TRANSLATING MUSICAL THEATRE SONGS, OR THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING FAITHFULLY FLEXIBLE AND FLEXIBLY FAITHFUL

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Abstract

The translation of singable texts remains a field that has received little scientific attention, despite an increase in the number of papers published on the subject of song translation since the early 21st century. The translation of musical theatre songs is no exception to the trend, as it is often overlooked by scholars in comparison to that of operatic or pop songs. This has led us to develop what we call the New Pentathlon Tool – a tool for translation and quality assessment – based on Peter Low's Pentathlon Principle and centred on fidelity and flexibility, two closely related concepts which are by no means mutually exclusive in the field of song translation.

Keywords: Song translation; Musical; Theatre; *Pentathlon*.

Résumé

Bien qu'ayant reçu davantage d'attention depuis le début des années 2000, la traduction de textes destinés à être chantés reste un domaine peu étudié en traductologie. La traduction de chansons de comédie musicale ne fait pas exception à la règle puisqu'elle est souvent laissée de côté, contrairement à la traduction de chants d'opéra ou de chansons de variété. De ce constat est né notre souhait de créer ce que nous appelons le *New Pentathlon Tool*, un outil tant analytique que d'aide à la traduction qui s'inspire

du *Pentathlon Principle* de Peter Low et qui s'articule autour des notions de fidélité et de flexibilité, deux notions étroitement liées qui, en traduction de chansons, sont loin de s'exclure mutuellement.

Mots clés : Traduction de chanson; Comédie musicale; Théâtre; *Pentathlon*.

1. Introduction

The translation of singable texts remains a field that has received little scholarly attention, despite an increase in the number of papers published on the subject of song translation since the early 21st century. This lack of attention is notable in reference works where only a few paragraphs are generally devoted to this type of translation. Examples include *A Companion to Translation Studies* by Piotr Kuhiwczak and Karin Littau (2007), *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* by Kirsten Malmkjaer and Kevin Windle (2011), the fourth volume of *Histoire des traductions en langue française* by Bernard Banoun, Isabelle Poulin and Yves Chevrel (2019), and the third edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha (2020).

We believe that the first researcher to explore song translation was the English musicologist Arthur Strangways, who published an article entitled "Song-Translation" in *Music & Letters* in 1921, a journal that he had founded one year earlier. The purpose of his essay was to draw particular attention to the translation of opera songs, which, even at that time, Strangways described as a neglected art (Strangways 1921: 211).

Since then, a substantial number of articles on opera song translation have been published, alongside an array of sources on the art of songwriting. However, compiling an exhaustive list of all the available literature on these subjects is beyond the scope of this research. Instead, we will limit our focus to the following two authors who wrote on the subject, long before Strangways, and whose comments could support those he made in 1921. The first was Richard Wagner, who, in 1852, devoted a few paragraphs of his *Oper und Drama/Opera and Drama* (Wagner 1852/1893) to the translation of opera songs. While Wagner's work does not constitute

a scientific or translational analysis, which is why it was not mentioned earlier, it does offer a personal critique of a practice he openly despised. The second author, Sigmund Spaeth (1915), posed the question "[w]hy translate at all?" during a time when debates about whether operas should be translated and performed in English were particularly contentious.

Since Strangways, other researchers have explored the translation of texts meant to be sung, employing a variety of approaches. Below we provide an overview of these approaches: Henry Drinker (1950) gives a list of criteria that translators should consider when translating songs; Suzanne de Grandmont (1978) examines her own translation of the musical *The Fantasticks* into Canadian French, explaining her efforts to achieve dynamic equivalence between the source and target texts; Andrew Kelly (1992), building off Drinker's work, offers guidelines for translators, emphasising respect for the original text; Peter Low (2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2013) draws on the recommendations of Drinker and Kelly to develop his own translation theory, the Pentathlon Principle, which will be detailed below; Johan Franzon (2005) analyses three Scandinavian translations of the musical *My Fair Lady* addressing the challenges translators encounter when translating songs; Klaus Kaindl (2005) adopts a socio-semiotic approach in his study on the translation of pop songs; Charlotte Bosseaux (2008) focusses on audiovisual translation and studies the French dubbing of a musical episode from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; lastly, in another article, Franzon (2008) examines the strategic and translational choices made by various translators and lyricists, with a particular focus on the concept of singability.

