

SUSAN BASSNETT (1945–)

“Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre” (1998)

Key words:

theory of drama translation, performability, speakability, performance, playtext,
translator’s reading of a play

1. Author information

Susan Bassnett is one of the most important contemporary translation studies scholars. She is a Fellow at the Royal Society of Literature currently working at the University of Warwick. Her contribution to the TS consists in the comparative approach to cultural differences between texts. She is the author of numerous anthologies and monographs. She co-worked with such researchers as André Lefevere and Gayatri C. Spivak. Bassnett’s main academic interest is poetry, especially that of Ted Hughes but, more importantly, she is one of the few theorists working in the field of the translation of drama. In this respect her views are extremely important as she has questioned the concept of ‘performability’ as the most important factor in translating drama. She believes that the language of a drama should be the main preoccupation of its translator who is neither the director nor the actor.

Main publications:

Bassnett, S. 1980. *Translation studies*. London: Methuen.

Bassnett, S. 1993. *Comparative literature: a critical introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bassnett, S. 2011. *Reflections on translation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

2. Abstract

In her article, Bassnett argues against *performability* being the most important concept in drama translation. The translator of a dramatic text should not take into consideration its potential stage rendering. According to the author, it would require the translator’s being

the director, the actor, set designer etc. all at once, which he or she is not capable of. Translator is thus only one of the participants in the theatrical process and should not assume functions of the others. Moreover, theatrical elements encoded in drama (subtext, gestic patterns) are highly culture-bound. Therefore, the translator's reading of a playtext according to these categories would impose on it concepts which are rooted only in the Western psychological theatre methods created by Constantin Stanislavsky. Bassnett indicates that there are other dramatic traditions (Oriental theatre, post-modernist drama) which do not employ them and the notion of *performability* cannot be applied. The translation of a dramatic text should thus only focus on linguistic and extralinguistic signs in order to express in the target language not only meaning but also the rhythm, stress patterns, deictic expressions and intonation. Subsequently, Bassnett states that there is a great potential for research in drama translation which should be done in co-operation with theatre historians and practitioners.

3. Terminology

Source text term	Definition	Term in Polish
acculturation	a process whereby a certain element of the source text is interpreted and adjusted along the categories of the target culture	akulturacja
gestic text	a dimension of drama which incorporates potential gestural elements to be used by actors in a performance	tekst gestyczny (struktura gestyczna tekstu)
performability	a concept whereby a drama is apt to be transposed into a theatre production	sceniczność tekstu

playtext	a text used by theatre practitioners working on a particular performance	egzemplarz aktorski/reżyserski
speakability	a quality of drama whereby an actor is able to utter the text flawlessly and efficiently	łatwość wypowiedzenia
subtext	in Stanislavsky's acting method: an underlying psychological situation of characters which may, or may not, be in accordance with the words they utter	podtekst

4. Methodology

Bassnett employs rather theoretical than applied approach to her subject. Her article's aim is to criticize a concept without proposing any practical solutions as to translating drama. Her research is therefore qualitative rather than quantitative as she illustrates her claims with one example from her own translatorial practice. The article also demonstrates comparative approach as Bassnett considers different theatrical and dramatic traditions.

5. Links with other publications on the subject

Bassnett's first essay against performability was *Translating for the theatre: The case against 'performability'*.

Theatrical potential of drama discussed in *Das theatrale Potential des dramatischen Textes. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie von Drama und Dramenübersetzung* by Sofia Totzeva.

Drama translation theory is also present in the works by Mary Snell-Hornby, Brigitte Schultze and Patrice Pavis.

6. Critical commentary

Bassnett's article is the milestone in the development of the theory of drama translation. Hitherto, *performability* has been the sole category to measure translator's faithfulness to a dramatic text. The author's critical approach to one of the crucial concepts in the practice and criticism of translation for theatre opened new perspectives for the somewhat neglected academic field. Instead of the idealized concept whereby the translator becomes a quasi-theatrical practitioner Bassnett offers a more realistic terminology. Subsequently, she proposes an intricate model of drama translation which may be compared to walking in a labyrinth where there are misleading paths, dead ends and pitfalls. Theory therefore is aimed at guiding the translator through the difficult space.

However, one may argue that Bassnett inadvertently reinvigorates a dated literary approach to drama. In the face of the development of drama in the 20th century from realism to post-modernism, one cannot easily return to the concept that drama is merely a group of linguistic signs. Contemporary drama often neglects the requirements of theatre but it does not rely solely on its literary function. Drama is thus situated between literature and theatre and should be considered within this dynamic tension. As we know from performance studies scholars (especially W. B. Worthen) it is not solely the basis for a theatrical production. Dramatic text is rather the interface between different participants of the theatrical process whereby it generates various meanings depending on the entry point of practitioners.

7. Quotation to remember the text by

“What is left for the translator to do is to engage specifically with the signs of the text: to wrestle with the deictic units, the speech rhythms, the pauses and silences, the shifts of tone or of register, the problems of intonation patterns: in short, the linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of the written text that are decodable and reencodable.” (Bassnett, Lefevere 1998: 107)

8. References

Bassnett, S. 1998. "Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre" in Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere ed. *Constructing culture: essays on literary translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.