



Este artículo examina la traducción de obras de teatro en diferentes momentos de la historia del teatro francófono en Canadá. Las traducciones inglesas de las obras dramáticas en lengua francesa, que se realizaron en Québec al principio de la década de los años setenta, muestran un bilingüismo artificial que sirve para promover la cohabitación lingüística y contribuye a la especificidad de un repertorio dramático anglófono emergente en Canadá. En el Canadá occidental, un tipo de teatro reciente, francófono y bilingüe, representativo del bilingüismo real que se da en las comunidades francófonas minoritarias, pone en cuestión la traducibilidad según los modelos tradicionales. Los mecanismos de traducción basados en la puesta en escena diseñados para públicos específicos, como es el caso de los sobretítulos, permiten que la producción original mantenga su dualidad lingüística a la vez que se hace accesible para grupos más amplios y diversos, y se incrementa su visibilidad tanto en el ámbito nacional como internacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teatro canadiense, teatro francófono, bilingüismo, traducción para la puesta en escena, sobretitulación.

Bilingualism on Stage: Translating Francophone Drama Repertoires in Canada

This article examines the translation of plays at different moments in the history of French-language theatre in Canada. The English translations of French-language drama originating in Quebec at the beginning of the 1970s depict an artificial bilingualism that serves to promote linguistic cohabitation and contributes to the specificity of an emerging English-Canadian drama repertoire. In Western Canada, a recent, bilingual francophone drama, representative of the real bilingualism of French-speaking communities in a minority context, raises questions of translatability within traditional models. Performance-based translation devices designed for specific audiences, such as surtitles, allow the original production to maintain its linguistic duality while rendering it accessible to larger audiences, thus increasing its visibility both nationally and internationally.

KEYWORDS: Canadian drama, French-language drama, bilingualism, performance-based translation, surtitling.

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This article examines the translation of plays at different moments in the history of French-language theatre in Canada. Instrumental in defining a practice and a critical discourse on theatre translation specific to the Canadian context, the first instance to be observed concerns the English translations of French-language drama originating in Quebec at the beginning of the 1970s, a time devoted to the creation of national repertoires in both of Canada's official languages. The second one is centred on the challenge to translation raised by bilingual francophone drama created in Western Canada.

A study by Ruth Martin shows that, five years after the creation of the translation program by the Canada Council for the Arts in 1972, the number of Canadian books translated from one official language to the other had almost doubled (1994: 54). Of the first 62 plays translated with the support of the program, there were 60 plays from Quebec translated into English. This is rather surprising given that 67.29% of the Canadian population is unilingual Anglophone, while 17.43% is bilingual and 13.25% unilingual Francophone, most of whom reside in Quebec¹. One would assume there would be more authors and more plays written in English and more translations from English into French. This paradoxical asymmetry in the number of plays translated in each direction is a consequence of the specific evolution of the French and the English drama repertoires in Canada.

At the end of the 1960s, the French vernacu-

lar of Quebec's urban working class, a sociolect referred to as *joual*, became the language of choice for a nascent Quebec literary institution eager to affirm a specific Québécois identity. Michel Tremblay's plays written in *joual* would go on to become a model for numerous playwrights no longer required to write in standard French with which they were uncomfortable. It was a time of rapid expansion for Quebec's drama repertoire, with plays not only written but also translated into *joual*, as opposed to being imported in French translations from France. Most of the translated plays originated in the prestigious American and British repertoires² as very little attention was paid to an English-Canadian repertoire still in search of itself.

