

Theatrical Role of Interpreter as a Mediator between Audience and Stage

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This essay examines the dramatic effectiveness of an interpreter, based on the writer's own experience as an interpreter in the theatre. An Irish theatrical company called 'Mouth on Fire' performed several later plays of Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) in English at Theatre X in Tokyo between 13 February and 17 February, 2013. First, I will focus on the theatrical role of consecutive interpreting presented as an introductory talk before the performances. I will then investigate the mechanism of liaison interpreting offered for the post-performance discussion at the meeting between the audience and the company to understand the 'invisible role' of both interpreter and characters in Beckett's plays. Finally, I will analyze the theatrical role of the interpreter for bridging the gap between audience and stage as well as between the unseen and the seen.

Introduction

Franz Pöchhacker describes the role of interpreters expected by the audience as “the **ghost role** of the interpreter over the ‘intruder role,’ but would at the same time give interpreters license to ‘correct the speaker’ and ‘add his own explanations’” (Pöchhacker, 2004, p.149). This contradiction will be further analyzed in this essay.

The first section focuses on a discussion of the ‘doppelgänger’ to clarify the co-existence of two different languages in the theatre as well as duplicate characters in Beckett's plays. The second section reinforces the discussion of ‘alter ego’ through both conceptual and theatrical performances of liaison interpreting. Thus, this essay scrutinizes how the interpreter in the theatre in the particular context of Beckett's drama reveals his/her affinity to the characters to highlight the importance of the theatrical effect of the interpreter as a mediator between audience and stage.

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1. Theatrical Role of Consecutive Interpreting

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word ‘doppelgänger’ means “an apparition or double of a living person” (Simpson, 1989, p.980) and it originates in “mid-19th century German, literally ‘double-goer’” (ibid.). This concept of ‘doppelgänger’ may be a key to extracting the essence of the theatricality of the interpreter.

In order to provide the audience with the literary, academic and artistic background of Beckett’s plays, there were explanations in English by the director of the Irish company, Cathal Quinn, before the performances, followed by my consecutive interpreting in Japanese. The director on the left-hand side and I on the right stood in front of the audience to give presentations. The spotlight was going back and forth between the director and me, which produced a lively environment with rhythmical shifts. This was effective for emphasizing the presence of an interpreter who is normally supposed to maintain a low profile and exist behind the scene. In this way, the interpreter was visible enough to convey her messages more dramatically with facial expressions and gestures. Although the contents of the messages were identical, the sounds of two different languages could vibrate equally in the theatre. Thus, I, as interpreter, was on par with the director in terms of receiving attention from the audience.

The explanation by the director in English and my consecutive interpreting in Japanese were followed by Beckett’s play, *Ohio Impromptu* (1981). This play consists of two onstage actors who look exactly the same sitting diagonally across from one another with a book and a hat on the table. One of them is named ‘Reader,’ who reads passages from the book and whose pace of reading is controlled by the other actor named ‘Listener,’ who listens to the story of the Reader and whose knocks distinguish the narrative and the onstage action. It may be seen that the onstage Reader and the Listener actually originate from the same person, and that those different bodies on the stage express two different characteristics of one identity. In other words, ‘doppelgänger’ functions in this play to demonstrate dissociation of personalities.

Let us here refer to how the playwright himself is associated with the keyword of ‘doppelgänger’ for deeper understanding of the play. Beckett wrote his plays in two different languages originating and translating in either English or French. Moreover, he did not allow other people to translate his plays between those two languages. His identity consisted in both English and French and those two languages were indispensable for his life. This is manifested in his decision to reside in Paris permanently from his thirties on and in the fact that he was acquainted with only a few words of Irish despite his birthplace in Ireland.

On the other hand, it should be mentioned that Beckett’s roots are found in his Irish identity and that he worked in his twenties as an assistant to another Irish writer, James Joyce (1882-1941). According to the biography by Anthony Cronin, “Joyce and Beckett had in fact much the same sort of sense of humor, the uncompromising, often cruel, Irish kind” (Cronin, 1999, p.101). In *Ohio Impromptu*, “old wide-brimmed hat at centre of table” (Beckett, 1986,

p.445) and “old world Latin Quartet hat” (Beckett, 1986, p.446) is reminiscent of the hat “James Joyce used to wear so jauntily” (Knowlson, 1996, p.665). Besides, the scene of the story read by the Reader in *Ohio Impromptu*, “Isle of Swans” (Beckett, 1986, p.445), also implies the island “where Beckett and Joyce used to walk together” (Knowlson, *ibid*).

