

## The Quality Criteria of Theatre Translation: The Case of Ali Akbar Alizad's Network of Translation of *Waiting for Godot* into Persian<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Theatre is an under-researched area of translation criticism. In criticism, the quality of the work is evaluated, and that quality also affects its reception. Therefore, having quality factors at hand can help practitioners improve the quality of their work, and critics have tangible criteria to assess works based on the actual processes. The purpose of the study is to explore the quality criteria of the stakeholders of a successful theatre translation in Iran. Alizad's translation-performance-after-performance network of *Waiting for Godot* into Persian was analyzed. The study used Actor-Network Theory and Performance Studies as its theoretical framework. Actor-Network Theory allowed 'translation' to be seen as the 'product' of the interaction between human and non-human actors, and Performance Studies allowed the analysis of the process from the perspective of the players involved. To triangulate, semi-structured interviews, paratexts, and extratexts/metatexts were qualitatively analyzed. Seven main quality criteria were identified. The factors together make the quality of the work and may lead to its positive or negative reception. The study's findings show that theatre translation quality is not an isolated feature of texts but an emergent property of the entire process that begins before translation, continues through performance, and can persist after the performance.

**Keywords:** Actor-Network Theory, Criticism, Performance Studies, Quality, Theatre translation

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## 1. Introduction

Theatre translation as a main part of theatre of a society feeds into an important portion of its cultural needs. Conveying the intended meanings to the multiple audiences of a theatre translation depends on the quality of the product. Theatre translation is a collaborative endeavor in which many human and non-human actors, terms borrowed from Actor-Network Theory, interact to form the final intended quality. In fact, in theatre translation, all these actors translate a foreign work into the language of their profession, linguistically, semiotically, sociologically, technically, etc., to shape a unified whole in performance; this product can then continue its life in the aftermath of the performance through critical responses, publication, etc. The final product's positive or negative reception depends on the collaboration of all the actors in the process, which starts with the choice of the text, and continues with translation, performance, and after-performance. Even the spectators are the actors (S. Aaltonen, personal communication, January 13, 2023) who are engaged in the theatre-making whose assessment and feedback affect the performance and the translation and may even cause changes to the product (see Schechner, 2020, p. 58). This signals the difference between drama translation and theatre translation (see, among others, Anderman, 2009; Bittner, 2020; Brodie, 2020). Drama translation is different from theatre translation in that drama translation as a literary genre is to be read on page by readers; while translation of dramatic texts for theatre, known as theatre translation, have multiple audiences. It is first translated to be read and worked on by the diverse theatre practitioners during the rehearsals to reach the performance on stage and be received by the spectators. It may also be published for readers. The whole complex process of theatre-making shapes the quality of the work and transfer of its meaning to the audience. Therefore, product-oriented models of quality assessment for such a collective process (see Abdallah, 2012) are not appropriate. Theatre translation is a collaborative process whose quality is affected by all actors and factors in the process from the beginning to the final stages. Bibliometric evidence

from translation criticism (TC) research shows that case study has been one of the dominant methodological approaches in the field (Huang & Xin, 2020, p. 751). In line with these trends, the present study tries to explore the quality criteria of the human actors (S. Aaltonen, personal communication, January 13, 2023) of a theatre translation known as successful in the Iranian context. It tried to answer the following research question:

- What are the quality criteria for theatre translation as perceived by the stakeholders of Alizad's translation-performance-after performance network of *Waiting for Godot* into Persian that made it a success in the Iranian theatrical context?

## 2. Literature Review

Literature on theatre translation regards "performability" as the yardstick for quality (see Bittner, 2020; Glynn & Hadley, 2020; Mišterová, 2016). Espasa (2000) examines "the changing notion of performability in stage translation" and analyses it "from textual, theatrical, and ideological perspectives" (p. 49). For her, performability is not something to be decided "*a priori*" (p. 49) or "*added a posteriori*" (p. 56) to the text. It is a quality that is worked out in the process of production of playtext and performance through 'collaboration' and 'negotiation' (see p. 58). There are studies on theatre translation that draw on collaborative aspects of theatre translation processes to shape the final intended quality (Baines et al., 2011; Bigliuzzi et al., 2013; Laera, 2011; Ploix, 2019). In her later contribution, Espasa (2017) emphasizes that 'performability', still, is the object of "research and practice of translation for the stage" with the difference that "the debate is no longer on whether performability can be defined, but on how performability is articulated, from different perspectives" (p. 279). Performability is not a 'universal quality' of the text and "what can be offered are simply multiple examples of individual practices" (Bigliuzzi et al., 2013, p. 4). This case study, as one example, explores how quality can be achieved