As we can see, research in our field of interest—namely, the translation of texts meant to be sung and performed on a theatre stage—remains limited. This scarcity can be attributed to the fact that the translation of musical theatre songs is frequently overlooked by scholars, unlike the translation of operatic or pop songs (Bosseaux 2011: 136). Among the aforementioned researchers, only two stand out as exceptions to the rule: Grandmont (1978) and Franzon (2005), who strive to objectify their own or others' translation choices.

The scarcity of studies on this subject has been addressed by several authors, including Şebnem Susam-Saraeva (2008b), who reflects on the underlying reasons for the lack of scientific research on translation and music. Similarly, Franzon writes:

> One of the very few musical comedy translators who have commented on their practice, Grandmont (1978: 98) metaphorically compares the practice to the minute labors of a Benedictine monk. Of the few translation theorists who comment on song translation, Nida (1964: 177) discusses the "severe restrictions," while Hervey and Higgins (1992: 138) call libretto translation an "extremely demanding task," on account of having to mind musical and dramatic constraints as well as audience preconceptions as to what a song of a certain type should be like (Franzon 2005: 266).

The publication of the collected works edited by Dinda L. Gorlée (2005), Susam-Saraeva (2008a), Helen Julia Minors (2013) and Franzon *et al.* (2021), along with the monographs written by Susam-Saraeva (2015) and Lucile Desblache (2019), demonstrates a growing academic interest in the field of song translation. Additionally, two recent books stand out: *Translating for Singing: The Theory, Art and Craft of Translating Lyrics* by Ronnie Apter and Mark Herman (2016), and *Translating Song: Lyrics and Texts* by Low (2017). These three authors are currently the only translators to have written books entirely dedicated to their own methodological approaches. However, the scope of these monographs differs: Apter and Herman focus on the translation of opera songs, while Low examines the translation of popular songs. Apter and Herman provide practical advice on strategies and tactics for translating singable texts, whereas Low introduces a distinct translation theory—the Pentathlon Approach—and its corresponding model, the Pentathlon Principle. This principle serves as the foundational concept for our present research.

2. Low's Pentathlon Principle: a matter of flexibility

Although Low's theory was originally developed for the translation of popular songs, its universality allows it to be applicable to other types of

song translations, including the translation of musical theatre songs. But what exactly does this theory entail, and how is it used?

Through his Pentathlon Principle (henceforth referred to as PP or pentathlon), Low draws an analogy between song translators and Olympic pentathletes, who compete in five distinct events. Translators, like these pentathletes, must consider five key criteria when translating a song: singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm, and rhyme. As with a pentathlon, the quality of the performance (or translation) is judged by the overall score (or the level of fidelity) awarded for all five events (or criteria), even though achieving a perfect score in each event is not required to win a medal (Low 2005: 192). Low emphasises that balancing these criteria:

> can assist translators both in their overall strategic thinking and also in their microlevel decisions—in the practical task of choosing which of several possible words or phrases is the best option overall (Low 2005: 191).

This pursuit of balance requires translators to make trade-offs and compromises, leading Low to argue that flexibility is essential for achieving a well-rounded translation (Low 2017: 80).

