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The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: On the Functional Approach to Translating Libretti for Modernised Opera Productions

Abstract

The present paper focuses on the issue of translating operatic libretti in the form of surtitles. This is a very specific type of translation, and it becomes even more challenging when operatic productions for which surtitles are created are modernised. In such cases the application of *skopos* theory proves to be the most useful and effective, even though some of its premises may be regarded as controversial. The data for the present study come from the most reputable opera houses, for example the Metropolitan Opera House or Royal Opera House, as they are known for providing their audiences with high-quality libretti translations.

1. Introduction

Opera is undoubtedly one of the highest forms of art, but it is simultaneously regarded as extremely traditional and conventionalized. Very often, particularly in the second part of the 20th century, entering opera houses could be compared to entering museums – places where visitors are not supposed to touch anything but look around and admire everything they see in utter awe. Understanding opera was often of secondary importance. As Mariusz Treliński, one of the most recognized Polish operatic directors, pointedly noticed, operas used to provide the viewers with “naïve productions showing silly little stories set literally in the 19th-century aesthetics. People were blackmailed by the pomposity of opera, and its fossilized form was served as an obligatory canon” (in Janowska 2002; translation mine). Fortunately, operatic directors finally realized that if opera is to survive in the digital 21st century, it needs to change its image radically. It is probably safe to say that nowadays opera is experiencing its renaissance, which can be confirmed not only by its unswerving popularity among classical music connoisseurs, but also by the growing interest in this genre among younger generations (Barone 2015).

However, combining such a traditional form of art with modern ideas and the latest technological developments is a real challenge, and the audience, first

of all, should understand the operatic performance very well. That is why surtitles which help people understand the meaning of libretti, are of such an importance, even if they are still too often considered to be just a minor element of the whole operatic production. Creating successful surtitles that would follow a modernised production is not an easy task, but this goal can be achieved by adopting one of the functionalist translation approaches, namely *skopos* theory focusing on the aim of the translation. In this paper I would like to discuss today's modern operatic productions and, with a few examples of surtitles from the best opera houses, show how *skopos* theory can marry the two opposites: opera and modernity.

2. Rendering opera more audience-friendly

One of the most significant steps towards redefining the contemporary image of opera involved the introduction of surtitles (Desblache 2007, 167). Up to the late 20th century operas were performed either in the original languages of the libretti in big opera houses or in translations in smaller theatres. Connoisseurs used to prefer the former solution, but they could not always afford it; the adapted performances were considerably cheaper, but their quality was often much worse. It became obvious that some change was both expected and needed. It paradoxically turned out to be a happy coincidence that some opera houses developed severe financial problems because many of them for a long time had been given subsidies, which near the end of the 20th century started to be shared out among other artistic institutions. Lucile Desblache describes the problems of the Royal Opera House, which had almost been closed down due to its financial difficulties, but eventually obtained support from the Arts Council. However, in order to be supported, the Royal Opera House had to become available for larger and more versatile audiences, and one of the ways of doing so was to introduce surtitles (2007, 163–164).

The very term *surtitles* describes the translated or transcribed text, which, contrary to the subtitles shown at the bottom of the television or cinema screen, is displayed on an electronic screen, usually located above the stage. Surtitles were invented by John Leberg, Lotfi Mansouri and Gunta Dreifelds. Although the first opera performance with surtitles – *Elektra* by Richard Strauss – took place on October 21, 1983 in Toronto, live translation had already been known earlier in China, as at the beginning of the 1980s some of the local opera houses used to show the Chinese translation vertically next to the stage (Dubiski 2012, 208–209). Surtitles are computer-operated and they are displayed above the stage on a screen. Some opera houses, though, particularly the ones with the biggest halls in which a relatively small screen is not clearly visible from each seat, introduce *seatback* screens. They are placed at the back of the seats and are controlled by individual users who can choose the language of the translation or turn it off completely. Moreover, some opera houses regularly broadcast their operatic performances

into cinemas or philharmonic halls; some of the broadcasts may be seen on the Internet as well. In such cases, the operas are accompanied by subtitles shown at the cinema or computer screen¹.

