

Language, Translation, and Multilingualism

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Introduction

Language – whether spoken or signed, pre-written, devised, or improvised – is one of the most distinctive ways in which theatre and performance makers can communicate with their audiences, alongside other visual and aural media and sign systems, such as the body, music, costumes, and light. However, while language had been perceived and articulated as the dominant aspect in nineteenth-century European theatre, text has seen its authority gradually decline in continental European theatre since the emergence of turn-of-the-century avant-gardes (such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, and Futurism) and experimental theatre directors and performers of the 1960s and 70s (such as Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, and Marina Abramovic). Language, however, is seeing a resurgence in the twenty-first century; while not all modern and contemporary European theatre and performance makes use of, or is based on, spoken or signed text, it remains a key component of traditional and experimental ways of making stage work in Europe.

But what languages can be seen or heard on European stages? The continent is the least linguistically diverse and yet, according to the latest edition of the authoritative world language database, the *Ethnologue*, there are 289 living languages in use in Europe. Out of these, about 72 are classified as ‘institutional,’ that is, they are ‘used and sustained by institutions beyond the home and community,’ and 52 are classified as ‘dying,’ that is, children of users are no longer learning them at school or at home, and they will not pass them on to their offspring (Ethnologue, 2020a and 2020b). The EU recognises 24 official languages and ‘over 60’ indigenous minority languages operating in its territory (Europa.eu, n.d. a). To grasp the full picture of linguistic diversity in Europe, however, one must also take into account languages spoken at home and in communities by its growing extra-European immigrant population, and the sign languages used by D/deaf communities, both of which the *Ethnologue* database only superficially accounts for. Estimates suggest that there may be as many sign languages as there are spoken languages in Europe (Timmermans 2005, 147). Moreover, extra-European immigrants currently form 4.7 per cent of the EU population, adding non-indigenous languages to the tapestry of sounds characterising contemporary life (Europa.eu, n.d. b). Scholars have called for more research and institutional investment to be channelled into preserving multilingualism and endangered dialects and tongues in Europe. The theatre continues to be a place where languages can form communities around them, and

it is therefore vital that we continue to support dialect theatre and theatre in minority languages whenever this is possible.

Dialect theatre, or theatre in endangered dialects that are no longer being taught at school, has a very strong tradition in Italy. One of the most distinguished and prolific contemporary Italian theatre makers, Sicilian director and writer Emma Dante, for instance, chooses to use Southern Italian dialects, such as Palermitan, Neapolitan, and Apulian, in all of her productions, claiming that most Italians do not understand a word of what her actors say on stage most of the time (Dante in Laera 2020a, 308). Despite her work's supposed otherness even in her own country, her plays have toured all over Italy, Europe, Asia, and the Americas in their original language, mostly with subtitles. One of her earliest and most celebrated shows, the satirical and physical comedy *mPalermu* (In Palermo, 2001), stages the quarrels of a Palermitan family struggling to leave the house for their Sunday stroll in the city centre. The characters' desires to 'get out' are obstructed by casual banter, which turns into bitter dispute, about slippers, *pasticcini* (pastries), and the size of the Palermo cathedral; their walking plans are finally thwarted, once and for all, by the sudden death of Nonna Citta, the eldest member of the family, who collapses on the floor. This production has captured the imagination of audiences in over thirty countries in its touring history.

Shared languages bring people closer together, allowing them to communicate with one another, building common cultures of understanding and ways of articulating the world around them. However, while some languages are similar enough to grant intelligibility (for instance, Italian dialects are mostly intelligible within Italy, despite what Emma Dante claims), not all languages and dialects are accessible to one another, hence the necessity to translate from other languages in order to communicate with more people. Language diversity is an invaluable and intangible asset that lies at the core of European cultural ecologies (and it is supposedly a core pillar of EU politics), yet it is often construed as a weakness within the theatre sector, in that it poses barriers to intercultural dialogue and international spectatorship.

Despite popular perceptions, the theatre has many tools at its disposal to overcome cultural differences whilst promoting the exposure of audiences to the stories of either close or distant communities who speak other languages. These tools include international touring of foreign-language productions (with or without subtitles, as in the case of Emma Dante's work); the staging of foreign-language plays in translation; more or less integrated sign language interpretation and accessible aesthetics; captioning for the blind; multilingual performance; and the adoption of text-less performance strategies. However, of these,

international touring, subtitling, translation, and sign language interpretation are often seen as expensive add-ons offering limited financial returns, and the discriminatory consequences that ensue are, sadly, yet to be perceived as unacceptable. This means that their use has remained a privilege of the few institutions and nations who can afford them, unless they are incorporated as part of the overall aesthetics from the start, such as in the work of British theatre company Graeae, whose work always incorporates multiple languages such as English, integrated BSL, captioning, and audio description (Laera 2019, 1–8).

In what follows, I want to consider more closely two aspects of the numerous intersections between languages and contemporary European theatre that concern the politics of language in performance: the staging of international plays in translation and the development of multilingual performance aesthetics as two methods to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding through the intersection of language and theatre.

