

التكييف الثقافي في ترجمة المسرح العبثي لبيكيت إلى العربية

Cultural Adaptation in Translating Beckett's Absurd Drama into Arabic

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ملخص البحث

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة التكيف الثقافي في ترجمة المسرح العبثي إلى اللغة العربية، مع التركيز على مسرحية نهاية اللعبة لصموئيل بيكيت. ويسعى إلى تحليل كيفية إعادة بناء الأبعاد الفلسفية والمسرحية للنص الأصلي ضمن الإطار الثقافي واللغوي للغة الهدف. اعتمد البحث المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، مدعوماً بالتحليل النصي المقارن بين مقاطع مختارة من النص الأصلي وترجماتها العربية.

يركز التحليل على أبرز خصائص مسرح العبث، مثل التكرار، والغموض، والاختزال، والتقطع، ويبحث في كيفية نقل هذه العناصر من خلال استراتيجيات التكيف الثقافي. وتُظهر النتائج أن ترجمة المسرح العبثي تتطلب الحفاظ على البنية غير المألوفة والفراغ الدلالي للنص الأصلي، بدلاً من إخضاعه لمعايير اللغة الهدف. كما تم تحديد عدد من الاستراتيجيات الأساسية مثل الاحتفاظ بالتكرار، والحفاظ على الغموض، والتكيف الأدائي، ومقاومة التوطين.

ويخلص البحث إلى أن الترجمة في هذا السياق ليست مجرد نقل لغوي، بل هي عملية إعادة بناء ثقافي، يؤدي فيها المترجم دوراً محورياً في نقل التجربة العبثية والفلسفية إلى المتلقي العربي.

Abstract

This study investigates cultural adaptation in translating Absurd drama into Arabic, with particular reference to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. It aims to examine how the translator reconstructs the philosophical and theatrical dimensions of the source text within the target cultural and linguistic framework. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, supported by comparative textual analysis between selected excerpts from the source text and their corresponding Arabic translations.

The analysis focuses on key features of Absurd theatre, including repetition, ambiguity, minimalism, and fragmentation, and explores how these elements are rendered through various cultural adaptation strategies. The findings reveal that successful translation of Absurd drama requires preserving the structural and semantic irregularities of the source text rather than conforming to the stylistic norms of the target language. Strategies such as repetition retention, ambiguity preservation, performative adaptation, and resistance to domestication are identified as central to maintaining the absurd effect.

The study concludes that translation in this context is not a process of linguistic substitution, but a complex act of cultural reconstruction. The translator plays a crucial role in reproducing the experiential and philosophical essence of the

original text, allowing the target audience to engage with the same sense of existential uncertainty that characterizes Beckett's work.

Introduction

Theatrical translation is considered one of the most complex fields of translation, as it does not merely involve transferring language, but extends to re-producing the text as a cultural and aesthetic act closely linked to performance context. This complexity becomes more pronounced in Absurd Theatre, which is characterized by fragmented dramatic structure, linguistic deviation, and the breakdown of traditional logical dialogue.

Samuel Beckett is one of the most prominent pioneers of this movement, whose texts are built on ambiguity, repetition, silence, and the production of unstable meaning. When translating these texts into Arabic, the translator faces not only a linguistic challenge but also the problem of transferring "semantic emptiness" and the "existential dimension" within a different cultural context.

The research problem arises from the complexity imposed by the nature of Absurd dramatic texts, particularly those of Samuel Beckett, where language intertwines with philosophy, silence with meaning, and unstable structure with open interpretation.

The main research question can therefore be formulated as follows:
To what extent is cultural adaptation effective in translating Absurd drama into Arabic, and how does the translator deal with the semantic and cultural challenges posed by Beckett's texts?

Significance of the Study

The importance of this research stems from the following:

- The study addresses one of the most complex areas of translation, namely Absurd drama translation, which requires deep understanding of linguistic, philosophical, and cultural dimensions.
- It highlights the role of cultural adaptation as a key strategy in bridging the gap between source and target cultures.