in theatre translation from the perspectives of human actors in a theatre translation network reputedly successful in Iran. The quality criteria that affect performability, and through that, the reception of a theatre translation. Huang and Xin (2020) found 'drama' as one of the under-researched 'subgenres of literature' on translation criticism (TC) (p. 750). The results of the present study can feed into future research and practice in this area. Huang and Xin (2020) also call for TC research to "move a step forward into the sociological paradigm" (p. 751).

The sociology of translation dates back to the 1990s (see, among others, Buzelin, 2013; Dam & Zethsen, 2009; Sapiro, 2014) where the study of 'translators' and translation 'processes' were called upon (Dam & Zethsen, 2008, pp. 71–72); This set the scene for sociology of translation. It was, however, with the "cultural turn" that a paradigm shift happened in Translation Studies (see Wolf, 2007, pp. 2–3). "Since the "cultural turn" in the 1990s, while the translator's mediation still remains central, Translation Studies has extended study from the micro-textual to the macro socio-cultural context" (Kung, 2009, p. 123). "Early cultural studies of translation made much use of polysystem theory, which was indeed originally developed as a theory of culture and cultural transfer" (Chesterman, 2006, p. 10). Over the next decade, several scholars broadened sociological perspectives for both researchers and practitioners in Translation Studies through their contributions. The contributions include, among others, the introduction of sociological frameworks into TS, comparison of those frameworks, and examining important topics in sociology of translation (see, among others, Bogic, 2010; Buzelin, 2005; Hekkanen, 2009). Theatre translation was no exception. In line with developments in Translation Studies, theatre translation research delved into different aspects of the processes including 'agency' (Albakry, 2020; Brodie, 2018; Čebulj, 2023; Kampert, 2024; Marinetti, 2022), 'censorship' and 'activism' (O'Leary, 2019), 'reception' (Aaltonen, 2020; Marinetti & Rose, 2013; Montanari & Rengakos, 2023), the 'role', 'position' and 'potential' of translators in theatre-making processes (Yang, 2017), translators'

account of their role in the processes (Aaltonen, 2023), and the role of translators feeding national theatrical cultures (Fonseca & Silva-Reis, 2023).

There are also examples of the application of sociological paradigms in theatre translation research. Aaltonen (2013) draws on Actor-Network Theory and Performance Studies to offer an empirical investigation of a theatre translation process into Finnish. Hanna (2016) employs Bourdieusian sociology to explore “the socio-cultural dynamics of Shakespeare Translation in Egypt.” In the context of Iran, Mollanazar and Shabani Rad (2018) apply Bourdieu’s sociology to investigate the “genesis of drama translation” during the Qajar period. Shabani Rad examines the “formation” and “development” of the field of drama translation in the first and second Pahlavi eras (2022, 2025). Aaltonen (2013) argues that “translations in the theatre are not objects of art but products of art worlds, bearing the fingerprints of many subjectivities” (p. 385). Her article inspired the present study; however, it tried to take the idea one step further by investigating the quality criteria of different human actors in a theatre translation process.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Following Aaltonen (2013), the present study employed Actor-Network Theory in combination with Performance Studies. With Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 1996, 2005), translation can be seen as ‘manufacture’, the product of the interaction of human and non-human actors of the process, in relation with each other. Performance Studies, on the other hand, as the ‘sociological approach to performance’, allows for the ‘role-related’ analysis of the process in the time-space sequence of ‘proto-performance’, ‘performance’, and ‘aftermath’ (see Schechner, 2020). The aforementioned theoretical framework was applied to Alizad’s Persian translation of *Waiting for Godot*, reputedly successful in the Iranian theatrical context, to explore the quality criteria for theatre translation as perceived by its stakeholders.

