

TRANSLATING DRAMA AS A LITERARY GENRE: CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract:

This paper explores the translation of drama as a distinct literary genre, examining its unique features, the theoretical underpinnings of drama-translation, practical challenges, strategies of adaptation, and implications for theatrical performance and intercultural communication. While translation studies often focus on prose or poetry, drama presents a dual nature: it exists both as a text and as a performance event. As such, translating drama demands attention not only to language but also to action, stage dynamics, performability, cultural context, and audience reception. Drawing on recent scholarship and case studies, the paper discusses genre-specific issues such as speakability, performability, untranslatability, and the role of the translator as dramatist. It further surveys the key strategies employed in drama translation, including adaptation, acculturation, domestication, foreignisation, and creative rewriting. The discussion also touches upon how dramatic translation functions within the literary polysystem and theatrical systems. Finally, the paper argues that drama translation is an act of cultural mediation which requires the translator to balance fidelity to the source text with the demands of target culture, stage— and medium. The conclusion highlights key areas for further research, including the impact of digital media and cross-lingual theatre, and calls for more integrative frameworks linking translation studies and theatre theory.

Keywords: *drama translation, performability, speakability, untranslatability, adaptation, theatre translation, genre theory*

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Introduction:

The translation of dramatic texts constitutes a special and significant branch of literary translation, yet one that remains under-explored compared to the translation of prose and poetry. Drama, in essence, is a genre designed for performance: it unfolds through characters' interaction, dialogue, stage directions, gesture and spectacle rather than narrative exposition alone. As such, translating a drama involves more than rendering words from one language into another—it involves transposing a text into an actable script, aware of the demands of voice, body, space, time and audience. According to Mohammad Shahadat Hossain, drama translation “is, in many ways, different from translating the other genres of literature ... it is both a linguistic and cultural exchange of conversations and dialogues” (Hossain, 2017). ([Department of English

and Humanities][1])

One of the pivotal issues lies in the dual nature of dramatic text: it is simultaneously literary (intended for reading) and theatrical (intended for performance). As Geraldine Brodie notes in *Translating for the Theatre*, such translation “is always focused on a performed text and its users ... actors who learn and reproduce the text as dialogue and movement.” ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment][2]) The translator must therefore possess both linguistic-textual competence and an awareness of stage-pragmatic demands such as “speakability, target-language acceptability, adaptability”. ([OUP Academic][3])

This paper aims to chart the terrain of translating drama: first, by mapping the genre's distinctive demands; second, by discussing theoretical frameworks and historical developments; third, by

analysing key challenges such as untranslatability and performability; fourth, by reviewing strategies and principles of translation; and finally, by reflecting on implications for target culture, theatre practice and future research. In doing so, it seeks to underscore the importance of treating drama translation not simply as textual translation but as an act of cultural, theatrical and performative mediation.

Drama occupies a unique position within literature because of its intrinsic orientation toward performance. Unlike a novel or short story which is primarily consumed by reading, a play is written to be acted. As Hana' Khalief Ghani argues, drama is “the most concrete of all genres of literature... the play-wright does not tell a story. Instead one gets the story as the characters interact and live out their own experiences on stage.” ([cbej.uomustansiriyah.edu.iq][4])

This characteristic has multiple implications. First, dialogue plays a central role; dramatic language tends to approximate natural, spoken language more than poetic or novelistic register. As Hossain observes, “the language spoken in a play is colloquial and not necessarily formal.” ([Department of English and Humanities][1]) Second, the stage dimension—time, place, action, physical movement, gestures and audience orientation—counts significantly in drama. Translation must therefore account for actors’ deliverability, timing, breath, cadence, intelligibility, stage directions and scenic conventions. For instance, the notion of “speakability” (whether the translated line can be naturally spoken by an actor in performance) becomes crucial. ([OUP Academic][3])

Third, drama engages audience reaction in real time; meaning is co-constructed with performance, set design, lighting, movement and acoustics. The literate reading of a play is only one dimension; theatrical realisation often demands changes or interventions. As one study shows, when texts are adapted from page to

stage, “two different systems are at work: the literary system and the theatrical system.” ([oiccpres.com][5]) Given these features, drama translation must not only respect textual fidelity, but ensure the translated text functions as a script that “works” in the target language, culture and theatrical environment. This dual orientation (text plus performance) makes drama translation a complex and hybrid domain, intersecting literary translation, performance studies, theatre theory, semiotics and intercultural studies.

