is necessary to write a text that is musically sweet and romantic, as in a dream, since the passage is entirely accompanied by music. It is debatable whether the Italian word “Si” has the same singability and resonance as the English word “Yes,”, but in any case there is no alternative translation possible.

In conclusion, we have only to ask ourselves if the translation produces the same esthetic and emotional effect as the original text, whether, that is, it communicates the same emotions, which are the real message of the work. Only the audience can decide.

References