

Translating gestures and dialogue on stage

Theatrical dialogue is a continuous exchange of verbal and gestural signs, assembled from types and in ratios strictly determined by genre and national tradition, and performed with a varying degree of improvisation. My purpose in this paper is to examine what happens to dialogue when performance texts are translated from a culture with a strong improvisational tradition into a culture in which improvisation is virtually unknown. At least three types of scenes are involved: (i) scenes in which the sense-generating function is grounded in a dramatic script that prescribes the speeches and gestures to be performed, (ii) scenes in which only the speeches and gestures of one interlocutor are prescribed while those of the other are entrusted to improvisational skill of the performer, and (iii) scenes in which both components are to be improvised in their entirety. Examples of all three types of situations are found in *commedia dell'arte*, a multilingual and highly physical Italian theatrical tradition that quickly permeated several other European cultures. Each translation of *commedia* performances on foreign stages required adaptation, at times to such a degree that little more than the costumes of the original characters and the themes of the original performance texts were recognizable in the final product. A close study of the mechanisms involved in such translations raises a number of theoretical issues in the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions of signification and cross-cultural communication.