Low's emphasis on flexibility sets his theory apart from the more prescriptive theories or approaches developed by other scholars mentioned in the introduction, such as Strangways (1921), Drinker (1950), and Kelly (1992). Unlike Low, these researchers prescribe extremely rigid rules that Low likens to straitjackets, and which it is exceedingly difficult to "wiggle out of" (Low 2008: 5-6). To counter these overly restrictive frameworks, Low ensures that flexibility is an inherent feature of his PP. Regarding this emphasis on flexibility, Low states:

> When translating a song, we should not *a priori* consider any one feature sacrosanct and to be rendered to perfection. To consider anything sacrosanct *a priori* […] is to accept a constraint which may lead to great losses. By tolerating some deviations – small margins of compromise in several areas – one can more easily avoid serious translation loss in any single area […] The more margins of compromise that are available, the greater chance of a successful translation (Low 2003a: 101-102).

In simple terms, allowing ourselves a certain degree of flexibility or leeway during the translation process enhances the likelihood of producing a faithful translation.

This concept of flexibility naturally leads to the second central theme of this study: fidelity. Given the numerous constraints involved in translating singable texts, it is quite appropriate to ask ourselves the following question: how can we maintain some flexibility in our translation choices without compromising fidelity and, in doing so, avoid validating the often cited Italian saying *traduttore, traditore*?

3. The New Pentathlon Tool, or the importance of being faithfully flexible and flexibly faithful

As discussed above, five constraints characterise the translation of songs: singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm, and rhyme. In the context of translating musical theatre and opera songs, Low (2017: 110) proposes the existence of a sixth criterion (or a sixth constraint), which he terms stage effectiveness or dramatic performability. This criterion recognises that staging is an integral part of the translation process since it interacts dynamically with the sung text, allowing the two elements to reflect and enhance one another. The inclusion of this sixth criterion transforms the original pentathlon into a hexathlon.

The very essence of these various constraints challenges the concept of fidelity in translation. But what does this concept mean in translation studies?

Although widely used by translation theorists and practitioners, the concept remains fundamentally ambiguous (Bogacki 2000: 30), paradoxical (Bataillon 1991: 21), and even contradictory (Cary 1963: 21). The ambiguity is further compounded by its characterisations as a concept that can be adapted as required (Balliu 1997: 56). Fidelity is, therefore, a semantically unstable concept (Delisle 2021: 134), so much so that Paul Chavy openly

expresses his frustration when he writes that "[t]out traducteur prétend être fidèle, mais fidèle à quoi ?"[1] (Chavy 1984: 119).

Translation experts do not agree on a single, universal definition of fidelity; rather, each offers their own interpretation of the concept. For example, while Amparo Hurtado Albir (1990) examines fidelity through the lens of meaning, which she considers an invariant in translation, Umberto Eco defines fidelity as:

> l'engagement à identifier ce qu'est pour nous le sens profond du texte, et l'aptitude à négocier à chaque instant la solution qui nous semble la plus juste (Eco 2003/2010: 466).[2]

Similarly, Christian Balliu emphasises the importance of meaning, defining fidelity as follows:

> [Q]ualité d'une traduction qui, en fonction de sa finalité, respecte le plus possible le sens attribué au texte de départ par le traducteur et dont la formulation en langue d'arrivée est conforme à l'usage (Balliu 2005: 19).[3]

Nicolas Froeliger (2007) explores fidelity to the form of the source text, highlighting the effort to balance fidelity to the content and fidelity to the form; finally, Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie (2014) describe a faithful translation as one that closely resembles the original, whether "in terms of either its literal adherence to source meaning or its successful communication of the 'spirit' of the original" (Shuttleworth & Cowie 2014: 57).

While this selection of definitions is far from exhaustive, it is reasonable to conclude that, despite the diversity of interpretations—often as numerous as the translators themselves—the core principle in ensuring fidelity to the source text lies in the transfer of meaning.

Low emphasises the significance of meaning in song translation, making 'sense' one of his top criteria. He argues that a target text that

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1. "Every translator claims to be faithful, but faithful to what?"
2. "[…] our commitment to determine the text's deepest meaning, and our ability to negotiate at all times the option that appears most suitable to us."
3. "The quality of a translation which, according to its purpose, respects as closely as possible the meaning given to the source text by the translator and whose formulation in the target language is idiomatic."