To celebrate the Centennial of the Canadian Confederation in 1967, many theatres had been built throughout Canada and given financial support and institutional status. Canadian artists had been encouraged to write plays for the occasion and a few were staged during that year. However, once the celebrations were over, the English theatres went back to producing plays from the American and British repertoires, and Canadian plays were no longer seen on Canadian stages. As a result, an alternative theatre network sprang up on the periphery of the government-funded regional theatres, dedicating itself to the creation and promotion of an indigenous English-Canadian drama. Translation offered several advantages to the poor and sparsely-attended alternative companies, one of which was to produce plays that had already proven successful. Quebec's remarkably prolific theatrical production of the time, and especially the success of Québécois playwright Michel Tremblay, had much to offer to the elabora-

¹ See Statistics Canada's charts on the use of official languages in Canada: <http://www40.statcan.ca/102/cst01/demor5_f.htm?searchstrdisab=langues%202006&filename=demor5_f.htm&lan=fre> [Consulted: December 2008].

² For more details on the translation of American plays in Quebec, see Annie Brisset (1990).

tion of a Canadian theatre repertoire. Tremblay would thus become the quintessential Canadian playwright with eleven plays produced in English translation between 1972 and 1979, and fourteen more between 1980 and 2007.

These English translations eloquently illustrate the incompatibility of the functions given to language in the French and English drama repertoires of Canada. As opposed to *joual*, a language that bears the marks of a distinct way of speaking French specific to Quebec, the English vernaculars spoken in Canada, although they can exhibit regional accents, fail to distinguish themselves sufficiently from their American equivalents to function as an emblem of a specific English-Canadian identity. The vernacular spoken in Newfoundland could be considered an exception to this, yet it could hardly be an option as it would most likely be incomprehensible throughout the rest of Canada³. Translating Tremblay's plays in an accentuated English vernacular would only have succeeded in shocking the audience and interfering with the plays' reception at a critical moment, since they were destined to contribute to an emerging English-Canadian repertoire. It was thus necessary to adopt another strategy in order to highlight the Canadianness of the plays and to validate their translation and production.

As can be seen in this excerpt from *Les belles-soeurs* in the French and English versions, the substitute given to *joual* in Tremblay's first plays is a kind of «standard [...] generic North American» (Bosley, 1988: 141) that retains a certain level of propriety, but doesn't exhibit any particularity that could be perceived as a distinctive Canadian attribute.

³ For a more detailed analysis on the function of the vernaculars in Canadian drama, see Louise Ladouceur (2007).

GERMAINE — J'comprends rien pantoute pis j'veux rien savoir. Parle-moé pus... Désâmez-vous pour élever ça, pis que c'est que ça vous rapporte? Rien! Rien pantoute... J't'avertis, Linda, chus pas une sarvante moé, icitte! J'ai un million de timbres à coller pis chus pas pour les coller tu-seule. Après toute, ces timbres-là y vont servir à tout le monde! (1968: 9)

GERMAINE — I don't want to understand. I don't even want to hear about it. I kill myself for the whole bunch of you and what do I get in return? Nothing! A big fat nothing! You can't even do me a little favour! I'm warning you, Linda. I'm sick and tired of waiting on you. You and everyone else. I'm not a slave, you know. I've got a million stamps to paste and I'm not about to do it myself. And what's more, those stamps are for the whole family! (1974: 9-10)

In the English version of the play, the names and forms of address of the various characters have been kept in French, as shown in this excerpt: «Here, Mme. [sic] Dubuc. Let me give you a hand. [...] Thanks Mlle. [sic] Verrette. You're so kind.» (1974: 25). Many Gallicisms, composed of sentences or words that are kept in French in the English version, can be found throughout Tremblay's plays, and some were even added in the revised English version of *Les-Belles Sœurs* published in 1992: «So Manon starts screaming at the kids, 'Catch Maman's little birdies. Maman's too tired'» (1992: 29); «Raymond started his *cours classiques*» (*ib.*: 27)⁴.