## Method

Saldanha and O'Brien (2014) caution against bias in choosing cases for the study of translation emphasizing the general preconception that they are of lower quality than the originals. Choosing bad translation cases to analyze "seriously undermines the contribution we make to existing knowledge" (p. 215).

The purpose of analyzing the case under study was to uncover the quality criteria of the stakeholders of a theatre translation known as successful in the Iranian theatrical context. As an aftermath study (Aaltonen, 2013) of the process (proto-performance, performance, and aftermath), the ideas of its stakeholders, the players (sourcers, producers, performers, and partakers) (see Schechner, 2020) involved in the process were sought. To do so, interviews were conducted with some human actors of the process who were available and willing to participate in this research. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted online, by phone, or in writing, depending on the participants' personal preferences. Attending the interviews was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. They were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their status and data. The participants were asked open questions about their experience in the process and their quality criteria for theatre translation. The interviews were then transcribed and coded for themes. As "a good way of verifying the reliability of the findings emerging from any one of the sources (triangulation)" and "a way of compensating for the almost inevitable bias emerging from our sources themselves" (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014, p. 217), different sources were used for gathering data for the case study. Content from paratexts and meta/extratexts were also analyzed and coded. The data obtained from the sources were then qualitatively analyzed and classified under related themes.

## Materials

Drama was introduced as a literary genre into Persian literature in the Qajar period through translation and gradually evolved into its theatrical form (see Ahmadi, 2019; Azhand, 2016; Malekpour, 2006; 2007; Mollanazar & Shabani Rad, 2018;

Mostafavi, 2012; Pourhassan, 2018a, 2018b; Sadeghi, 2014; Soleimanirad, 2025; Talimi & Mahmoudi Bakhtiari, 2019). Examining translated dramas since the introduction of drama as a literary genre into Iranian society (see, among others, Bozorgmehr, 2015), it has become clear that Iranian translators, directors, and performers favored *Waiting for Godot* in two different social, cultural, and political eras in Iranian history, before and after the Islamic Revolution.

*Waiting for Godot* is the Irish Noble Prize winner Samuel Beckett's first play. The play was originally written in French as *En attendant Godot* and self-translated by Beckett into English. Hutchings (2005, p. ix) locates *Waiting for Godot* among the three Western plays of all the times regarding the questions they pose and interpretations they provoke. The play was performed for the first time in 1953 in Paris and soon became one of the most influential literary works of the world (Graver, 2004, p. 1). Burt (2008, pp. 43–44) calls *Waiting for Godot* "the watershed 20th-century drama" and believes that the play parallels the influential works in modern poetry and modern fiction.

In Iran, *Waiting for Godot* has been translated, retranslated, and performed several times since its introduction. Before the Islamic Revolution, the work had been translated by a number of translators, including Tahbaz, Imani, and Daryabandari (Bozorgmehr, 2015, pp. 302–303). It has been performed by Rashidi (Bozorgmehr, 2015, p. 421; Hosseini-Mehr, 2021, p. 109). After the Islamic Revolution, the work has been translated by some translators, including Rastegar, Hajimohammadi, and Alizad and performed by some directors, including Rahbani, Alizad, and Ghanizadeh.

The case to be analyzed in this study was Alizad's translation of *Waiting for Godot* into Persian. It has been chosen for different reasons:

- Alizad's translation of *Waiting for Godot* has been translated for performance.
- The translation was performed and edited after the performance.

- Alizad is the translator of the play, which he has directed the translation himself.
- Alizad openly mentions in the book that he has benefited from the questions and suggestions of his actors and assistants in translating and editing the play.

This translation was published in 2002 under Makan Publishing Company. Alizad performed the play (with Leev theatre group) in the Molavi Theatre of Tehran in 2004 and republished the translation. The translation was republished for a third time in 2006 under Makan Publishing Company. The publication's activity soon terminated, but the translation continued its life under another publication. It was published for the first time in 2008 under Bidgol Publishing Company. Under the new publishing company, the book reached its third edition by the sixth print and was republished many times after that. To date (2025), the translation has reached its 34th republication, which is considered a very good record for a published theatre translation. This may also be a sign of its reception in the target culture (Glynn, 2020, p. 4). Additionally, some Iranian newspapers, including *Tose'e* (Rahimi, 2004) and *Iran* (Sohrabi, 2004), have reacted positively to Alizad's translation and performance of the work. Rasooli (2021) also approved the success of this contemporary translation for theatre and its performance. Alizad's translation has also been scrutinized as performable in some academic works including Abdollahi (2007).