As a whole, ‘doppelgänger’ in *Ohio Impromptu* may be interpreted in two ways; one that two different personalities on the stage must co-exist in one space, which suggests the indispensability of both English and French throughout Beckett’s theatrical life; and the other that two different figures on the stage must merge “to be as one” (Beckett, 1986, p.447), which signifies his cherishing the Irish identity he once shared with Joyce.

At Theatre X, *Ohio Impromptu* was followed by another beautiful example of Beckett’s later drama, entitled *Footfalls* (1976). It is a play about a female character named May, who paces on the stage from left to right and right to left in time to the rhythm of an invisible Voice heard from backstage. The director explained that the name May refers to Beckett’s mother, who is also said to have walked around the family home late at night. He also mentioned that the visual inspiration was derived from *The Virgin of the Annunciation* (1476) by Antonello da Messina (1430-1479).

Both visually and mechanically, this play itself was symbolic of the theatrical role of consecutive interpreting. Like the spotlight going back and forth between director and interpreter, May in *Footfalls* physically goes left to right and right to left on the stage. The consistent speed and rhythm of May’s pacing coincides with the rhythmical shift of consecutive interpreting from English to Japanese.

After the intermission, three more performances were presented on the stage before I was responsible for liaison interpreting at the post-performance talk. *That Time* (1976) is a play about an old man who mentally recalls his youth, middle and old age. The man’s head, which never speaks, is only visible for the audience framed in darkness, and three different versions of voices are heard in turn on the stage. Although it is the man who creates and listens to those voices, the audience is bemused whether the man plays the main role or a supporting part. This ambiguous image of the man may be applied to the mediating role of the interpreter, who both inputs and outputs all sorts of voices. As the role of interpreter is defined as a “bilingual mediating agent between monolingual communication participants in two different language communities” (Bell, 1991, p.15), the characters in Beckett’s plays heightened and somehow overlapped with my interpreter’s role as a mediator between audience and stage.

Lastly, the final play, *Come and Go* (1967), was performed in both English and Irish. It is a play about three women with the same style of hat and dress in different colors of red, yellow, and violet, sitting on a bench and whispering to each other about one of them who leaves and comes back on the stage in turn. This act of whispering by the three women symbolizes the definition of ‘whispered interpreting’. “Only where the interpreter works right next to one or no

more than a couple of listeners can he or she provide a rendition by whispered interpreting, or ‘whispering’ (also known by the French term *chuchotage*), which is in fact done not by whispering but by speaking in a low voice (‘*sotto voce*’)” (Pöchhacker, 2004, p.19). Moreover, the act of whispering in rotation by those three women also implies the definition of ‘relay interpreting’, “indirect interpreting via a third language, which links up the performance of two interpreters, with one interpreter’s output serving as the source for another” (Pochhacker, 2004, p.21). It may be worthwhile to quote here what the Irish director had to say about this final play as well as about the relationship between Beckett and the Irish language.

According to Professor Anthony Roche, the three women ‘assert a strength through their interdependence which makes this play one of the most perfect theatrical ensembles ever devised’. *Come and Go* is immediately followed by *Teacht Is Imeacht*, the same play performed in Irish. Beckett didn’t speak Irish, he knew a ‘cupla focal’ (few words) but was fluent in German and Italian yet only wrote in French and English. He was delighted when he heard a recording of *Waiting for Godot* in Irish that was sent to him, as he enjoyed its music. I will leave you with a few words by Gabriel Rosenstock, who translated *Come and Go* into Irish: ‘Beckett belongs to world literature. The best of world literature should be available in Irish just as the best of Irish-language literature should be available to the world.’ (Quinn, 2013)

Thus, performing *Come and Go* in both English and Irish proved meaningful for a Japanese audience. Just as the three women rely on each other, the three different languages of English, Irish and Japanese interacted in the theatre to create a theatrical ensemble, one which appears to hide something but in fact reveals everything on the stage. Here, the role of interpreter overlapped with the whispering of the women on the stage.