The importance of the Gallicisms in the English versions of Tremblay's plays cannot be overemphasized as they have become their trademark, many of them bearing titles such as: *Les Belles Sœurs* (1974), *Bonjour, là, Bonjour* (1975), *En Pièces Détachées* (1975), *Surprise! Sur-*

⁴ For more details on the use of Gallicisms in the English versions of Tremblay's plays, see Louise Ladouceur (2002).





prise! (1976), *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1976), *Trois Petits Tours* (1977), *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* (1981), *Sainte-Carmen of the Main* (1981) and *La Maison Suspendue* (1991). Hybridized in a way that fails to echo any real usage in a Canadian context where the anglophone majority is rarely exposed to the influence of French, the English translations replace the French vernacular of the original versions with an amalgam of English and French that, although totally artificial, proposed a valuable specificity to English Canada's audiences. Not only did it present a model of linguistic cohabitation, at a time when cohabitation was under threat following the separatist upheaval of the 1970 October Crisis in Quebec⁵, but it also acted as a symbol of the bilingualism and multiculturalism that serves to distinguish the Canadian «mosaic» from the American «melting pot», therefore accentuating something perceived as specifically Canadian in the emerging English-Canadian drama repertoire to which the translations would contribute.

The strategies applied to the English translation of the plays of Quebec playwright Michel Tremblay is a consequence of the difference in the function of language in the French and English drama repertoires of Canada from 1968 to the beginning of the 1980s. For the French minority, theatre performance is an act of cultural resistance as it allows a threatened language to resonate in the public sphere and openly assert the existence of French in front of the English majority⁶. The use of an oral, vernacular form of French specific to Quebec also

serves another function, destined to affirm a francophone identity that is distinctly Québécois. As noted by Pascale Casanova, in a study that adopted the sociological model of Pierre Bourdieu, for whom «difference is a key factor in defining and affirming social identities» (my translation) (1979: 191), a local vernacular possesses a highly distinctive value for emerging literatures that employ a major literary language such as French, inasmuch as it allows them to reappropriate this prestigious literary language while proclaiming their own specific use of it (Casanova, 1999: 386).

These functions have no equivalent in English, since there is little need for Anglophones to affirm the existence of their language in Canada and its vernacular forms are not sufficiently distinct to anchor a specific Canadian identity. In English Canada, theatre is a cultural event devoid of the urgency that informs Quebec and other French-language drama repertoires created across Canada. Taking on an ethnographic form, the English translations of Tremblay's plays accentuate the origin of the text by means of French words, sentences and titles that invite the spectators to distance themselves from the harsh reality depicted in the plays, rendering them more acceptable to the target audience, while underlining Canada's bilingualism and multiculturalism.

Although it has been developing more slowly, the other francophone repertoire under study has much in common with the one we have just examined as it aims to affirm a distinct francophone identity that speaks of and from the margins. In Western Canada, French communities are small and separated by great distances. In these minority communities, far from the French hubs of Eastern Canada, those who speak French are bilingual by necessity. Unilingual Francophones are virtually non-existent

⁵ The 1970 October Crisis led to the adoption of the War Measures Act that suspended all civil liberties in Quebec until the Canadian army was withdrawn in February 1971.

⁶ For more details on the function of language in plays written and translated in both of Canada's official languages, see Louise Ladouceur (2005).

west of Ontario since English is the sole language used in the public sphere, while French is confined to the private sphere or to the activities of a very few French cultural organisations. In Alberta, a western province that covers an area of 661,848 *square kilometers*, with a francophone and bilingual population of 225,085, there is but one professional francophone theatre company, as is the case for the other three provinces in Western Canada: Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia.

Previously perceived as a failure to fully appropriate French, the bilingualism of Western Canada's French communities has taken on a different value with the globalisation of the marketplace. No longer a symbol of inadequacy, it has become the sign of a capacity to function in two languages, including English, which is a decided advantage in a global marketplace dominated by the United States. As *joual* did for Quebec theatre in relation to a French repertoire, the bilingual aesthetic of the French-Canadian plays serves as a distinctive feature, which allows them to distinguish themselves from the decidedly unilingual Quebec repertoire. However, because bilingualism is an attribute specific to French-speaking communities outside of Quebec, it prevents the plays from being produced in Quebec and thus acknowledged by the Québécois theatre institution that occupies the center of the francophone theatrical market in Canada and regulates the legitimacy and circulation of plays written in French within the country and abroad. Not only would the bilingualism exhibited in these plays make them almost incomprehensible in Quebec, where the majority of the audience is unilingual francophone, it would also be the object of an ideological resistance rooted in the way Quebecers perceive Canadian bilingualism. Such a perception is clearly expressed in the

preface written to the publication of *Je m'en vais à Régina* by Roger Auger, the play that inaugurated a francophone repertoire specific to Manitoba in Western Canada.