"bear[s] no semantic relation with the [source text]" (Low 2005: 194) cannot be considered a true translation. However, the unique constraints of song translation require translators to adopt a high degree of semantic flexibility. These necessary semantic adjustments, aimed at balancing the five criteria, often place complete faithfulness to the original meaning in jeopardy. Consequently, the primary objective in song translation is to create a target text that is singable and conveys a meaning like that of the source text, despite the inherent challenges posed by these constraints.

Achieving this goal is supported by the flexibility inherent in the PP, which aims to balance the five criteria. The emphasis on balance is not unique to Low's framework; it is central to Froeliger's definition of fidelity and to Eco's concept of translation as a negotiation. According to Eco, translation is fundamentally a process of negotiation much like Low's search for balance. It is through these negotiations, made by translators throughout the translation process, that the target text can remain faithful to the source text.

3.1. Fidelity

In contemporary translation studies, the use of the concept of fidelity—or faithfulness—may appear contentious. Before proceeding to the next section, we would like to briefly explain why we have chosen to adopt the term fidelity in our research rather than other concepts, such as equivalence, which has also been at the centre of many debates since its emergence in the 1950s, or more recent terms, such as the principle of loyalty (Nord 1989). While there are numerous reasons to justify this choice of terminology, each warranting a more detailed exploration, we will limit ourselves to discussing one key reason here to avoid unnecessarily lengthening this essay and deviating from its primary focus.

As discussed above, we acknowledge the controversial and historical background of the concept of fidelity in translation studies. However, we firmly believe that, on the one hand, it is the most suitable and appropriate term for the development of our argument and, on the other hand, it is a concept that not only can be defined but would also benefit from being

contextualised within a specific framework rather than relying on a universal definition. We argue that fidelity possesses a deeply protean nature, adapting—or rather, its definition adapting—to the specific translation context in which it is applied. Therefore, rather than dismissing fidelity as outdated, old-fashioned, or problematic, we propose to reinterpret it by offering a revised definition (cf. Section 3.2.).

To develop our concept of fidelity, which is grounded in Low's theory, we have drawn on and synthesised ideas and approaches from several prominent translation theorists. As a result, our definition of fidelity incorporates multiple theoretical perspectives and is not confined to the traditional (socio)linguistic approach. These perspectives include the concept of norms in translation (Chesterman 1997; Toury 2012), the interpretive approach (Seleskovitch & Lederer 2014), and the functionalist approach and *skopos* theory (Vermeer & Reiss 1984). Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of our work—addressing plurisemiotic texts—requires us to integrate concepts from fields such as semiotics and performance studies, among others.

Fidelity, as we conceive it, must not be understood through the lens of literalism or word-for-word translation—an unattainable goal when translating musical theatre songs. It is crucial to remember the paradox of fidelity in translation, which is particularly relevant in our context: one must be unfaithful to the source text to produce a faithful translation in the target language. As Hurtado Albir aptly notes, "une traduction qui rend fidèlement chaque mot restituera rarement le sens de l'original"[4] (Hurtado Albir 1990: 21).

Fidelity, as we interpret and link it to the concept of flexibility, should be understood as synonymous with what we term free-constrained translation. While this phrase may initially appear contradictory, we believe it encapsulates the balance translators strive for—the liberties they choose to take in their work are far from illusory. In essence, this free-constrained translation, or faithful-flexible translation, necessitates making decisions

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4. "A faithful word-for-word translation will seldom convey the meaning of the original text."

that are neither overly servile nor excessively free but are instead carefully considered and negotiated. These choices must account for the specific constraints of the source text to produce a translation with the same *skopos* as the original; a text that not only conveys the source text's meaning but that can also be sung effectively in the target language.