However, before surtitles became popular and widely used, a great number of stage directors had been strongly against them, claiming that they spoiled the special atmosphere of opera houses. James Levine, the artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, said that they would be introduced there only “over his dead body” (Tommasini 1995). Nonetheless, he finally changed his mind, and the Metropolitan Opera’s seatback titles – *Met Titles* – were first used in 1995 for a rehearsal of *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini (Kozinn 1995). *Met Titles* are also the first seatback titles in the world. It is true that surtitles have a number of disadvantages, namely they are often too small, unclear or chaotic, but they are in fact liked very much by the majority of opera audiences (Desblache 2007, 167–168), who want to know exactly what is being sung, especially at long operas with intricate plots.

Opera producers are, however, very well aware that in order to maintain the popularity of this genre and of particular opera houses, productions should be above all interesting and innovative. Directors often aim at rendering operas in an exceptionally attractive fashion, as their stories have usually over-simplified or over-complicated plots. Stories are also based on repetitive structures in which, as Lucile Desblache humorously described, “jealous baritones generally scheme the murder of amorous tenors while (not always seemingly) feeble sopranos die of unrequited love singing top Cs” (2009, 72). Moreover, most operas are already known to audiences coming to opera houses. Thus, in order to attract the attention of a wider audience opera directors try to be exceedingly extraordinary, and nowadays one of the most popular ways of achieving this aim is by modernising opera productions, i.e. transferring their plot from, for example, the 16th century to the here and now. It is, in fact, a part of a specific view of an operatic text, which emerged in the late 20th century. According to this view,

how the text came to be there [on the stage], what the librettist and composer meant by it, what theatrical and social conventions it drew on, how it was originally designed and performed: these things may well be of some curiosity value and may perhaps be alluded to in a staging; but they have no controlling power over that staging. They are not privileged; they cannot compel; they are part of a dead past. (Savage 1994, 416–417)

The modernising trend, which perfectly agrees with the above ideas, meets with a strong opposition of numerous traditionalists who do not hesitate to express their dissatisfaction with the set designs or the director by booing them during curtain calls. This phenomenon stems from the fact that, as has been mentioned above, opera is still considered a high genre of art and its style may clash with modern sets, which are often ill-considered (Ożarowska 2016, 67). Modernising

has gained its ill-fame because of numerous unsuccessful productions, “but done right, an updated production can be a revelation” (Tommasini 2011a). However, in order to achieve a revelation, one needs not only a good idea, but also great financial outlays. In addition, in cases of modernised operas, following the premises of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* is particularly significant.

The value of applying the holistic approach while directing a modernised opera production cannot be undermined because deviating from the traditional stage design and, very often, interpretation is usually confusing enough. That is why the stage design, acting and translation should all be in perfect agreement. Therefore, it is possible to pose the question: Does, for example, an 18th-century libretto suit a story set in modern times? It has to be emphasised that singers usually sing the original version of the libretto, but translations seen by viewers may vary from each other, and it is justified to claim that depending on whether a particular opera is staged traditionally or in a modernised way, it should have different translations.

There are, naturally, different levels of adapting surtitles to the production: usually certain concepts absent in the productions are omitted, some are generalised, some are added, but there are cases in which what is sung and what is read by the audience does not have much in common. Extreme cases take place when the entire libretto is adjusted to a particular production: adjusted mostly in terms of form, but also in terms of meaning.

The primary function of surtitles is informing the audience what singers are singing about, and what is happening on stage. But what if these two do not agree with each other? Singers sing the original libretto with no changes, but the stage design and their acting can imply a considerably different interpretation. Surtitles may be considered as a minor part of an opera performance but, in fact, they are the element that may bind these differences. I would like to claim that if this goal is to be achieved, the process of translating libretti should be strongly influenced by the premises of *skopos* theory.