In his history of modern French theatre in Manitoba, Roger Léveillé quotes Roland Mahé the director of Cercle Molière, a francophone theatre company established in St-Boniface in 1925. According to Mahé, «in 1975, Cercle Molière 'presented the first real Franco-Manitoban play', *Je m'en vais à Regina* by Roger Auger» (my translation) (Léveillé, 2005: 345). This play introduces us to the Ducharme family, bilingual Francophones that switch easily from one language to the other in a French text that contains entire scenes in English. If the Ducharmes fail to agree on how to manage their bilingualism and on the need to speak English at home while entertaining an anglophone guest, it's with a vernacular that switches from one language to the other that they succeed in doing so, a code-switching characteristic of the community represented. Thus, the scene in which Walter informs Julie that he has accepted a promotion and will soon be leaving Winnipeg takes place entirely in English. Another scene in which the father and mother welcome Walter into their home also unfolds exclusively in English, as can be seen in the first example below. Even when speaking amongst themselves, Auger's francophone characters resort to numerous terms and expressions in English, as can be noted in the second excerpt wherein Martha speaks to her mother when she returns home to pick her up:

RAOUL — Hi Walter. Come in. Give me your jacket I'll hang it up for you. Well how's it been at work? We're having it tough at the shop. Bloody jobs are piling up. You know how it is at this time of year, with all the back orders.



THÉRÈSE — Hello Walter.

WALTER — Hi Mrs. Doosharm [Ducharme].

THÉRÈSE — Julie is downstairs for a while. She'll be back in a minute. Sit down won't you. So how are you keeping? (1976: 16)

MARTHA — Allo. Hello. You-hou. Y a-t-il quelqu'un? (*Pas un son.*) Où est-ce qu'ils sont bien tous? (*Elle se dirige vers les escaliers.*) Allô. Mom. Mom? Anybody there? Mom. (*Julie descend.*) (1976: 30)

As Leveillé underlines: «If Tremblay could allow people from Montreal's working class neighbourhoods to speak *joual*, why couldn't Franco-Manitobans hear French or English spoken on stage in a manner that reflects the reality of their surroundings?» (my translation) (2005: 347). Thus, in this manner, Manitoban bilingualism and code-switching were placed on equal footing with Quebec *joual* as representative of a specific francophone reality.

In his preface to the play, published in 1976 by Éditions Leméac, a prominent Quebec publisher, the Québécois critic Jacques Godbout refers to it as the emblem of the «disappearance of western French-Canadians» (my translation), a prediction that has yet to materialize as they are still to be found in 2008. But perhaps more tellingly, Godbout sees in the play «the Québécois melodrama transposed» (1976: xi), «the future that the defenders of bilingualism are preparing for us» (my translation) (1976: x). This Québécois vision of Canadian bilingualism as a symbol of the imminent eradication of French in Canada is a determinant factor in the relationship Quebec has developed with the French-Canadian communities outside its borders.

Despite the fact that Auger's play was published by a well-known Quebec publisher, and that Godbout fervently encouraged its

production in Quebec in order to illustrate the devastating effects of Canadian bilingualism, it was never produced on a Quebec stage. Not only does Godbout's vision of bilingualism as the inevitable demise of French remain vivid in Quebec, but to display such bilingualism on stage without resorting to translation would be unacceptable inasmuch as it would deprive French of its supremacy as the sole language of narration. The prospect of hearing the invasive presence of English on stage or a French overly deformed by English, as manifested not only in the code-switching typical to French vernaculars outside Quebec, but also, and perhaps more insidiously, in the strong English accent displayed by the actors, would seem to sound the death knell of the French language.