Translating plays in contemporary Europe

One of the ways in which we can assess the degree of openness, inclusivity, and diversity of theatre scenes within national or regional contexts – but by no means the only one – is to measure what proportion of text-based plays staged each season are works originally written in the local dominant/official language(s), and how many were composed in foreign languages and performed in translation. However, reliable data about national stage output is hard to come by, and not many theatre scholars have ventured into this territory so far. In my experiences while living, studying, and working in three European countries – Italy, France, and the UK – I have witnessed first-hand the starkly different attitudes that national practices demonstrate towards foreign work. This perception prompted the following research questions: what does it mean for a theatre culture to make space for cultural and linguistic otherness? What is at stake when we stage or watch the stories of others – and what happens when we ignore them? While marginalisation on the basis of linguistic background is not yet widely seen as an issue of social justice, it is clear to me that this type of discrimination intersects with other forms of prejudice, such as those on the basis of race, gender, ability, class, and religion. However, if a theatre culture makes space for translated work, that does not necessarily mean they have created a respectful, open, inclusive, and representative field – it may simply be under the spell of more influential cultural capital imported from abroad. For instance, according to unpublished data I acquired through the Deutscher Bühnenverein, the proportion of plays originally written in foreign languages staged every year in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland is about 33%. In the 2017/18 season, the most performed playwright

of all in the three countries was by far William Shakespeare, who topped the charts for number of performances, number of productions, and tickets sold (Deutscher Bühnenverein 2020, 102).

In my report, entitled ‘Contemporary Playwriting and Theatre Translation Cultures in Europe: A Report on Current Systems, Conventions and Perceptions’ (Laera, 2020b), commissioned by the EU-sponsored network, ‘Fabulamundi: Playwriting Beyond Borders’, I used qualitative research methods to analyse and compare practices and systems of theatre translation in nine European countries: Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, and the UK. Working with playwrights, directors, producers, and institutions in these countries, I asked questions such as: how is the translation of contemporary plays perceived by different national and regional audiences? What institutions, norms, procedures and perceptions encourage or impede the international circulation of plays? I am interested in how audiences’ taste around the translation of plays is socially constructed by cultural and geopolitical discourses.

The qualitative data I collected through interviews and questionnaires with experts in these countries – which differs in nature from the numerical data available for German-speaking countries quoted above – showed that contemporary international plays in translation appears valued the most in Spain, Romania, and Poland, where audiences are used to seeing themselves reflected in culturally distant plays, and where institutions invest in, and make space for, the translation of texts by contemporary international authors. In the case of Spain, this interest in contemporary foreign plays is matched by an almost equally strong support for local playwrights writing in all four national languages: Castilian Spanish, Catalan, Galician, and Basque. In Poland, according to the experts I spoke to, audiences are simultaneously attracted to, and aware of, the value of contemporary plays in Polish. However, in Romania the picture is different: a marked interest in contemporary translated plays is not counterbalanced by confidence in the local playwriting scene. In fact, Romanian audiences and theatre-makers tend to rate home-grown Romanian plays a lot less highly than foreign ones, which are infused with perceived prestige and cultural capital, and come with a tried and tested history of success. The very opposite cultural phenomenon – that of mistrust towards foreign imports, especially if continental European in origin – can be observed in the UK: there, plays in English – predominantly from within the home territories, but also from the US – are supported by institutional and private investment and exceptional audience interest, while foreign-language plays are rarely staged as a percentage of the total output of new work (only about 2.3% in 2014, according to official figures, which are available for

2013 and 2014 only). According to a study of the British Theatre repertory in 2014 (Rebellato and Edgar 2016), play translations in the UK are also minoritarian within the revivals category – such as productions of plays written by the likes of Ibsen, Chekhov, or Brecht – as most of revivals in the UK tend to be by Shakespeare (76% of revivals in 2014) (Rebellato and Edgar 2016, 9). When it comes to translating contemporary international plays for the British market, French authors writing in the plot-driven bourgeois realism genre – such as Yasmina Reza and Florian Zeller – tend to be in pole position. In Italy, as my survey and interview data shows, confidence that contemporary plays were valued by theatre-makers and audiences was among the lowest for both local and foreign-language plays – a sign that contemporary playwriting is not currently an established or sustainable field within stage genres in this country. There is a lot more work to be done to map different regional ecologies, practices, and perceptions around theatre translation and the international circulation of plays, but this report opens new opportunities for comparison and learning from best practices.

Multilingual performance in contemporary Europe

Europe is a continent of immigration, that is, a continent in which the fact of immigration requires a social and collective renegotiation of identities and affiliations. It can be described as a ‘*postmigrant* continent’ on the basis that immigration has happened, and it needs to be reckoned with (Foroutan 2015). Speaking, hearing, reading, and learning different languages, accents, and dialects has become an everyday aspect of contemporary life in Europe due to cultural factors including the establishment of free movement in the EU and other forms of migration, along with globalisation and the aftermaths of colonialism. But have theatre and performance makers been actively engaged in growing linguistic and cultural diversity in our societies?