### **Instruments, Corpora and Participants**

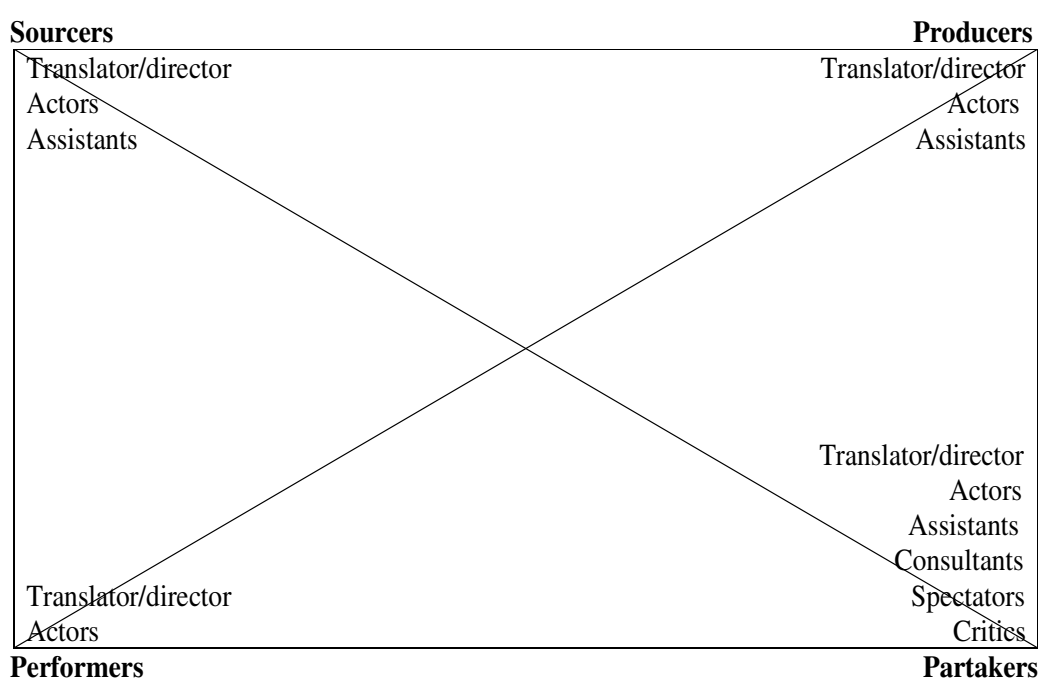
The study applied semi-structured interviews (Glynn, 2020, pp. 4–5) as one of the staples of case study research (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014, p. 220) with some human actors of the network and content analysis of the non-human actors available to the researcher including the "paratexts" and available "extratexts" (Kung, 2009, p. 124) or "metatexts" (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014, p. 218) to explore the quality criteria of theatre translation.

The participants of the study included the human actors involved in the network of translation to performance and afterwards, who were accessible and willing to cooperate. Since the translation was performed relatively recently (20 years before



this research was conducted), some of the stakeholders involved in that process could be located and interviewed. They included among the “four categories of players” Schechner (2020, p. 60) proposes in *Performance Studies*: “sourcers”, “producers”, “performers” and “partakers”. They were interviewed for the purpose. Figure 1, adapted from Schechner (2020), shows the structure of the network of the players/human actors in the process.