3. *Skopos* theory and operatic libretti

Skopos theory, formulated by Hans Vermeer, belongs to the functionalist translation approach, which also includes Katharina Reiss and Vermeer’s general theory of translation and Justa Holz-Mänttari’s theory of translational action. They were all developed in the second half of the 20th century, but the origin of functional approaches to translation can in fact be traced back to antiquity. Even Cicero postulated that word-for-word translation was not a good solution, “If I render word for word, the result will sound uncouth, and if compelled by necessity I alter anything in the order of wording, I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator” (in Nord 1997, 4).

Hans Vermeer, who was a student of Reiss, evidently rejects the idea of a word-for-word translation; in formulating *skopos* theory, he regards translation as a communicative transfer, and, first of all, as an action:

Any form of translational action, including therefore translation itself, may be conceived as an action, as the name implies. Any action has an aim, a purpose. (...) Further: an action leads to a result, a new situation or event, and possibly to a 'new' object. (in Nord 1997, 12)

For Vermeer it is not the source text, whose status in this theory is very low, but the translation's purpose and, subsequently, the addressee that are the most important for the final version of the target text. *Skopos* theory, whose name comes from the Greek word *skopos* (Eng. 'purpose'), assumes that "the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (*Skopos*) of the overall translation action" (Nord 1997, 27). In *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* this theory is classified as one of functional approaches which "define translation as a purposeful transcultural activity and argue that the linguistic form of the target text is determined by the purpose it is meant to fulfil" (Schäffner 2008, 115). It is therefore one of the most essential theories of translation, as it highlights the fact that there is always some intention and reason for translating a particular text. Hans Vermeer describes it in the following way:

Each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve this purpose. The *Skopos* rule thus reads as follows: translate/interpret/speak/write in a way that enables your text/translation to function in the situation in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function. (in Nord 1997, 29)

According to Christiane Nord, the specific purpose of translation is also defined by the communicational situation for which the translation is made; she claims that the text has not a top-down function, but it receives it in a specific situation when it is interpreted ([1993] 2009, 176). This concept stems from the translation turn of the 1980s. Vermeer treats language not as "an autonomous 'system' but part of a culture" (Snell-Hornby 2006, 52) and he views translation as "a cultural transfer rather than a linguistic one" (Snell-Hornby 2006, 54); subsequently, there is not just one correct and ideal translation. The text is not isolated, but is set in the extra-linguistic context, which can be, for example, an operatic production.

As I have already stated, the basic *skopos* for each operatic translation in the form of surtitles consists in informing the audience what singers are singing about: the text shown on the screen above the stage needs to be fairly concise, as the viewers should focus their attention on the stage and not on the surtitles. Of course, sometimes such simplifications may lead to either minor or major losses (Burton 2009, 62–64).

As most operatic libretti have very florid and complicated form, both syntactically and lexically (Desblache 2009, 71–72), the translators often decide to sacrifice it for the sake of clarity; preserving the basic meaning becomes the major aim of such translations. An interesting example may be an excerpt from *Die Zauberflöte*, which has a specific form – there are many words beginning with the same letters and the last words of each line rhyme. In the production by David McVicar, which was staged in the Royal Opera House (2003), the surtitles provided are brief, clear and very accurate, but the above-mentioned form is lost.

Table 1

Original libretto	Translation provided by the opera house
Du, du, du, wirst sie zu befreien gehen,	You will go and rescue her
Du wirst der Tochter Retter sein.	You are the man to save my daughter
Und werd' ich dich als Sieger sehen,	If I see you triumph
So sei sie dann auf ewig dein.	Then she will be yours forever

In this example it is the pure content that was given the priority, and the function of the surtitles was to provide the audience with the basic meaning of what is sung. The general poetics of the libretto is, unfortunately, not reflected in the translation, as translators do not always decide to preserve the rhymes in surtitles; such translations are often just informative (Snell-Hornby 2007, 114).

