

Translating Theatre Language of Beckett's Texts 'Domestication' and 'Foreignization'

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze how Beckett's English texts are translated into Japanese productions by looking into the correlation between language, body movement and space. Translating Beckett's texts on the stage demonstrates the process of utilizing body and voice of the actors in accordance with the aesthetics of limited space in the theatre. By focusing on the Japanese productions performed in 2015 and 2016, this paper aims to discover the connection between two different translation strategies: 'Domestication' and 'Foreignization'. In other words, translating the theatre language of Beckett's texts discloses the possibilities of adaptations through nonverbal expressions. The fact that those theatrical texts written by Beckett from the 1950's to 1970's are still translated and adapted in 2015 and 2016 intersemiotically into Japanese performing art proves the depth and deftness of Beckett's linguistic and nonlinguistic dramaturgy. The theatrical codes hidden in Beckett's texts remain a challenge for actors and directors to grasp beyond the barrier of languages.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the work of other dramatists that are categorized as the "Theatre of the Absurd", plays by Samuel Beckett have continuously been accepted and performed in Japan even after the twentieth century. What makes those slow-tempo Beckett dramas still exceptional and alluring for Japanese directors and actors to put on stage in such an expeditiously globalized world?

This paper examines how Beckett's plays are translated and performed from two different perspectives. The first part focuses on the translation strategy of 'Domestication' through the performance of *Waiting for Godot*, staged at the Theatre X in Tokyo in December 2015, emphasizing the aesthetics suggestive of Japanese *butoh*; and Beckett's *Rockaby*, interpreted

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according to the principles of Japanese traditional Noh at Oe Noh Theatre in Kyoto in December 2015.

As opposed to the ‘Domestication’ method, the second part discusses the other translation strategy of ‘Foreignization’ through Beckett’s *Happy Days*, presented at Komaba Agora Theatre in Tokyo in February 2016 to demonstrate how voice is the only crucial tool for the main character to express how she is stuck in a dead-end situation, and how the simplicity of the setting specified in the ST (source text) enhance the effect.

Those three perspectives of Japanese butoh dance, Noh theatre, and contemporary stage design, disclose the basic theatrical codes hidden in Beckett’s texts, which are the keys to the never-ending enthusiasm for performing them.

1. Existing Scholarship on Beckett and Japanese Theatre Language

Ever since Shinya Ando introduced *Waiting for Godot* into Japan, Japanese productions of Beckett’s drama have been the focus of numerous key scholars. Yasunari Takahashi is the primary scholar who referred to the connection between Beckett and Noh. He had paid attention to the common structure of Noh plays presented by Zeami and Beckett’s dramaturgy. Mariko Hori Tanaka’s works included an examination of the influence of Beckett’s drama on Japanese theatre. Her analysis extends to the shared physical pain required for both Beckettian and Noh actors for theatrical aesthetics. Minako Okamuro, a prestigious scholar who illuminated the correlation between Yeats, Beckett and Noh, bears mentioning.

While other scholars have piled up the Japanese receptions of Beckett’s plays performed in the twentieth century and the first dozen years of the twenty-first century from biographical and theatrical perspectives, this paper aims to bridge the gap between performance studies and translation studies by focusing on the particular productions translated and adapted in Japan after 2015.

2. Translating Theatre Language

According to *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ‘Drama translation’ is distinguished from other types of literary works as follows. “Unlike the translation of a novel, or a poem, the duality inherent in the art of the theatre requires language to combine with spectacle, manifested through visual as well as acoustic images” (Anderman, 2011:92). In her *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon refers to ‘theatrical language’ suggested by Patrice Pavis that distinguishes drama from other forms of literature and art.

Adapting across cultures is not simply a matter of translating words. For audiences experiencing an adaptation in the showing or interacting modes of engagement,

cultural and social meaning has to be conveyed and adapted to a new environment through what Patrice Pavis calls the “language-body” (1989:30). The intercultural, he says, is the “intergestural”: the visual is as important as the aural. In transfers from a telling to a performance mode, differences of philosophy, religion, national culture, gender, or race can create gaps that need filling by dramaturgical considerations that are as likely to be kinetic and physical as linguistic. Facial expressions, dress, and gestures take their place along with architecture and sets to convey cultural information that is both verisimilar and an “index of the ideologies, values, and conventions by which we order experience and predicate activity” (Klein 1981: 4) (Hutcheon, 2013: 149-150).