- It contributes to improving translators' and translation students' understanding of how to render structurally non-traditional texts such as Beckett's plays.
- It clarifies the relationship between dramatic text and its cultural reception in the Arabic context.

Research Objective

This study aims to analyze the challenges of translating Absurd drama into Arabic in light of cultural adaptation strategies in Samuel Beckett's works.

Chapter One: Dramatic Translation and Absurd Theatre

Theatrical translation is considered a specialized field within Translation Studies, as it does not merely involve transferring literary texts from one language to another, but extends to re-producing the text as a performative and cultural entity closely linked to stage performance and audience reception. Therefore, translating dramatic texts requires a deep understanding of the dialogic, rhythmic, and semantic elements that constitute the structure of the play.

This complexity becomes even greater in Absurd theatre, which is characterized by the disruption of traditional dramatic structure and the reliance on linguistic fragmentation, repetition, and silence as key semantic elements. Samuel Beckett is one of the most prominent pioneers of this movement, whose works reflect a philosophical vision based on meaninglessness, communication breakdown, and interpretative openness.

Theatre translation has gradually emerged as an independent field of research situated at the intersection of Translation Studies and Theatre Studies. Its early foundations were established through seminal works by Bassnett (1991), Johnston (1996), and Aaltonen (2000). However, the field has experienced significant expansion since 2010, with increasing scholarly attention to the role of the translator as an active agent in shaping performative meaning (Brodie, G., 2017).

This research trajectory has been further reinforced by studies such as Baines et

al. (2010), Bigliuzzi et al. (2013), and Laera (2019), alongside a rising number of publications in translation and theatre journals, including Battistón (2019) and Marinetti (2018), which have explored the interaction between translation and performance from multiple perspectives.

However, despite significant methodological advancements in both Theatre Studies and Translation Studies, there remains a clear gap in establishing a unified methodological framework capable of analyzing theatre translation as a hybrid field that integrates text and performance. Consequently, recent scholarship has attempted to address this gap by reviewing methodological approaches across both disciplines, identifying points of convergence, and discussing ethical and methodological concerns related to theatre translation research.

In defining translation research, some perspectives conceptualize translation as a universal interpretative act encompassing all forms of understanding (Steiner, G., 1975) while a more restricted definition describes it as the replacement of a written text in one language with an equivalent text in another language while preserving its core meaning (House, 2018, p10).

Holmes (1988) famously categorized Translation Studies into two main branches: “pure” research, which aims to explain translation phenomena and develop theoretical frameworks (e.g., Robinson, 2011), and “applied” research, which focuses on translator training and the development of translation tools (Flórez & Alcina, 2011), as well as translation quality assessment in professional contexts (Colina, 2008). Although influential, this division has been reconsidered in later scholarship (Munday, 2016, pp 19-20), as the boundary between the two branches is no longer strictly rigid.

Furthermore, van Doorslaer (2007) proposed a more recent conceptual mapping, distinguishing between “translation” as a practical activity and “translation studies” as a theoretical field, reflecting the ongoing evolution in how translation research is understood.

Theatre is constructed as an integrated artistic form that combines dialogue, setting, plot structure, and performance, where actors present a written script live before an audience. Stage design and décor also contribute to supporting

performance, aiming to enhance the expression of the dramatic scenario more effectively and vividly.

The concept of theatre originates from the Greek notion of “action,” “doing,” and “performance” (Storey, I. & Allan, A., 2005, p.1). Accordingly, performability, speakability, staging, the play text, and the translator’s interpretation of the script are essential elements that must be considered in theatre translation.

Thus, theatre translation differs significantly from the translation of other literary texts, as it produces a performance-oriented text rather than a text intended solely for reading. Non-verbal and non-literary elements such as gestures, music, movement, speech rhythm, sound effects, stage scenery, and lighting are foregrounded.