It is fair to say that multilingual theatre in Europe has never been a mainstream or highly popular aesthetics, and its histories and genealogies are neither well-documented nor well-researched. Marvin Carlson’s book, *Speaking in Tongues*, demonstrates how multiple languages have been at play in the theatre throughout history, particularly to represent foreign characters. He argues, however, that an era of relative monolingualism was inaugurated in the nineteenth century with the rise of nationalist ideologies and the one culture/one language model became dominant. In the second half of the twentieth century, according to Carlson, playwrights and theatre-makers began to re-engage with multilingualism in a way that was

not preoccupied with verisimilitude, embracing instead what he calls ‘post-modern heteroglossia’ (Carlson 2006, 150–79).

A further broad distinction, however, needs to be made between twentieth-century pioneers of multilingual theatre and linguistic experimentation in Europe, who used multilingualism to serve the belief in people’s common humanity and the search for a common language, and a younger generation of practitioners whose work emerged in the twenty-first century, whose heteroglossic practices also highlight incommunicability, prejudice, contradictions, and difference.

In their pursuit of universalism, intercultural theatre practitioners working in the second half of the twentieth century – such as Giorgio Strehler in Italy, Odin Teatret in Denmark, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Peter Brook in France – opened up to multilingualism’s potential more as an internal rehearsal process than as a fully-fledged stage strategy, and in some cases this practice overlapped with damaging forms of cultural appropriation. Welcoming international performers in their ensembles, but often shying away from letting them perform in their own mother tongues, this early form of heteroglossia manifested in the foreign accents of multicultural and multiethnic casts, rather than in confident code-switching (see for instance Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*, which premiered in 1985, and featured an international cast of actors speaking French with non-standard accents). Many scholars credit Karin Beier’s 1995 ‘European’ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, staged in Düsseldorf, as being the first fully multilingual play where each actor spoke their own languages (nine in total) without multilingualism serving the purpose of realism, and celebrating instead multilingual European identity (Boecker in Mancewicz and Joubin 2018, 25–39).

In the twenty-first century, however, universalist humanism has lost its purchase and many contemporary theatre practitioners interested in the interplay of languages – such as Milo Rau, Katie Mitchell, Oliver Frljić, Jan Lauwers, Angélica Liddell, Shermin Langhoff, Luk Perceval, Lola Asias, Wajdi Mouawad, Anestis Azas, Maria Aberg, and so on – tend to use multilingualism to expose and challenge the hierarchies and divides at play in contemporary post-migrant, global societies. For instance, in one of Lola Arias’ multilingual productions, *Minefield* (2017), two sets of protagonists, non-professional actors from Argentina and the UK, who fought each other during the Falklands War, speak their own native languages without ever understanding one another on stage, highlighting how Thatcher’s interventions in the Malvinas have caused traumas and cultural rifts that may never be fully overcome.

While staging multilingualism may be perceived as a playful, democratic activity, the co-existence of multiple languages in the same context is more often than not an expression of hierarchical structures, histories of domination, and subversive struggles. Multilingualism on stage may be a way for theatre to rehearse the ethical and cultural competence required in a globalized world, but it may also uncover practices of oppression, stereotyping, and resistance. Staging multilingualism therefore trades a fine balance between representing a dystopian present characterised by prejudice and rehearsing a better future where equity and inclusivity have prevailed. For some of the artists currently invested in creating multilingual work, representing linguistic diversity combines the ethical imperative of inclusion and anti-racism with the political practice of hope.

In 2008, Shermin Langhoff, acclaimed Berlin-based theatre director of Turkish heritage, popularised her now iconic brand of 'postmigrant theatre' to define the artistic mission of the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, which she was then leading. Langhoff also made this genre of performance the identifying mark of the Maxim Gorki Theater, to which she moved in 2014 with dramaturg Jens Hillje. Postmigrant theatre is, according to Langhoff, about 'critically question[ing] the production and reception of stories about migration and about migrants which have been available up to now and [viewing and producing] these stories anew' (Langhoff in Stewart, 2017, 56–68). The Maxim Gorki's Exil Ensemble is a key part of Langhoff's artistic vision to represent the diversity of German society: composed of actors of migrant background who had recently come to Germany from Syria, Palestine, and Afghanistan, it was recruited in 2016 and then semi-dismantled when those actors were incorporated into the 'regular' ensemble three years later, ceasing to be 'other.' The Exil Ensemble created many productions, including the German post-dramatic 'classic' *Die Hamletmaschine* (Hamletmachine) by Heiner Müller, directed by Sebastian Nübling, and a new play, *Winterreise* رحلة الشتاء (Winter journey) devised in 2017 by the company and German-Israeli director Yael Ronen about the Exil Ensemble members' experiences of traveling through Germany and meeting 'the natives.'

Both the practice of multilingualism and the staging of plays in translation have been used to disrupt the one language/one culture model and the nationalist and discriminatory systems of power that currently dominate theatre systems in most European countries. In future, we may look forward to languages playing a bigger role in furthering the values of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

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Further Reading

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