The term ‘theatre language’ originally comes from the rehearsal method conceived by Stanislavsky, also known as ‘psychotechnique’. This method allows the actors to live life on the stage by using their bodies and voices through meditation, concentration and self-discipline. This concept of focusing on the importance of physicality and materiality of the body also becomes the key to translating Beckett’s ST into the three-dimensional opuses beyond the barrier of languages and cultures.

3-1. ‘Domestication’: Theatre Language of Butoh Dance in *Waiting for Godot*

The term ‘Domestication’ can be defined as “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language cultural values” (Venuti, 1995:20). In other words, “[the translator] leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him” (Schleiermacher, 2004: 49).

Waiting for Godot was staged in Japanese by a Japanese contemporary dancer Saburo Teshigawara at Theatre X in Tokyo in June and December, 2015. All the lines of all the characters were uttered by this unique dancer while he moved his body on the stage in the style reminiscent of Japanese ‘Butoh’. Butoh can be defined as follows:

It was a dance form of slow-motion movements and exaggerated gestures, sometimes juxtaposed with incongruously shocking music or performed in utter silence. Austere and mysterious, the Butoh performers’ Zen-like goal was to achieve spiritual enlightenment through rigorous physical training. They were often naked, skins dusted with white or ashen clay, and the part fetuses, part bound mummies, thus symbolizing Butoh’s chosen subject of the space between birth and death. Intricately tied to ancient Japanese traditions – both priestly, as in the dances of Bugaku, and magically theatrical, as in Noh – exponents such as Min Tanaka,

Sankai Juku, and Kazuo Ono in Japan have in common their fascination with the body as an instrument of transcendental metamorphosis (Goldberg, 1988: 206-207).

Such motifs of Japanese Butoh as ‘the space between birth and death’, ‘slow-motion movements and exaggerated gestures’, or ‘fascination with the body as an instrument of transcendental metamorphosis’ all coincided with the backbone of Beckett’s *ST*. The awkwardness of a dancer talking while dancing heightens the dislocation and schizophrenia of the characters in the play. According to Teshigawara, who directed the play as well, “This performance is meant to be floating between verbal movement and physical flow, between the genres of theatre and dance. Though difficult, I threw out myself to go beyond the frames of language and body deeply and shallowly, across the borders of realities nearly and farther” (Teshigawara, 2015: trans. Mine). Through his physicality, Teshigawara successfully manifested the tenuous border between tragic and comic elements by instantly shifting his facial expressions and physical states in accordance with the lines of each character. The off-balance movements of the dancer demonstrates the restless man on the stage. The audience may have been reminded of Charlie Chaplin, who also derived humour from intricate and often ironical movement.

Throughout the play, Beckett shows a distinct taste for miming that allows his characters to behave like clowns. During his years at Trinity College in Dublin, Beckett is said to have seen a lot of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin films. As stated by Knowlson, the “love of old music hall and circus routines was to remain with him and resurface later” (Knowlson, 1996: 57). By aligning his characters with buffoons, Beckett seems to weave tragic and comic elements into one opus.

Vladimir: Hold that. *Estragon takes Vladimir’s hat. Vladimir adjusts Lucky’s hat on his head. Estragon puts on Vladimir’s hat in place of his own which he hands to Vladimir. Vladimir takes Estragon’s hat...* (Beckett, 1954: II. 46).

This exchange of hats among three different people indicates not only comic interplay but also the multiple aspects of the same personality. There is a subtle fusion of the characters which signifies the interchangeability of their relationships.

The qualities of namelessness, interchangeability, and unity of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* particularly suited the 2015 Japanese one-man show by the contemporary dancer. He expressed himself as a three-dimensional code that swims between the boundaries of theatre and dance heading nowhere. In other words, his performance discloses the process of creating and destroying the boundaries between theatre and dance through combining and separating words

and body. All the lines uttered by the multiple characters in Beckett's text can be heard as the internal thoughts confessed by one human being. The limped voice of Teshigarawa recorded in advance is replayed on the stage along with his off-balance movements such as staggers, paces, turns, gestures and facial expressions. The linguistic elements of Beckett's text were treated as live substances and were physically 'choreographed' by the dancer nonverbally with the atmosphere of Japanese *butoh*.

In fact, there was another actor standing still on the stage in silence with her back facing the audience from the beginning until the end of the performance. As a result, this unmovable actor symbolizes the sense of betrayal by the audience, which keeps expecting her to dance or say something during the course of performance. The audience's unfulfilled expectation is shared in common with the actual characters depicted in Beckett's ST.