3.2. *The New Pentathlon Tool*

The conflicting interpretations of the notion of fidelity within translation studies, combined with the absence of a specific definition tailored to the context of translating musical theatre songs, have led us to propose our own definition of this concept in this particular framework, by correlating it with Low's PP theory. Below we present a schematic representation of this concept:
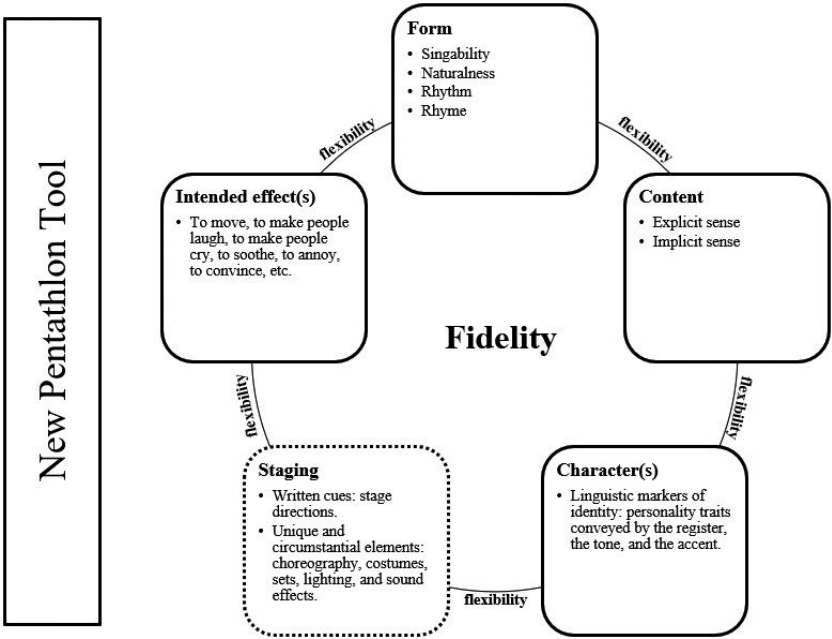
Figure 1. The New Pentathlon Tool diagram

The New Pentathlon Tool (NPT), as we call it, can be viewed as an alternative version of Low's PP. While it adopts the five criteria of the PP, it presents them differently and incorporates five distinct types of fidelity. However, the NPT is not a version 2.0 intended to replace Low's PP. On the contrary, the two tools are complementary, with their primary distinction lying in their respective fields of application: the PP is designed for the use of translation of popular songs, whereas the NPT is tailored specifically for translating musical theatre songs.

The NPT can be employed during two critical phases of the translation process: upstream and downstream. It thus serves a dual function: as a translation tool during the upstream phase and as a quality assessment tool in the downstream phase. When employed, especially during the upstream phase, the NPT functions as a flexible instrument with its criteria either adjusted, simplified or made more complex to align with the specific characteristics of the source text.

It is important to note that the NPT presented here is currently in a testing phase, as one of the primary objectives of our research is to assess the relevance of the five criteria that constitute this tool. Consequently, revisions may be necessary as our research progresses; we may need to rename, replace, or expand some of these criteria.

We will now examine the diagram in detail to define each of its components. As shown, sense is not the only criterion that influences our interpretation of fidelity. Other elements, or criteria, are equally significant. Like Low's PP, the NPT comprises five criteria—or more specifically five types of fidelity: fidelity to the form, the content, the effects, the characters, and the staging. Each of these elements is defined individually below.

3.2.1. Fidelity to the form

Fidelity to the form refers to the stylistic choices made in the source text. It encompasses four of the five criteria of Low's original PP: singability, naturalness, rhythm, and rhyme.

3.2.2. *Fidelity to the content*

Fidelity to the content encompasses the remaining criterion from Low's PP—sense—which we have divided into two components to make it more manageable. This type of fidelity pertains to the meaning conveyed by the source text, whether explicit or implicit.

These first two types of fidelity will not be elaborated on here, as the five criteria defining them have already been thoroughly discussed in various published sources. For deeper understanding, we recommend consulting Low's essays, as well as his book *Translating Song.* These references are listed in the bibliography.