This vision of bilingualism ignores the fact that Canada has been home to Francophones outside Quebec for a long while. Living in small communities, they have learned to coexist with the vast English majority while continuing to speak, write and create in French. They easily switch from one language to the other, but continue to claim French as their language of identity. Not only is it the language with which they identify, it is the language with which they want to be identified, as bilingual Francophones for whom bilingualism, far from being incompatible with a French identity, is a *sine qua non* to their remaining Francophone.

In order to render these plays accessible to a Québécois audience ill-equipped to understand them, one must resort to translation. But not the type of translation usually called upon, which basically consists of translating everything into one single language, effectively erasing the linguistic duality characteristic of these plays and which is essential in representing the francophone reality specific to the context where they take place and which they



describe. In order to preserve the multilingual nature of the plays, it is necessary to explore other translative strategies based on the use of performative resources or performance-based translation devices⁷. In the case of Auger's play, it would be very easy to use surtitles, a process increasingly popular with francophone theatres in a minority context wishing to open up their productions to a larger audience by offering performances accompanied by English surtitles. This translative strategy, similar to that of movie subtitles, has several advantages: it is quick and relatively inexpensive, and it allows an audience to see the play in its original form and thus to have integral access to foreign works that otherwise would remain unintelligible. Toronto's Théâtre Français and Saskatoon's Théâtre du Jour have both been employing this process for several years now. It has also recently been used by Edmonton's Unithéâtre, where three plays produced in April 2007, and in October and December of 2008 have been staged in French accompanied by English surtitles⁸. For a unilingual francophone public in Quebec, it would be a question of integrating French surtitles into a bilingual play whenever English dialogue occurs. The surtitles used during passages delivered in English would, in effect, enable French to remain the primary language of narration inasmuch as it would be the only language through which the play could be understood in its entirety.

⁷ For more details on performance-based translation devices, see Louise Ladouceur and Nicole Nolette (forthcoming).

⁸ The plays are: *Le cadeau d'Einstein* by Vern Thiessen (English translation and surtitles by Manon Beaudoin); *Bashir Lazar* by Evelyne de la Chenellière (English translation by Morween Brebner, adapted for English surtitles by Shavaun Liss and Louise Ladouceur), and *Trains fantômes* by Mansel Robinson, French translation by Jean Marc Dalpé (English text adapted for surtitles by Shavaun Liss).

The two instances studied in this article highlight different francophone realities that contribute to the make up of Canada and their representations within various dramatic repertoires. If the French vernacular of Quebec managed to impose itself on the stage, it was subsequently the object of translative strategies that profoundly modified the function and purpose of the language in the plays in order to contribute to the elaboration of an English-Canadian drama repertoire. In Western Canada, the bilingual dialogue in plays originating from small francophone communities allows them to express their own specificity, but at the same time considerably reduces their circulation in the marketplace of French cultural products in Canada and abroad. Nonetheless, with the increased value that globalisation gives to multilingual resources, the francophone minorities' bilingualism takes on another significance. Previously looked upon as an inability to fully appropriate French and thus combat Anglicization, it is now seen as an asset, inasmuch as it indicates an ability to function in French and in English, thus providing access to a global marketplace that has adopted English as a *lingua franca*. The Québécois are not insensitive to this new linguistic and economic factor, which could very well modify their perceptions of bilingualism and its manifestations on stage. Rather than a symbol of the imminent demise of French in Canada, being bilingual can be viewed as having the capacity to function with more than one language, in this instance the unavoidable English of commercial exchanges, while continuing to identify oneself first and foremost as a Francophone, without doubting that this identity is legitimate and should be recognized as such.

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136

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