3-2. 'Domestication': Theatre Language of Noh Techniques in *Rockaby*

The Japanese traditional performing Noh techniques were efficiently utilized to translate Beckett's ST intersemiotically. Such techniques as *kuroko* (a stagehand dressed in black that the audience is meant to ignore), *kata* (a stylized pattern of acting, reflecting the features of mime), *Shite* (the primary role wearing a mask who comes from another world, remaining mysterious until she is able to express herself through Noh dance to be purified in the end), *Waki* (the secondary role, who lives in this world, guiding the audience, and chanting musical aria to let *Shite* reveal her true self), and *monomane* (a form of mimicry which forms the basic movement) were adopted in the performance of Beckett's *Rockaby*.

The play, performed by NOHO in December 2015 at Oe Noh Theatre in Kyoto, was the revival of 2002 version. While the woman on the stage rocks her chair in accordance with the lines of an unseen Voice in ST, this production in TT (target text) featured the collaboration of a narrator that chanted the lines in the text in Japanese operatic form, *kuroko* who rocked the chair, and a silent masked performer. The recorded voice which is supposed to be heard from backstage in ST became visible as a narrator on the stage in TT. Supported by the narrator in the role of *Waki*, the woman who is originally sitting on a rocking chair from the beginning in ST turned out to be a masked *Shite* who mimes and dances in the stylized pattern of *kata* along with the lines of the narrator, *Waki*, until the final scene where *Shite* sits on the rocking chair and slants her neck to signify that her life is over.

In May 1981, Jonah Salz and Akira Shigeyama started NOHO, which is described as "a theatre group dedicated to using traditional Japanese theatre techniques to perform Western themes and plays. By using the "Ho" of "Noh", the Direction of Noh, in staging Western works, NOHO hopes that a vital fusion will emerge" (Salz, 1981:3). In order to visualize the recorded Voice in ST into a realistic character on the stage in TT, the convention of *Shite* and *Waki*

became mechanically and artistically valid. Thus, the traditional Japanese Noh techniques enabled them to convey the original motif of ST.

4-1. 'Foreignization': Theatre Language of Voice in *Happy Days*

In contrast to the 'domestication' method discussed above, this section analyzes Beckett's text through the other translation strategy of 'foreignization,' which exerts "an ethnodeviant pressure on [target-language cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (Venuti, 1995:20). To put it in another way by using the words of the initiator of this dichotomy, "... the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him" (Schleiermacher, 2004: 49).

In February 2016, *Happy Days* was presented at Komaba Agora Theatre in Tokyo by an avant-garde company named 'Soshin Kikan' the winner of a local theatrical award in 2012. The name of the company 'Soshin' derives from the word 'twin body' or 'double body', denoting 'the body of an ancient Japanese god formed by both man and woman, endowed with both virtue and evil.' Yet, it is the company's aim to get rid of the dualism of West and East, of ancient and modern. Instead of merely concentrating on the script's verbal lines in the text, they reexamine the text from the perspective of the relationship between body and space. Ultimately, they seek to adapt the concept of 'Soshin (twin body)' to 'Kikan,' literally meaning 'organization', which implies our system in contemporary society.

The compactness and density of the space at Komaba Agora Theatre in Tokyo let the audience focus on the effectively simple black and white setting. Trapped in the black cloth streaked with white strings, Winnie, the main character, represented a spider-like figure that has been building up her own web of territory. The colorless texture of the setting created a contrast between shadow and darkness, highlighting Winnie in her spotlighted frame as a painting. This made it easier for the audience to savor the play's acoustic elements and concentrate on the flow of Winnie's voice.

The setting must evince a "maximum of simplicity and symmetry" with "gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage" (Beckett, 1986:9). Winnie, who is embedded up to her waist in Act I, is in the same place but embedded up to her neck in Act II. In a blazing light, the image of darkness makes a contrast through Winnie's nostalgic line, "The shadows deepening among the rafters" (Beckett, op. cit.: I. 15).

Winnie: . . . Well, I don't blame you, no, it would ill become me, who cannot move, to blame my Willie because he cannot speak. [*Pause.*] Fortunately I am in tongue again. [*Pause.*] That is what I find so wonderful, my two lamps, when one goes out the other burns brighter (Beckett, op. cit.: I. 28).