Research on drama translation has matured significantly in recent decades, drawing on genre theory, translation studies, theatre studies and cultural studies. One recent contribution, by Olha Volchenko, frames drama translation within the genre-theory of translation, emphasising its regularities and influencing factors including linguistics, semiotics, culture and stage-oriented approaches. ([isg-journal.com][6])

In The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies, the chapter on drama translation outlines key concerns such as “plays for the page, and for the stage”, “special qualifications” of drama translators, various methods and adaptive interventions. ([OUP Academic][3]) These underscore that drama translation cannot be treated purely as literary translation (concerned with text and reader) but must incorporate performance translation (concerned with actor, stage, audience). The distinction between “translation for the stage”, “drama translation” (text for reading) and “theatre translation” (stage version) has been refined in earlier decades. ([isg-journal.com][6])

From a theoretical standpoint, drama translation raises enduring questions of fidelity, equivalence, adaptation and cultural mediation. For example, the notion of untranslatability (certain cultural, idiomatic or performative elements that resist transfer) is heightened in drama because of its reliance on local stage conventions and performative timing. Hossain engages

with the “strategy of ‘intentional betrayal’ to attain the ‘translatability’ of the ‘untranslatability’.” ([Department of English and Humanities][1])

Moreover, the translator’s role is re-conceived: not simply a linguistic mediator but a kind of dramatist, collaborating with directors, actors, designers. Some scholars argue the translator must have a “sense of theatre”—an understanding of how lines will be spoken, how the action will unfold, how audiences will receive cues. ([OUP Academic][3])

In terms of genre theory, drama translation has been seen within the larger framework of literary translation and its position in the literary polysystem. For instance, how translated drama enters theatrical repertoires, how it interacts with native dramatic traditions, how it is adapted, acculturated or resisted. Projects such as Translating Ancient Drama explore cross-cultural networks of dramatic translation from ancient Greek drama into various languages, illustrating the interaction of translation and reception. ([apgrd.ox.ac.uk][7])

Thus, the theoretical frameworks for drama translation draw on translation studies (equivalence, genre, culture), theatre studies (performance, actability, stage), and cultural studies (audience, reception, adaptation). They emphasise that drama translation is genre-specific and demands specialised attention.

One of the foremost challenges is ensuring that translated lines are performable—i.e., they can be spoken naturally, with appropriate brevity, pacing and clarity. Brodie notes that the translator must consider “actors who learn and reproduce the text as dialogue and movement”. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment][2]) Issues such as mouth-movement, breath pause, rhythm, and actor comfort in pronunciation (e.g., names) all matter. The chapter in Oxford Handbook refers to personal names that may be difficult to pronounce or for audiences to apprehend. ([OUP Academic][3])

Dramatic texts often embed cultural references, idioms, humour, dialects, registers, stage conventions, gestures and performative cues specific to one culture. Translating such elements may lead to loss, substitution, or creative rewriting. Hossain discusses translation as involving “loss and gain” and the “strategy of intentional betrayal” to handle the untranslatability. ([Department of English and Humanities][1]) Additionally, the performative “illocutionary acts”—for example commands, insults, comedic timing—may not map cleanly into another language or culture. The speech-act theory dimension is particularly relevant in drama translation.