4. Translating libretti for modernised opera productions

Creating surtitles becomes even more complicated in the case of modernised opera productions, wherein what happens on stage does not always accord with the libretti sung by singers. The aim of translation still consists in providing the audience with information, but what should the audience be specifically informed about? About what the singers are singing or about what is taking place on stage? On the one hand, the discrepancy between what happens on stage and what surtitles show is not desirable, as it would be confusing for the audience. If they suddenly read something considerably different in the translation, they will certainly be confused. On the other hand, if the translation shows something different than the original, it is doubtful whether it is still a translation. Usually it is the faithfulness to the original that is sacrificed. The production and its general effect become the priority. Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera House, claimed that, particularly in modernised productions, coherence is of the utmost importance, and adjustments are actually desirable: “You’re obliged to have titles go along. Otherwise you pull the rug out from under the change of setting” (in Tommasini 2011b).

An example of moderate adjustments to a modernised production was provided by the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, which stage a great number of modernised opera productions. One of its latest productions has been *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Gaetano Donizetti, directed by Barbara Wysocka (2015). *Lucia di Lammermoor* is based on Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and this opera is originally set in the 18th century in Scotland. This work is very rarely modernised: most productions set it, as in the original, in the 18th century, and viewers are usually presented with a conventional set comprising of a castle, cemetery, moors and woods. However, in the production of the Bavarian State Opera, the plot takes place in the middle of the 20th century in the United States. Enrico, a Scottish nobleman and Lucia's brother, is a politician, Lucia is modelled on Jackie Kennedy and Edgardo, Lucia's fiancé, appears as a rebel modelled on James Dean. Such an update was done "on the one hand, to show the balance of powers behind *Lucia* in modern times, and, on the other, to present traditional patriarchal structures" (Hettinger 2015; translation mine).

The libretto of *Lucia di Lammermoor* is inextricably connected with the reality of the 18th century in Scotland and it contains numerous references to Scottish history or to the places (e.g. castle or cemetery) in which the story is set. Therefore, it is undoubtedly difficult to translate the libretto so that it is adjusted to a modernised production. One of the parts of the libretto in which the translation is adjusted to the production is the scene when Enrico tries to persuade Lucia to marry the man he has chosen for her. He mentions historical figures, namely British monarchs Mary II and William III, but the titles provided by the opera house generalize this utterance, so that it can relate to 20th-century realities.

Table 2

Original libretto	My literal translation of the libretto	Translation provided by the opera house
M'odi, Spento è Guglielmo – ascendere vedremo in trono Maria.	Listen, William is dead – we will see Mary ascend the throne	A change of government takes place.

The aim of those titles is to inform the audience what Enrico generally tries to communicate to his sister: he wants to tell her that the government is changing. With the technique of generalisation, the translation by the Bavarian State Opera does convey this message.

In some productions the deviation from the original form consists not only in modernising the stage design, but also in changing the interpretation of the opera, and in such cases adjusted surtitles may render the alteration clear to the audience. I will illustrate this particular issue with an example from one of the

most famous and controversial productions of *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi, directed by Willy Decker and staged in the Metropolitan Opera House in 2011. Apart from transferring the plot from the 18th-century Paris to the surreal modern reality, the production presents its characters in a considerably different light than originally intended.

Originally, in Act I Scene I, when Alfredo, the lover of the title character Violetta Valéry, hears about Violetta selling her possessions, the stage directions state that he is alone, and in his cabaletta following the opening-act aria, he sings about his honour that he intends to avenge. In Decker's production, when singing this aria, Alfredo is together with Violetta: the tenor clearly addresses the soprano, and the titles imply that it is her and her honour that he wants to avenge.

Table 3

Original libretto	My literal translation of the libretto	Translation provided by the opera house
Oh mio rimorso! Oh infamia! Io vissi in tale errore! Ma il turpe sogno a frangere Il ver mi balen! Per poco in seno acquetati, O grido o grido dell'onore; M'avrai sicuro vindice; Quest'onta laver.	Oh, my remorse! Oh, disgrace! I lived so mistaken! But the truth, just like a flash, Has shattered my dream! For while be calm in my breast Oh, cry of honour; I will become your avenger, I will wash away this infamy.	I've disgraced myself! How could I have been so blind! The ugly truth has shattered This dream of mine. But I know what must be done. I must right this wrong. I will be your avenger. I'll wash away this shame.

It is just a small change but the effect differs considerably from the original. However, the *skopos* of this translation is to follow the action on stage, and, subsequently, it is the translation that alters the general picture of the character whom the production intends to present in a more favourable light.