Theatre translation involves both the transfer of a written text into another language and its transformation into a performable script (Türkmen, 2021). This process requires movement between languages and cultures, followed by the adaptation or reshaping of the translated text for stage performance. The primary aim of theatre translation is its realization on stage.

Cultural differences must also be taken into account, after which the translated text is transposed into a performative form. Bassnett (1991) argues that the success of theatre translation depends on treating the written text as the foundation for stage production, while also considering its performability before actual performance (Bassnett, 1998, p.99).

Gestural or “gestic” text represents one of the most problematic aspects for interlingual translation, as it incorporates kinesic and paralinguistic signs within a complex semiotic system (Bassnett, 1998, p.99). Therefore, a play consists of both a surface text and a subtext (or gestural text), which the translator must decode as part of a multilayered system.

Theatre translation is not merely a linguistic or rhetorical act; rather, it is a process of cultural transformation and textual recreation involving cross-cultural interaction and the adaptation of cultural heterogeneity (Türkmen, 2021).

Theatre of the Absurd

The term “Theatre of the Absurd” was introduced by Martin Esslin in his 1962 study to describe a group of dramatists who emerged during and after World War II. This movement developed as a response to the devastation of the war and the resulting awareness of human existence as fragile and unstable, intensified by the threat of nuclear destruction.

Rooted in existential philosophy, Absurd drama—represented by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett—presents life as inherently meaningless. These works often express confusion, uncertainty, and despair regarding human existence, rejecting the idea of a rational universe or solvable dramatic conflicts. Human beings are portrayed as trapped in a futile struggle for survival despite their continuous efforts (Türkmen, 2021).

Playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd did not necessarily recognize themselves as part of a unified movement while writing their works, and many of them rejected fixed symbolic or theoretical classifications. For instance, Samuel Beckett frequently stated in interviews that he belonged nowhere, and that his plays were not based on fixed symbolism or rigid interpretative frameworks.

However, this self-perception contrasts with Esslin’s observation that absurdist writers often present themselves as “lonely outsiders, cut off and isolated in their own private worlds” (Esslin, 1961, p. 22). This perspective is clearly reflected in their dramatic works, which emphasize human isolation and the difficulty of meaningful communication between individuals.

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1949), one of the most prominent works of the movement, vividly illustrates this idea by portraying human inability to achieve effective communication or establish definitive meaning in existence.

Chapter Two: Cultural Adaptation in Translation

Cultural adaptation is considered one of the most important strategies in modern translation studies, as it aims to bridge cultural gaps between the source and target languages by reshaping cultural elements to make the text more

accessible within a new context. This concept goes beyond linguistic substitution to include the reconstruction of cultural meaning.

Its importance becomes even more significant in theatrical texts, particularly Absurd drama, which is characterized by symbolic density and semantic openness, as in the works of Samuel Beckett. In such cases, the translator faces the challenge of conveying “uncertainty” and “semantic emptiness” while preserving the originality of the text and ensuring its reception in the Arabic culture.

Translation has been practiced since ancient times, originating from the human need to communicate with different linguistic and cultural communities. This necessity has become increasingly significant in the modern era due to technological advancements and the expansion of communication systems that facilitate intercultural interaction.

In the translation process, focusing solely on the literal meaning of words is insufficient; instead, the overall meaning of the text must be understood. In this regard, culture is defined by Larson as "complex beliefs, attitudes, values and rules held by a group of people", as cited in Akef and Tahmineh (Larson, 1984).

Therefore, translators must be aware of the beliefs, values, ethics, and regulations of both source and target cultures in order to produce accurate and culturally appropriate translations. Translation involves the selection and construction of meanings within a framework that reflects cultural events and interactions. As literature is a product of culture, it is naturally shaped by writers who exist within a specific cultural environment, making literary works part of broader cultural development. In this context, this study is limited to the Indonesian setting, where literary achievements are integrated into national cultural progress and contribute to broader cultural advancement. Moreover, the role of literature in culture is not limited to writers alone, but also includes critics, thinkers, scholars, literary activists, and others who contribute to shaping the cultural landscape (Siregar, 2023).