**Figure 1. The performance quadrilogue of Alizad’s *Waiting for Godot***



#### 4. Data Analysis

Based on the tenets of Actor-Network Theory and Performance studies, Alizad’s Persian translation of *Waiting for Godot*, reputedly successful in the Iranian theatrical context, was analyzed to explore the quality criteria for theatre translation as perceived by its stakeholders. Different sets of data, including semi-structured interviews, paratexts, and metatexts/extatexts, were scrutinized. The obtained themes were then classified into seven main quality categories of theatre translation:

### **1. Translation quality and strategy**

This category focuses on how the translation is done in terms of faithfulness, readability and performability, etc. As a reaction to different translations of the work, the translator's intangible approach, accompanied by fluency, rhythmic and verbal alignment with the original, appropriate atmosphere-making, combining written and spoken forms, and alignment with contemporary language, all contribute to a translation that is both authentic and theatrically effective. Furthermore, revising the translation over time is a factor that keeps the translation alive; at the same time, it becomes a sign of sustainable development (Abdallah, 2012). The emerged sub-categories are:

- Reacting to different translations of the work as a retranslation.
- Producing translation intangibly (based on what happened during rehearsals and on stage)
- Producing fluent translation
- Creating atmospheres appropriately
- Understanding the situation and using appropriate words to convey meaning
- Applying a contemporary language and up-to-date expressions
- Trying not to promote the language of the original
- Compatibility with the original and faithfulness to the verbal and rhythmic structure of the play
- Combining written and spoken language
- Revising, proofreading, and editing the translation and re-matching it with the original text over time

### **2. Theatricality of translation and performative emphasis**

With this category, the stakeholders emphasized that translation is deeply integrated with theatrical practices and performance. Equally important is the theatrical mentality embedded in the translation, where performative emphasis and

dramaturgical work done by the translator and the group members allow the text to come alive on stage. Translation is tested and refined in a theatrical atmosphere where theory meets action to become complete in performance. The main components are:

- Translating with theatrical mentality
- Translating for performance
- Performative features of translation
- Conducting dramaturgical work
- Testing translation in a theatrical atmosphere
- Action and theory together
- Completing the translation with performance

### **3. Rehearsal and collaboration process**

This emphasizes rehearsal dynamics and collaborative creation. With the translator serving as director, the translation becomes a living product on stage, shaped by intimate teamwork and informed by suggestions from the actors and some experts. This collaboration fosters a balance between creative experimentation and textual faithfulness, with simplicity of the original as the guiding principle. Key aspects are:

- Engaging in Teamwork
- Rehearsing and trying outs
- Enjoying the rehearsal and performance process
- Doing intense workouts
- Being both the translator and director
- Working in an intimate atmosphere
- Considering the suggestions of the actors
- Going beyond the stereotypes

- Inviting some experts in the rehearsals
- Translator/director's understanding and analysis of the text
- Striving to maintain the simple language and staging of the original
- Producing a creative but faithful stage translation

#### **4. Actors and acting**

The next category concentrates on the selection of the actors and their performance quality. The selection of appropriate actors for the roles significantly influences how the translation is realized on stage and received by spectators. Actors play a pivotal role, not just as performers but as creative partners whose curiosity and sensitiveness, improvisational abilities, performing styles, and commitment to the work elevate the performance. Following dimension are included:

- Appropriate actors for the roles
- Creative actors
- Curiosity and sensitiveness of the group members
- Ability of the actors to improvise
- Acting style of the actors
- The work was more important for the actors than anything else

#### **5. Theatrical knowledge and experience**

Stakeholders highlighted the domain-specific knowledge crucial to successful translation and staging. The translator's theatrical knowledge and experience prove essential in maintaining the delicate balance between comedy and tragedy, preserving the complexity of the original while translating it for a new cultural context. Specifically, this involves:

- Theatrical knowledge
- Theatrical experience

- Translating and performing as a comedy while maintaining the tragic implications of the work

## **6. Credibility and professional status**

The translator's credibility, academic standing, and the significance of the original text and the playwright reinforce the translation's critical value. The publisher's credibility also emerged as significant in the number of reprints of the published translation. This category encompasses:

- The importance of Beckett's work as one of the most important plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- The credibility of the translator
- Academic career of the translator
- Credibility of the publication

## **7. Audience reception and impact**

The final category concerns how the play is received critically and publicly. Responses from spectators, critics, readers, and others indicate that the translation achieved artistic success and social relevance. High engagement with the rehearsals, performance, and multiple reprints (34<sup>th</sup> edition at this time) of the translated text reflects the work's impact across diverse audiences. The emerged sub-categories include:

- The social and political implications of the work
- Performances full of spectators
- Strongly connected and following the performance with concentration
- Staying in the hall even during the intermissions
- Spectator brought spectator
- Reception of the critics, journalists, etc.
- Reception of the readers (the number of reprints)

- Good translation and performance as attested by different stakeholders of the process

## 5. Results and Discussion

In the analysis of the data, seven main categories were unveiled as the quality criteria of the stakeholders (the human actors or players) involved in the process. They included the translation quality and strategies of the translator, the performative emphasis, high quality rehearsals, casting choices and acting qualities, theatrical knowledge and experience, and the credibility of the translator/director, the publication, the playwright and the play. All these factors together made the work a success in the Iranian context and influenced audience reception in this process as revealed from the quality criteria of the stakeholders of the process. The criteria show that a work's success is guaranteed by more than the process (from translation to performance) and the translated product. Many criteria also refer to the extra-processual qualities (before the process begins and outside the process itself) that influence the quality and success of the work, including experience and knowledge. This knowledge encompasses not only knowledge of the play (Radfar, 2023), but also theatrical knowledge and experience. Quality elements outside the staging process also include whether the work is published and republished (Glynn, 2020, p. 4), whether it is reflected in the media, and whether it remains positively in the collective memory of theatre in society. In Iran when contents are produced about *Beckett* and *Waiting for Godot*, usually Alizad's work is mentioned as a good and successful work. Moreover, one important point which should be considered is the connectedness of the main theme of the play to the 'Zeitgeist' (Johnston, 2016, p. 239) of the society. *Waiting* is a prevalent theme in the spirit of the Iranian society and the Iranians are always *Waiting* for good things to happen. This criterion is related to the choice of the text for translation and performance that again shows the translator/director's sleight of hand besides his other qualifications in translating and transferring the text into a different theatrical atmosphere. To these can be added the

fact that the work is a retranslation not only in the traditional sense of closeness to the original, the experience accumulated in the previous translations, and the new avenues they provide us with, but as a “highly multifactorial endeavor” (Lanselle, 2020) that contribute to the success of the work. Furthermore, the findings of the study are in line with (Lauscher, 2000), who states that the evaluation criteria of translations should take into account the actual processes under which the products are produced, and Abdallah (2012), who states that in collaborative networks, quality should be decided by all actors together.

## 6. Conclusion

The reason for the analysis of the case was to explore the quality criteria of multiple stakeholders of a theatre translation in Iran which is attested as successful by theatre practitioners, some media, and academic works. Alizad’s theatre translation network of *Waiting for Godot* into Persian was analyzed with the parameters of Actor-Network theory and Performance Studies. Seven main quality criteria were explored that included textual and extra-textual factors affecting the whole process. The criteria uncovered show that it is not only the translated play that makes the work a success. The quality of a theatre translation is determined by many factors, influencing the whole process from the choice of the text to the translation strategy and the collaborative procedure that puts it into action on stage and its aftermath. It is within the convergence of these elements that translation moves beyond textual reproduction to become a transformative act of theatrical creation. The findings carry practical and pedagogical implications for Translation Studies, Theatre Studies, and theatre translation criticism as an interdisciplinary endeavor influenced by both. However, the study does not claim generalizability. It focused exclusively on Alizad’s translation network of *Waiting for Godot* into Persian for different reasons, including its performative basis and its reputation as a successful work in the Iranian theatrical context. The purpose was to analyze the process from translation to performance and afterwards to uncover the quality criteria of its stakeholders for theatre translation. It

should be emphasized that all translations have their own merits and deserve analysis in the appropriate frameworks. However, the small sample size is a limitation of the study. For generalization, more similar or dissimilar cases across different genres and situations should be scrutinized in future research. The findings from a range of case studies can be used for research on different aspects of the networks and for generalizations. Analyses of individual cases of theatre translation to explore the quality criteria for the success or failure of networks can be a valuable research endeavor to improve the quality of theatre translation processes. Analyses of cases to examine the quality criteria affecting the choice of play texts, how different translational decisions are taken during rehearsals, how they evolve into the final text for performance, and the roles of different human and non-human actors in the decision-making processes are among the topics that can be explored.

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