There are also a number of examples of surtitles that are quite radically adjusted to productions. As a result, the difference between the original libretto and the surtitles is considerable. Such a case may be illustrated with the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Faust* by Charles Gounod. Based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust, Part I*, it is originally set in the 16th century, and it tells the story of a scholar who, being disappointed with his life, enters into a pact with the devil. In the production staged by the Metropolitan Opera House and directed by Des McAnuff (2011), the story is updated and it takes place in the 20th century. Faust himself, "usually presented as an old philosopher who feels he has wasted his life with fruitless scholarship, is here a middle-aged scientist" and he "works

in a big laboratory where the atomic bomb is under development” (Tommasini 2011a). Due to the fact that there are a few moments in which the production – using the acting and stage design – diverges from the original French libretto, the translation seen by the audience has been considerably adjusted.

The most striking adjustment was introduced for a scene when Méphistophélès visits Faust for the first time in his laboratory. In Metropolitan Opera’s production Méphistophélès is dressed according to contemporary fashion, as he wears a white suit; however, in the original libretto (sung onstage by the bass singing the role of the devil) he describes to Faust his traditional outfit: a cloak, a hat with a feather and a sword. If viewers were presented with a literal translation of the libretto, the discrepancy between the stage and the titles would be too great and, subsequently, confusing and unacceptable. Therefore, the translator decided to adjust it to what the audience could actually see. Let us look at the following two versions:

Table 4

Original libretto	My literal translation of the libretto	Translation provided by the opera house
Me voici! – D’où vient ta surprise? Ne suis-je pas mis à ta guise? L’épée au côté, la plume au chapeau, L’escarcelle pleine, un riche manteau Sur l’épaule; – en somme Un vrai gentilhomme!	Here I am! Are you surprised? You dislike my dress? My sword, a feather in my hat, Money in my pouch and my rich cloak. All in all, a true gentleman	Here I am! Why are you so surprised? I’m not what you expected? With the cane and panama hat, Dressed to the nines... Altogether: a real gentleman

As a result, what the audience is reading and what the bass playing the role of the devil is singing varies to a great extent: Méphistophélès is singing about his sword, cloak and a feather in his hat, but the audience is presented with a cane, Panama hat and suit. The *skopos* of this translation consists in informing the audience of what the character is saying in this production and, also, in rendering the production consistent.

In the above-mentioned *Faust*, the translation was adjusted to the modernised production in terms of specific elements, but there are also productions where surtitles are adjusted to the modernised stage design generally in terms of style. An example may be *Rigoletto* directed by Michael Meyer and staged by the Metropolitan Opera House (2013). Focusing on the typically operatic subjects, namely love and revenge, this opera is originally set in 16th-century Italy and it is a story of a court jester (the title character Rigoletto) being at the service of

the immoral Duke of Mantua. Meyer decided to move the opera plot to the 1960s Las Vegas, whose licentious and lawless atmosphere corresponds to the unethical character of the Mantua court of the opera. Instead of a court, however, the setting of much of the action is a casino owned by the Duke.

The titles provided for this production extend the extraordinary stage design and they reflect the stereotypical atmosphere of the 1960s Las Vegas. One of the most interesting aspects of this translation is its adjustment to individual characters: the titles presenting the words of Sparafucile (Table 5), a contract killer hired by Rigoletto to kill the Duke, depict him as a person of a truly dubious reputation even more than the original.

Table 5

Original libretto	My literal translation of the libretto	Translation provided by the opera house
SPARAFUCILE	SPARAFUCILE	SPARAFUCILE
Signor?	Sir?	Hey, pal.
RIGOLETTO	RIGOLETTO	RIGOLETTO
Va, non ho niente.	Go, I have nothing.	Beat it, no handouts.
SPARAFUCILE	SPARAFUCILE	SPARAFUCILE
Né il chiesi: a voi presente un uom di spada sta.	I didn't ask for anything. I am a swordsman.	I don't want any. I make my living with a knife.
....
M'aiuta mia sorella.	My sister helps me.	I use my sister as a bait.
Per le vie danza...è bella...	She dances in the streets... she's beautiful...	She stands out front. You should see her, she's a knockout.