2. Theatrical Role of Liaison Interpreting

It is my basic policy as an interpreter to play an ‘invisible role’ that allows for clarity and transparency in the lines spoken by the performers. On the other hand, the mechanism of liaison interpreting in the theatre required me to be aware of ‘alter ego’ so as to provide a constant bridge between languages. Since a liaison interpreter is “a bilingual interpreter assuming the pivotal mediating role between two monolingual clients” (Pöchhacker, 2004, p.16), I was responsible for interpreting two different cultural backgrounds, Irish and Japanese. Moreover,

this concept of 'alter ego' refers to both the functions of the interpreter and the characteristics of Beckett's plays. The inherent similarities may be seen to represent a dual structure encompassing both the liaison interpreter and the Beckettian drama itself.

After all of the plays were performed on the stage, the theatre was ready to move on to the post-performance meeting between the Japanese audience and the Irish company. Apart from ordinary post-performance talks, where actors and director are situated on the stage while the audience remains seated, the lobby of the theatre was used as the meeting floor. In this way, the audience and the company were at the same level without any tension or barrier between them.

There were two participants in particular who should be mentioned in order to comprehend the theatrical role of the liaison interpreter. One of them was the son of the famous Japanese dancer, Kazuo Oono (1906-2010). The former raised his hand to remind us that his own father and Beckett, who were both born in 1906, were part of the same wartime generation. Kazuo Oono once danced Beckett's *Rockaby* (1981) with Noh actors. Although many in the audience were excited to have the opportunity to meet the son of the renowned dancer, the members of the Irish company did not show much interest in him. However, in order to explain the excitement of the Japanese audience to the Irish company, I took it upon myself to add a commentary in English about the internationally renowned dancer.

The other participant was a director named Kenichi Kasai, who crafted Beckett's *Quad* (1984) into a Noh performance in 2006. He asked how the Irish actors and director regarded the relationship between Beckett's work and the Japanese Noh theatre. The director answered that Beckett never visited Japan and did not acknowledge the direct influence of Noh theatre. The director also referred to Beckett's ancestral Irish playwright, W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), who did admit the influence of Noh theatre and utilized some of the Noh essence in his own plays. Moreover, in order to let the Irish company confirm the success of the Noh versions of *Quad* directed by Mr. Kasai, which I attended in 2006 in Tokyo, I had to tell them in English that I myself was impressed by the fusion of Beckett's original text and Noh elements in *Quad* as an artistic theatrical performance. Without deviating from the original text of Beckett's *Quad*, the aesthetics of Noh dance was successfully adopted to the piece.

It may be seen from those two cases that I, as interpreter, was able to interject my own appropriately timed comments by utilizing my "license to 'correct the speaker' and 'add his own explanations'" (Pöchhacker, 2004, p.149). It was efficient especially in the case of liaison interpreting where I played the "pivotal mediating role between two monolingual clients" (Pöchhacker, 2004, p.16). Although I was not spotlighted like I was before the performance when I did consecutive interpreting with the director, the role of liaison interpreting was visible, with clear shifts from Japanese to English and vice versa. It enabled me to be one of the presenters at the meeting instead of remaining as a backstage supporting staff. Moreover, my own theatrical experiences of seeing Beckett's Noh versions in the past gave me a realistic

framework for responding to the questions and comments posed by the Japanese audience, and enhanced my motivation to add explanations to help the Irish company feel and seize the nuances of the Japanese audience.

3. Theatrical Effect of Interpreter as a Mediator between Audience and Stage

In the previous sections, this essay examined the role of interpreter as a mediator between audience and stage through consecutive interpreting and liaison interpreting. In this section, I would like to scrutinize how the interpreter acting as a bridge between audience and stage may be effective in a theatrical sense.

Besides the artistically accomplished people mentioned above, the participants in the post-performance meeting no doubt also included many with no particular theatrical background. A woman raised her hand and said in a soft Japanese voice, “I don’t know anything about Beckett, but I’m happy I was able to come here today. It seems that Beckett’s plays treat the theme of death. Paradoxically, I have recently given birth to a baby. Yet, I somehow felt intimacy to Beckett’s plays.” On hearing my English interpreting, the Irish director replied to the young woman, “Then, please watch the shortest play by Beckett entitled *Breath* (1969). You only hear the cry of a baby for a few seconds from the rubbish.”

Two opposite themes of death and birth, light and darkness, seen and unseen, one and alter ego, words and silence are expressed on an equal footing throughout Beckett’s plays. Even a novice in Beckett’s theatre was able to perceive the paradoxical contrast of opposites in his plays.