3.2.3. *Fidelity to the effects*

Fidelity to the effects involves analysing and interpreting the intentions of the author of the source text. For example, do they want to make the audience laugh or cry, or do they want to disturb or shock them, etc.? It is worth noting that a single text may encompass multiple effects, some of which may even conflict, depending on the interpretation.

One justification for including this criterion in our concept of fidelity is articulated by Hurtado Albir, who writes that:

> [l]a notion d'effet est importante dans la théorie de la traduction et dans l'analyse de la fidélité car le traducteur doit toujours tenir compte de l'effet produit par le texte original chez le récepteur dans la langue de départ, pour produire avec sa traduction le même effet chez son destinataire (Hurtado Albir 1990: 77).[5]

Evaluating fidelity to the effects during the upstream phase—whether during the author's creation of the original text or the translator's rendering of it—poses significant challenges. How can authors or translators predict whether their work will make spectators laugh or cry if it has not yet been

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5. "The concept of effect plays a crucial role in translation theory and fidelity assessment because translators must always take into account the effect the source text has on its original audience to ensure that their translation will have a similar effect on the target audience."

performed in front of an audience? In reality, both authors and translators have limited control over the effects their work will have on an audience, as a theatrical performance is fundamentally "an interactive process, which relies on the presence of spectators to achieve its effects" (Bennett 1997: 67). Moreover, it is "always open to immediate and public acceptance, modification, or rejection by those people it addresses" (*ibid.*: 67-68). As such, the intended effect of a text—whether original or translated—may vary depending on the audience, changing from one city to another, one continent to another, and across languages and cultures. This variability helps explain why shows, whether original or translated, are often revised during previews—the series of performances preceding the official premiere—to adapt and refine the intended effects based on audience reception.

This criterion can, therefore, only be assessed hypothetically during the initial stage of the process.

3.2.4. Fidelity to the characters

Fidelity to the characters means ensuring that the idiosyncratic features of the character(s) for whom the source text was written are preserved in the translation. These features include linguistic markers that define a character's identity, such as their register, tone, or accent.

Various authors have emphasised the importance of fidelity to the characters, even if they use different terminology to describe it. Gunilla Anderman, for example, discusses the concept of character voice in her book *Europe on Stage* (2005). She argues that each character in a play possesses a unique voice shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds. According to Anderman (2005: 28-29), preserving these distinct voices in the translation is crucial to conveying the original author's intentions as faithfully as possible. Neglecting to respect these voices, she contends, would result in unfaithfulness to the characters. This type of fidelity is also acknowledged by Grandmont (1978: 99-100), as well as by Apter and Herman (2016: 143-156), who dedicate an entire chapter of their book *Translating for Singing* to it.

Being faithful to the characters is not solely the responsibility of translators; it is a principle that many prominent figures in American musical theatre have also emphasised in their creative processes. For example, John Kander and Fred Ebb assert that they always strive to let "the character be true to himself or herself" (2003: 41); similarly, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II explained that they had to write "in their words, not ours" (quoted in Lunden 2000) when creating dialogue and lyrics for Laurey and Curly, the protagonists in their play *Oklahoma!*; Stephen Sondheim (2010: 48) also reflects on this principle, admitting his failure to remain faithful to the character of Maria in his lyrics for the song "I Feel Pretty" from *West Side Story*. He acknowledges that he gave Maria words that were far too complex—ones an uneducated Puerto Rican girl would not realistically know—thereby undermining the authenticity of her character.

These various remarks highlight one of the principles of musical theatre songwriting: the importance of staying true to the authenticity of the characters. This principle is equally critical for translators to uphold during the translation process, as emphasised by Apter and Herman, who state that translators "should do no less" (Apter & Herman 2016: 156).

3.2.5. *Fidelity to the staging*

This final criterion corresponds to what Low refers to as stage effectiveness or dramatic performability.

Fidelity to the staging is formed both by fixed written cues—commonly known as stage directions—and, in our own translation approach and process, by the interplay of various staging elements such as choreography, costumes, sets, lighting, and sound effects, as well as the way the songs are performed.