Many scholars have provided various definitions of translation and the stages involved in the translation process. However, these definitions generally agree that translation is an attempt to find a semantic equivalent in the target language (TL) for the source language (SL) text. This equivalence is not limited

to linguistic meaning but also includes extralinguistic aspects, namely the overall meaning of the text.

In this regard, Larson in Suryawinata and Hariyanto, states that the translation process involves studying and analyzing words, grammatical structures, and communication contexts in the source language text as well as its cultural setting. The purpose of this process is to comprehend and capture the meaning intended by the source text (Suryawinata, Z., & Hariyanto, S., 2003, p. 40).

After understanding the meaning, it is then re-expressed using words and grammatical structures that are appropriate to the cultural context of the target language. The translation process model proposed by Larson, as described by Said in Suryawinata and Hariyanto (Suryawinata, Z., & Hariyanto, S., 2003, p. 20), can be represented as a sequence of stages beginning with comprehension of the source text and ending with the production of an equivalent target text.

Similarly, Nida and Taber emphasize that cultural differences between societies are often more complex than linguistic differences, making translation particularly challenging in practice, especially when dealing with literary texts rich in cultural depth and complexity (Nida, 1982, p. 30).

Accordingly, translators face multiple challenges when rendering literary works, as their role is not limited to linguistic transfer but also includes preserving the cultural values of the source text while reconstructing them in a way that fits the target culture, achieving a balance between fidelity and readability. Moreover, translator competence is not limited to bilingual ability; it requires deep cultural awareness of both source and target cultures. Literary translation demands high skill in transferring meanings and culturally bound expressions, including idioms and specific cultural structures (Issa, 2024, p. 1421).

This becomes even more critical when applied to Absurd drama, particularly Samuel Beckett's works, where translation turns into a process of cultural adaptation aimed at reconstructing meaning within a different cultural framework.

The impact of cultural adaptation in translation can be illustrated through idiomatic expressions with strong cultural connotations, such as the phrase “carrying coals to Newcastle” in the sentence: *Jane told me that to give Jack money is like carrying coals to Newcastle*. Readers of the source text understand that Newcastle is historically known as a coal-rich city, which makes the act of transporting coal there unnecessary and pointless. Accordingly, the expression conveys an implied meaning referring to doing something redundant or useless, similar to giving money to a wealthy person such as Jack (Issa, 2024, p. 1422).

However, the translator faces a real challenge in transferring this meaning into the target language, as target readers may not share the same cultural background regarding Newcastle. This may result in the loss of the implicit meaning. Therefore, cultural adaptation becomes essential to ensure the accurate transmission of meaning. The expression can thus be rendered into the target language

as:

“Jane told me that giving money to Jack is like selling water in the water-carriers’ alley.”

Within the theatrical context, this issue becomes even more complex in Absurd drama, where meaning is based on implication and semantic emptiness rather than direct expression. For instance, in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the repetitive and circular dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon, which leads to no resolution or logical development, reflects a philosophical sense of absurdity and meaningless waiting. When translating such dialogue into Arabic, the translator faces the challenge of preserving the absurd rhythm and semantic void without over-interpretation. This makes cultural adaptation an essential strategy not only for transferring meaning, but also for recreating the dramatic experience itself.

In this regard, Eggins states that the systemic functional approach explains how language is used to achieve cultural purposes appropriately through the concept of genre (Eggins, 1994, p25).

Speakers rely on cultural background in constructing meaning, and cultural differences lead to variations in interpretation. This highlights the central role of culture in translation, especially in complex theatrical texts such as Absurd drama.