As the study by Shahba, Ameri & Laal emphasises, the translation of drama may work differently on the page and on the stage: “two different systems are at work: the literary system and the theatrical system.” ([oiccpres.com][5]) A translated text may function as a readable script but fail to realise as performance (actors struggle, audience disconnects). Changes in word and movement systems are predominant in such adaptation efforts. Thus the translator must anticipate shifting from text-centred to stage-centred thinking.

Drama translation must contend with the fact that the literary genre of drama is subject to both literary conventions and theatrical medium constraints. For example: length of speeches, stage directions, act/scene divisions, interplay of dialogue and action, scenic realism or stylisation. The translator may have to condense, expand, rearrange or omit textual material to suit the stage. Suh Joseph Che’s paper on “Drama Translation: Principles and Strategies” underscores how translators must navigate prescriptive and descriptive rules tailored to theatre translation. ([National Translation Mission][8])

The target audience for a translated drama may differ in linguistic competence, cultural background, theatrical norms and expectations. A joke, slang, gesture or cultural reference that works in the source

culture may fall flat or mis-fire in the target culture. Hence translation of drama often implies adaptation, localisation, recontextualisation. The translator must balance respect for the source text with target audience intelligibility and theatrical effect.

Unlike purely literary translation, drama translation often requires collaboration with theatre practitioners (directors, actors, dramaturges, designers). The translator may need to adapt lines according to rehearsal feedback, actor delivery, stage constraints, acoustics and audience reaction. Brodie emphasises the collaborative dimension in theatre translation. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment][2])

Suh Joseph Che identifies principles such as compatibility and integration of the translated script into the receiving culture. The underlying premise is that the translated drama must “work” in the target theatrical context—not just as an imported text but as a livable performance. ([National Translation Mission][8]) Similarly, the Oxford Handbook chapter outlines special qualifications for drama translators: awareness of theatre, speakability, adaptability. ([OUP Academic][3]) Volchenko’s framework illustrates that drama translators must consider linguistic, semiotic, cultural and stage-oriented factors in tandem. ([isg-journal.com][6])

In translating drama, several key strategies guide the translator’s approach to balancing linguistic fidelity with performative and cultural effectiveness. Domestication and foreignisation represent two opposing orientations: the translator may adapt idioms and cultural references to align with the target culture’s norms (domestication) or retain the original’s foreign flavour, inviting audiences to experience its cultural otherness (foreignisation). Adaptation or re-writing involves reshaping dialogue, reordering scenes, or modifying expressions to meet stage requirements, audience comprehension, or pacing—often necessary when moving a text from “page to stage,” as seen in

Persian theatre translations where major linguistic and physical adjustments occur. Acculturation ensures that the translated play fits within the target culture’s theatrical conventions, respecting actor abilities and audience expectations; over-strict fidelity to the source can hinder this natural integration. The preservation of performative function focuses on maintaining the illocutionary power of speech acts—commands, emotions, humor, or insults—so that dialogue carries the same dramatic force in translation. Finally, collaborative revision underscores the importance of rehearsal-based refinement, where translators work closely with directors and actors to fine-tune tone, pacing, and naturalness. Together, these strategies ensure that a translated play is not merely linguistically accurate but theatrically alive and culturally resonant for its new audience.

In practical application, translating drama requires both linguistic precision and theatrical awareness. The translator must first analyse the source play’s overall structure—its characters, dialogue patterns, humour, and stage directions—to grasp its artistic and performative essence. Equal attention should be given to dialects, idioms, and cultural references, ensuring that these are meaningfully rendered for the target audience. As performance is the end goal, the translator must anticipate the target theatre’s physical and vocal constraints—actors’ comfort, projection, timing, and stage changes—so that the text is both speakable andactable. Clarity, brevity, and naturalness of dialogue are essential for enhancing “speakability.” Cultural jokes, names, or idioms should be adapted, annotated, or replaced to preserve relevance and impact. Close collaboration with directors, dramaturges, and actors enables refinement through rehearsals, ensuring the translation works in practice, not just on paper. Ultimately, the translator must balance fidelity to the original with the practical viability of stage performance.