Numerous sources in the field of theatre translation highlight the inherent connection between the performed text and its staging, emphasising the importance of preserving this connection in the translation. As Anderman writes,

> [w]hen performed on stage, […] the words spoken constitute only one element of a theatrical production, along with lighting, sets, costumes and music. Here, because it forms part of an integrated whole, greater demands are also placed on the translation with respect to its 'performability' (Anderman 2011: 92).

Alluding both to the concept of performability and to Patrice Pavis' *verbo-corps* theory, as outlined in his book *Le théâtre au croisement des cultures* (1990), Florence Zhang adds the following:

> [L]a traduction du texte théâtral doit se coordonner avec la future mise en scène. Ces notions d'oralité et de gestualité résument en partie la théâtralité du texte dramatique, et constituent le vrai enjeu de la traduction. Préserver la théâtralité de l'original, c'est la tâche primordiale du traducteur (Zhang 2006: 137).[6]

This correlation between staging and the performed text is crucial to consider when translating a play or, in our case, a musical.

In the NPT diagram, this fifth and final type of fidelity is represented by a dotted line. Unlike the other four types of fidelity, it is not unique nor fixed but is instead deeply intertwined in existing productions. It is important not to forget that the staging of a show, while not unique, is even less immutable, offering some leeway in translation choices. As Pavis observes, "un texte, original ou traduit, [peut] se prêter à des mises en scène différent[e]s"[7] (Pavis 1990: 145). The dotted line circling this criterion thus symbolises the degree of freedom possible within this aspect of fidelity.

3.2.6. Flexibility

The final element in the NPT diagram is flexibility. This concept, highly valued by Low, is equally significant in the translation of musical theatre

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6. "The translation of a dramatic text must correspond to its future staging. The notions of orality and gestuality somewhat characterise the theatricality of dramatic works, and represent the main challenge for translators. Therefore, their primary objective is to preserve the theatricality of the original text."

7. "A text, whether it is the original version or a translation, can be staged in many different ways."

songs. Flexibility acts as the unifying factor for all the criteria within the NPT and plays a critical role in maintaining an appropriate balance among them. In essence, flexibility is what enables a certain level of fidelity to be achieved across all aspects of the translation process.

In addition to the pentathlon metaphor, Low employs an archery metaphor to illustrate the most crucial aspect of a flexible translator's task: "[Y]ou don't need to hit the bull's-eye, you do have to hit the board" (Low 2017: 81).

This quote ties in well with the structure of the NPT diagram, which resembles a target. At the bull's-eye lies the word 'fidelity', representing the ideal of a translation that is perfectly faithful to the original text. The surrounding space symbolises the realm where flexibility is paramount, allowing for the compromises and adjustments necessary in song translation. In this framework, the centre of the target symbolically represents a translation that achieves 100% fidelity or, in the context of Low's pentathlon metaphor, a translation that earns the highest possible score across all five criteria.

However, as previously discussed, achieving a perfect score in each of the criteria is by no means necessary to win the medal. In fact, we can go even further and assert that the pursuit of absolute fidelity to the source text is neither advisable nor feasible. In the field of song translation, the hope that our dart will hit the bull's-eye is nothing more than an unattainable ideal—a utopian goal. Moreover, as Phyllis Zatlin explains, "[t]he servitude of total fidelity is undesirable […] even if it were possible, it would yield unstageworthy results" (Zatlin 2005: 5-6). In our context, this means that aiming for a perfect score in each criterion is incompatible with fully respecting the *skopos* of the original text—creating a translation that is also singable in the target language.

Thus, we can conclude that in the translation of musical theatre songs, flexibility and fidelity are not mutually exclusive components. They do not repel each other like identical poles of two magnets; instead, they coexist and complement each other in the translated text.

3.3. Link(s) between the NPT criteria and the principle of prioritisation

One final, yet crucial, issue to address is the potential connection between the NPT criteria and the principle of prioritisation.

To assume that these five criteria are all independent from one another within a given song would be a serious mistake. Depending on the source text, two or more criteria may be linked, either closely or loosely.