Being an interpreter for Beckett’s performances made clear to me that the characters in Beckett’s plays also play roles similar to interpreters in the theatre. The Listener in *Ohio Impromptu*, the Voice in *Footfalls*, the Voices in *That Time*, and the women in *Come and Go*, all play “the ghost role of interpreter over the intruder role”(Pochhacker, 2004, p.149) and sometimes “‘correct the speaker’ and ‘add his own explanations’”(ibid.).

Let me here refer to ‘hashigakari’, a corridor used in Japanese Noh and Kabuki theatre where actors enter and leave from the stage. Without this corridor, actors are unable to appear on the stage or disappear from the audience. It may be possible to apply the image of this ‘hashigakari’ to the role of interpreter at the theatre. As interpreter, I existed at the theatre to bridge the gap between audience and stage. In this sense, the function of the interpreter was invisible and emotionless. Yet, the experience did not always accord with the function of ‘hashigakari’ at the theatre. As interpreter, I also had to play a proactive role to cast away the barrier and tension between audience and stage.

To some extent, I was closer to the role of ‘benshi’, “the famous screen-side narrator of Japanese silent film who offered both narrative commentary and mimicked the voices of the characters” (Nornes, 2004, p.454). By showing my presence under the spotlight, I was able to

play a visible and emotional role. At the meeting, I was also able to convey my own message. This was beneficial especially for Beckett's later plays where nonverbal elements pervade the atmosphere, similar to silent movies. The Japanese audience needed additional guidelines to grasp the unspoken messages that fill Beckett's later plays. Likewise, additional explanations helped the Irish director and actors recognize more precisely the nuances of the Japanese audience's reactions.

Thus, the role of interpreter enhances and reinforces the fruitful dialogue between the audience and the stage. Experiencing the dual role of consecutive interpreter under the spotlight and liaison interpreter at the post-performance meeting enabled me to play an active role in bridging the gap as a mediator. Since Beckett created the mediator as a crucial character in his plays, serving as an interpreter for Beckett's theatre meant being incorporated into his theatrical world. Listener in *Ohio Impromptu* controls the flow of the storytelling by the Reader. Voice in *Footfalls* also directs the movement of footsteps by the woman on the stage. Voices in *That Time* shift the variations of the invisible memories of the man on the stage. The women in *Come and Go* rely on each other to demonstrate the artistic rotation of the whispering on the stage. These mediated roles played by the characters on the stage were all linear and geometrical, and served to bridge the gap between 'one' and 'alter ego'.

Considering that Irish people are known to be superstitious and that many still believe in the existence of fairies, it is indeed impossible to separate the Irish Beckett from the surrealistic characteristics of his Irish-ness. At the same time, I was able to find affinities between the surrealistic essence of the mediator in his characters and the role of interpreter for Beckettian theatre as it was performed by the Irish company from Dublin.

Conclusion

On entering the lobby of a cozy theatre in Tokyo on a chilly afternoon, there was a timeless atmosphere where I heard all sorts of voices — the Irish director shouting, the Irish actors rehearsing, the Japanese staff preparing, and the audience of all generations murmuring in its seats. Just as Beckett depicted the alter ego of his characters in a timeless world, I was there to interpret the various voices of people with different backgrounds gathered at the theatre under the passion of savoring the unique world of Beckett's drama.

Having been spotlighted equally with the Irish director and actors, I was able to visibly disclose my presence as an interpreter at the theatre. It seemed that Beckett, who made much of the doppelgänger inherent in his characters, was permitting me to express my own viewpoint through my voice and gestures.

Moreover, it was symbolic for me to work at the theatre for a Japanese audience who came to see Beckett's plays in English and Irish. In other words, it was significant for an interpreter to participate in the performances represented in the language which the playwright

himself was unable to figure out fully. As I mentioned earlier, although Beckett's birthplace was Ireland, he was acquainted with only few words of Irish. Just as most of the Japanese audience was unable to appreciate all verbal elements of Beckett's plays in English and Irish, Beckett himself could not have comprehended all the Irish lines in *Come and Go* if he had been sitting there with them. On the other hand, Beckett's later plays filled with nonverbal elements in silence and repetition of gestures do not always require verbal translations of lines in order to savor his artistry.

The interpreter is thus 'theatrical' in playing both visible and invisible roles for bridging the gap between audience and stage, between the unseen and the seen, between the verbal and the nonverbal. This dual structure of interpreter became clearer through performing both consecutive interpreting and liaison interpreting at the theatre.

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