Translating *spada* (Eng. 'sword') as *knife* seems justified in this context, but translating *signor* (Eng. 'sir') as *hey pal* and *bella* (Eng. 'beautiful') as *a knockout* is surprising. The meaning of these words is similar, but their register and style vary. In this case the *skopos* of the titles seems more complex than in the above examples; the titles inform the audience what the singers sing about, they aim at preserving the coherence of the whole production, and they are one of the elements of modernising. In fact, going beyond the original libretto, they become an inseparable element of the performance complementing the general audio-visual effect.

The differences between original libretti and surtitles discussed in the examples above are certainly puzzling, particularly because the original is very much heard even if the majority of the audience does not understand the language of the libretto when it is sung in a foreign language. The point is that entering the opera house, viewers need to assume that they are about to take part in a highly conventionalised and symbolic event. They usually need to accept that elements

like surtitles adjusted to modernised productions are a part of the entire production, which cannot be regarded as concise and complete if its elements do not fit each other. Therefore, the communicational situation specified by Nord is the specific production together with the director's ideas and this situation determines the shape of the communicated message, i.e. the translated libretto.

5. Concluding remarks

As has been emphasised at the beginning of this paper, the issue of opera surtitling is often overlooked in the staging of an opera production. The interpretation and significance of particular productions are created not only by the use of spoken (or sung) and written words, but also by various visual elements, namely the stage design and acting. However, as the above examples depicted, surtitles can, in fact, be looked upon as *éminence grise*. Opera is a highly specific genre, indeed: if modernising is nowadays acceptable in the theatre, in opera it is still fairly controversial and it “is a staple of opera directors, especially in Europe, and it sparks feuds between traditionalists and updaters as regularly as the sun rises” (Tommasini 2011b). Despite the criticism this trend is most probably here to stay, as it has shown itself to be a way of reviving the art form and bringing it closer to younger generations (Ożarowska 2016, 73–74). But it can only defend itself if it leads to the production of complete and coherent performances; and surtitles serve as an element that binds opera and modernity, and makes this marriage of heaven and hell (i.e. opera and modernity, or modernity and opera) possible and viable. This bold goal can be achieved only with a proper translation of operatic libretti. The first step towards this aim is recognising the function of surtitles and then drafting them so that they can fully play their part. *Skopos* theory is therefore indispensable.

It is, of course, very easy to flatten the problem and accuse *skopos* theory of being a mere feeble excuse for taking liberties with the original; in fact, this theory has received much criticism for, among others, dethroning the source text (Nord 1997, 109). However, libretti are translated for a specific reason and for specific viewers watching an operatic production. Hans Vermeer states that texts should be translated in such a way that they may function in a given situation, and in a modernised production surtitles can function properly – i.e. convey the message to addressees – only if they are a part of a coherent whole. Obviously the level of adjusting translations to the production should be different in every case. As Vermeer claims,

what the *skopos* states is that one must translate, consciously and consistently, in accordance with some principle respecting the target text. The theory does not state what the principle is: this must be decided separately in each specific case. (in Nord 1997, 29–30)

The target text must be respected, indeed, and in order to translate operatic libretti one needs “not only a wide range of linguistic and musical skills but also (...) in-depth knowledge of operatic cultural background and an artistic sensitivity” (Desblache 2007, 169). The coexistence and cooperation of translational skills and classical music expertise are therefore indispensable elements of achieving the goal of successful surtitles, especially if they are to play a special part in an extraordinary production. And it is essential to marry not only tradition with innovation, but also technical skills with artistic abilities because “the titling of opera is not only a craft, but also an art” (Burton 2009, 69).

Notes

- 1 In this paper I use libretti translations that were provided by opera houses not only in the form of surtitles, but also seatback titles or subtitles. For the sake of clarity I use the word *surtitles* for describing theoretical matters; for discussing individual libretti translations I use the general word *titles* if the libretto translation in question was not shown specifically as surtitles by the opera house.

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