Methodology

This study adopts the descriptive-analytical method to examine cultural adaptation in the translation of Absurd drama, particularly in the works of Samuel Beckett into Arabic. This approach aims to describe and analyze translational phenomena through the comparison of source and target texts, focusing on the semantic and cultural shifts that occur during the translation process.

The study is also based on the cultural approach in Translation Studies, which views translation as a process of cultural reconstruction rather than mere linguistic transfer. Accordingly, it analyzes how translators deal with cultural elements in Beckett's texts and the strategies of cultural adaptation used to render Absurd meaning into Arabic.

Corpus

The corpus of this study consists of Samuel Beckett's Absurd plays, particularly those translated into Arabic. This corpus is suitable for analysis due to its complex linguistic and cultural features that require multiple translation strategies, especially cultural adaptation.

Sample

The sample of the study is Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, one of the most important and complex works of Absurd theatre in terms of linguistic and semantic structure. It was selected due to its minimal language, fragmented dialogue, and static structure based on stasis and futility, which present clear challenges in translation into Arabic, particularly in cultural adaptation.

Research Tools

The study employs comparative textual analysis as its main research tool, comparing the source text with its translation to identify similarities and differences and to reveal cultural adaptation strategies. Contextual analysis is also used to understand the relationship between language and culture in the dramatic text.

Applied Analysis

Cultural Adaptation in Translating Beckett's *Endgame* into Arabic

Example (1): Repetition and Semantic Emptiness

ST (Source Text): "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished."

TT (Target Text): "انتهى، لقد انتهى، يكاد ينتهي، لا بد أنه يكاد ينتهي."

Analysis:

This example demonstrates a clear case of **cultural adaptation through formal retention**. In English, repetition functions as a stylistic marker of absurdity, reflecting circular thought and existential stagnation.

In Arabic, stylistic norms often favor conciseness and avoidance of redundancy. However, the translator deliberately preserves repetition instead of reducing it. This indicates a conscious **resistance to domestication**, allowing the target text to retain the foreign absurd effect. Thus, cultural adaptation here operates by maintaining structural excess as a meaningful feature, ensuring that the absurd experience is reconstructed rather than normalized.

Example (2): Minimalism and Fragmentation

ST: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness."

TT: "لا شيء أكثر إضحاً من التعاسة"

Analysis:

This line illustrates Beckett's paradoxical style, where humor and suffering coexist in a single expression. The statement carries both philosophical and ironic undertones.

The Arabic translation preserves the structure and paradox through a close rendering. The translator adopts a **semantic equivalence strategy**, ensuring that the ironic contradiction remains intact. Cultural adaptation is evident in choosing "التعاسة" as a culturally appropriate equivalent that conveys emotional depth without over-explanation.

Example (3): Dependency and Power Relations

ST:

“Clouv: Do you believe in the life to come?”

Hamm: Mine was always that.”

TT:

كلوف: هل تؤمن بحياة أخرى؟
”هام: حياتي كانت دائماً كذلك.”

Analysis:

This dialogue reflects existential irony and ambiguity. Hamm’s response collapses the distinction between present and future existence, reinforcing absurdist philosophy.

In Arabic, the translation maintains ambiguity without clarification. The translator resists interpreting the line explicitly, applying a **cultural adaptation strategy based on preserving ambiguity**. This is crucial, as any attempt to explain the line would undermine its philosophical openness.

Example (4): Silence and Incomplete Meaning

ST: “We’re not beginning to... to... mean something?”

TT: “ألسنا نبدأ... أن... أن نعني شيئاً؟”

Analysis:

This line demonstrates hesitation, fragmentation, and the breakdown of meaning. The pauses (“...”) are essential in conveying uncertainty and cognitive disruption.

The Arabic translation successfully preserves hesitation through repetition and ellipsis. The translator applies **performative adaptation**, ensuring that pauses and interruptions remain part of the dramatic structure. Cultural adaptation here extends beyond language to include theatrical rhythm and delivery.