Translating drama has significant implications both for theatrical practice and for cross-cultural communication. On the theatre side, a well-translated play can broaden access to global dramatic repertoire, enabling plays written in one language to be performed in another culture, thereby enriching local theatre. As the Goethe-Institut project “Contemporary German-language drama in six South Asian languages” indicates, translating drama makes visible global repertoire to new cultural audiences. ([Goethe-Institut][10])

From the intercultural viewpoint, drama translation serves as cultural mediation: the translated play carries not only the story and characters but also the voice, norms and worldview of the source culture. The process of translation may involve negotiating cultural difference—what to keep, what to adapt, what to localise. Translators act as cultural brokers. The choice between domestication and foreignisation influences how ‘foreign’ the source remains in the target context. Moreover, drama translation impacts the literary polysystem: translated plays may challenge or shift local dramatic traditions, influence performance practices, and expand audience horizons. The translator’s decisions may shape reception and reinterpretation of the source play in a new cultural milieu. Projects such as “Translating Ancient Drama” show how early translations influenced the reception of classical drama across Europe. ([apgrd.ox.ac.uk][7])

Furthermore, the performance dimension adds layers of complexity: translation choices affect actor delivery, audience comprehension, stage rhythm and scenic coherence. Poor translation may lead to stilted performances, confused audience reaction or failure of the play to resonate. Conversely, sensitive translation can preserve the vitality of performance and the immediacy of theatrical action in a new language.

Finally, the emergence of new media and cross-lingual theatre (for example bilingual productions, digital

performances, livestreamed theatre) raises new questions for drama translation: how to adapt for subtitles, how to consider multimedia mixing, how to maintain performability in non-traditional venues. While the literature is still emerging, these trends suggest fruitful directions for future research.

Conclusion:

Translating drama as a literary genre is a richly complex, interdisciplinary endeavour that demands more than linguistic transfer—it requires theatrical imagination, cultural insight, and collaborative sensitivity. Drama translation sits at the intersection of text and performance: the translator must preserve the literary integrity of the play while ensuring it functions as an actable, speakable, performable script in a new language and cultural setting. The genre-specific demands of drama—its reliance on dialogue, action, stage space, timing and audience reaction—set it apart from other literary translation tasks and call for specialised strategies and principles.

The literature demonstrates that drama translation involves fundamental issues such as performability, untranslatability, adaptation and cultural mediation. Translators of dramatic texts must negotiate the twin axes of fidelity and viability: maintaining the spirit and structure of the source play while adapting it to the realities of the target theatrical system. Strategies such as domestication or foreignisation, adaptation of cultural references, revision in rehearsal and collaboration with theatre practitioners are essential to ensure success in performance. Studies show that a failure to engage with the performative dimension can lead to a “page-only” translation that fails on stage.

Practically speaking, drama translation invites the translator into the theatre’s ecosystem: into the world of actors, directors, designers, audiences—each bringing their conventions, constraints and expectations. This cultural-theatrical dimension means that drama translation is not simply a literary exercise

but a form of intercultural performance and theatre practice. It fosters cross-cultural exchange, expands repertoires across languages, and enriches both literary and theatrical landscapes.

Looking ahead, new frontiers such as digital theatre, multilingual performance, and hybrid forms call for fresh research on how drama translation adapts to new media, new audience modalities and transnational collaborations. Further study is needed on how translation decisions affect performance dynamics, audience reception and cultural transformation. Ultimately, treating drama translation as a distinct, genre-aware field invites scholars and practitioners to engage more deeply with the interplay of text, performance and culture—and to acknowledge that in translating drama, one translates more than words: one translates action, voice, gesture, culture and the very experience of theatre.

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Cite This Article:

Mrs. Sam K.M. (2025). *Translating Drama as a Literary Genre: Challenges, Strategies and Transformations*. In **Aarhat Multidisciplinary International Education Research Journal**: Vol. XIV (Number VI, pp. 49–54).

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18139510>