Here, “two lamps” symbolize words and actions. As a whole, while the symmetry in Beckett’s drama plays an effective role, the characters do not succeed in keeping their physical and spiritual balance. It can be said that the more Beckett’s characters become asymmetrical, the more the symmetry in the drama itself takes on a unique and even mystical quality. In other words, Beckett’s use of symmetry in constructing the framework of his drama serves to counterpoint its chaotic contents. Just as Beckett struggled with dualism, the Japanese company endeavored to go beyond the concept of ‘twin body’ in order to emphasize the absurdity of ‘organization’ in our reality.

As a result of translating through ‘foreignization,’ this production succeeded in creating the same visual image conceived in ST by Beckett. Equally, the translated words heard from Winnie’s voice became indispensable key elements to savor the language of TT.

4-2. Correlation between ‘Domestication’ and ‘Foreignization’: Language, Body and Space

‘Domestication’ of Beckett’s texts became effective through ‘intersemiotic translation’, “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson, 2004:139). *Waiting for Godot*, represented at Theatre X in Tokyo, explored how it might be possible to translate all the lines of multiple characters into a single character’s internal thought process through recourse to the aesthetics closer to Japanese butoh dance. *Rockaby*, translated within the context of Japanese traditional Noh theatre, unveiled the affinities between the stoic requirements of Beckett’s texts and the conventions of Japanese Noh, including *Shite*, *Waki*, *Kuroko* and *Kata*. Those adaptations thus clarified the nonverbal relationship between Beckett’s ST and other live art in TT. “In many cases, because adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system to another” (Hutcheon, op. cit.:16). The restricted aesthetics created in Beckett’s dramaturgy as depicted through the Noh and the style similar to Japanese butoh dance is reminiscent of the Zen spirit incarnated in Japanese tea ceremony. In the ceremony, tea is served in a confined space nonverbally with precisely defined manners, which trains the mind of the server in silence to offer the tea with patience and sincerity.

On the other hand, ‘foreignization’ of Beckett’s text was demonstrated by ‘interlingual translation’, “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (Jakobson, op. cit.:139). Without transforming the visual image and characterization written as stage directions in ST, *Happy Days*, performed at Komaba Agora Theatre in Tokyo, proved that voice on the stage may be compared to an effective role of ‘lip-synchronized dubbing’ in a film. “In the field of audiovisual translation, dubbing denotes the re-recording of the original voice track in the target language using dubbing actors’ voices” (Gonzalez, 2011: 17). The performance of *Happy Days* by ‘Soshin Kikan’ enabled the actor to convey the original message linguistically in a

conventional way and to assert the significance of voice as the symbolical tool for translation. Winnie, embedded up to her neck in the mound, demonstrated her presence through the crescendo and diminuendo of her voice and accent in the target language in order not to destroy the image of the ST by Beckett.

Whether translating through ‘domestication’ or ‘foreignization,’ both approaches “deal with ‘the question of how much a translation assimilates a foreign text to the translating language and culture, and how much it rather signals the differences of the text’” (Munday, 2008: 146). Those linguistic lines and stage directions in the ST written by Samuel Beckett were successfully translated into TT with an indigenous artistry making use of body movement, facial expression, and the voices of the actors on stage.

CONCLUSION

Unlike other dramatists that are categorized as “Theatre of the Absurd”, plays by Samuel Beckett have the unlimited potential to bring hope and light to the stage. Works that he wrote from the 1950's to 1970's still maintain freshness and persuasiveness in Japanese productions in 2015 and 2016. To revisit the question I raised in the Introduction: What makes Beckett’s slow-tempo dramas still exceptionally appealing to Japanese directors and actors in today’s globalized world? For the answers, we may usefully refer to the explanation that Peter Brook gave in his *The Empty Space* as to the distinction between Beckett and other writers:

Sadly, it is the wish for optimism that many writers share that prevents them from finding hope. When we attack Beckett for pessimism it is we who are the Beckett characters trapped in a Beckett scene. When we accept Beckett’s statement as it is, then suddenly all is transformed. There is after all quite another audience, Beckett’s audience; those in every country who do not set up intellectual barriers, who do not try too hard to analyze the messages. This audience laughs and cries out – and in the end celebrates with Beckett; this audience leaves his plays, his black plays, nourished and enriched, with a lighter heart, full of a strange irrational joy. Poetry, nobility, beauty, magic – suddenly these suspect words are back in the theatre once more (Brook 66).

The Japanese artists cited above coped with Beckett’s texts faithfully, exploring the possibilities of intersemiotic translations as well as interlingual translations to create a “Beckettian audience” in Japan without deviating from the ST.

Notes

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