Example (5): Absurd Routine

ST: “Every day we do the same thing.”

TT: “كل يوم نفعل الشيء نفسه.”

Analysis:

This sentence encapsulates the repetitive and meaningless routine central to Absurd theatre. It reflects existential monotony and lack of progression.

The Arabic translation retains simplicity and directness, reflecting a **minimalist adaptation strategy**. The translator avoids stylistic embellishment, preserving the flat tone that characterizes Beckett’s language. Cultural adaptation here lies in maintaining the monotony rather than enriching the expression.

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis of selected excerpts from Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* reveals that cultural adaptation plays a central role in translating Absurd drama into Arabic. The findings indicate that the translator does not merely transfer linguistic meaning, but actively reconstructs the dramatic and philosophical experience of the source text within the target culture.

Several key strategies of cultural adaptation have been identified:

- First, **repetition retention** emerges as a dominant strategy. Instead of reducing redundancy to conform to Arabic stylistic norms, the translator preserves repetitive structures to maintain the circular and absurd nature of the dialogue.
- Second, **ambiguity preservation** is consistently applied. The translator avoids explicitation and maintains interpretive openness, which is essential in reflecting Beckett’s existential philosophy.
- Third, **minimalist rendering** is evident in the translation of simple and direct sentences. The translator resists stylistic embellishment, thereby preserving the austerity and monotony characteristic of Absurd theatre.
- Fourth, **performative adaptation** is used to reproduce pauses, hesitation, and fragmentation. These features are not treated as linguistic deficiencies

but

as meaningful theatrical elements that must be retained in the target text.

- Finally, the analysis shows a clear tendency toward **resistance to domestication**, as the translator often preserves the foreign and unconventional features of the source text rather than adapting them to familiar cultural norms.

Discussion

The results confirm that translating Beckett's *Endgame* into Arabic requires a shift from traditional equivalence-based approaches toward a culturally oriented translation strategy. In line with cultural translation theories, the translator's task extends beyond linguistic transfer to include the reconstruction of meaning within a different cultural and philosophical framework.

The prominence of repetition retention challenges conventional Arabic stylistic preferences, suggesting that fidelity in Absurd drama is not achieved through fluency, but through preserving structural and semantic disruption. This aligns with the view that translation should maintain the functional effect of the source text rather than conform to target language norms.

Similarly, the preservation of ambiguity reflects a deliberate rejection of clarity as a translation goal. In many translation contexts, ambiguity is resolved to enhance readability; however, in Absurd theatre, ambiguity is a core element of meaning. Therefore, maintaining it becomes a form of cultural adaptation that respects the epistemological foundations of the source text.

Moreover, the use of performative adaptation highlights the importance of considering drama as a performative text rather than a purely literary one. Elements such as pauses, silence, and fragmentation function as semiotic signs that contribute to meaning production. Their preservation in Arabic demonstrates an awareness of the theatrical dimension of translation.

The findings also indicate that cultural adaptation in this context often overlaps with **foreignization strategies**, where the translator intentionally retains the strangeness of the original text. This suggests that, in translating Absurd drama, successful adaptation does not necessarily mean cultural assimilation, but rather the preservation of difference.



Overall, the study demonstrates that cultural adaptation in translating Beckett's *Endgame* is not a process of simplification or normalization, but a complex negotiation between source text fidelity and target culture intelligibility. The translator operates as both an interpreter and a re-creator, reconstructing the absurd experience within the Arabic linguistic and cultural system.

Concluding Insight

The results and discussion collectively emphasize that translating Absurd drama requires a redefinition of translation priorities. Instead of prioritizing clarity, coherence, and naturalness, the translator must prioritize **ambiguity, fragmentation, and experiential impact**. Cultural adaptation, therefore, becomes a strategy of preserving the unfamiliar, allowing the target audience to engage with the same existential uncertainty that defines Beckett's work.

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