It is therefore essential to recognise not only the existence of these interconnections, but also the possible losses—whether semantic or otherwise—that certain translation choices might entail. While some of these losses may be necessary or unavoidable and have only minimal impact on the overall balance of the NPT, others could result in far more significant and potentially detrimental consequences.

We hope that the following example will clearly illustrate the importance of recognising potential links between the NPT criteria during the translation process. The example should sufficiently demonstrate why translators must remain mindful of these connections to ensure a balanced and effective translation.

The song "I Guess This Is Goodbye," from the first act of Sondheim and James Lapine's *Into the Woods*, will serve as an example. Below are the lyrics (Sondheim 2011:66):

(1)   I guess this is goodbye, old pal.
        You've been a perfect friend.
        I hate to see us part, old pal.
        Someday I'll buy you back.
        I'll see you soon again.
        I hope that when I do,
        It won't be on a plate.

This song is sung by Jack, a character taken from the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale *Jack and the Beanstalk*, to his best friend, Milky White the cow, when the two of them are forced to part ways.

As you might have noticed, this song is devoid of rhymes. Sondheim explains why: "It seemed fitting that innocent, empty-headed Jack be so dim-witted that he couldn't even rhyme" (Sondheim 2011: 66). Sondheim's

lyrics reflect a key convention of musical theatre songwriting, which Richard Andrews describes as follows: "[C]omplex rhyming implies education, so the level of sophistication should be dictated by the character who is singing" (Andrews 1997: 99). In other words, the absence of rhyme can underscore a character's lack of education, as well as the use of assonance and alliteration, categorised as imperfect rhymes (Woolford 2012: 285), or the exclusive use of poor rhymes (Sondheim 2010: 48)—two words having only a single phoneme in common.

Since Jack is unquestionably not the most intelligent character, having him sing a rhyme-filled song would have been a choice incompatible with his voice, to borrow Anderman's terminology. While adhering to this song-writing rule is the original lyricist's responsibility, it is also a principle that a translator must uphold, as will be discussed further below.

Beyond Jack's intellectual limitations, there is another possible explanation for the absence of rhymes in this song. Although purely hypothetical, it is nonetheless logical: Jack's profound sadness is so overwhelming that he does not feel like rhyming. This emotional state might justify the simplicity of the lyrics, emphasising the character's raw and unfiltered expression of grief.

This example, deliberately chosen, illustrates the boundaries—perhaps even moral—that translators must consider regarding the degree of flexibility they are prepared to tolerate in their work. It underscores the importance of evaluating, prior to beginning the translation process, the potential consequences of excessive flexibility (or too few restrictions) on the overall balance of the NPT. Equally important is the need to prioritise the five criteria to identify where, and to what extent, some degree of leeway might be acceptable, however minimal. As Golomb aptly observes, "never in a work of art is everything equally significant" (Golomb 2005: 136).

This prioritisation of the criteria, and the resulting strategic translation choices made by the translator, are guided by the characteristics of the text to be translated. Since each source text is unique, "it is the specificity of each individual song which should guide the choice of strategy," as Low (2005: 200) points out. This careful analysis of the characteristics of the

source text, combined with the prioritisation of the criteria, enables translators "to make the necessary trade-offs in the [most] optimal way" (Meller & Costa 2020: 312).

When applied to the translation of the song "I Guess This Is Goodbye," this prioritisation principle suggests placing greater emphasis on two criteria: fidelity to the characters and one of the sub-criteria of the fidelity of form, namely, rhyme. Preserving the essential connection between these two elements is crucial to retaining the implicit meaning conveyed by the absence of rhymes, specifically the fact that Jack is not the most perceptive or intelligent boy. Therefore, it is paramount that the translated version of this song should also be devoid of rhymes to maintain this key aspect of the character's portrayal.

Below is a list of the many consequences that would arise if the translation of the song included rhymes. The presence of rhyming words would not only compromise the sub-criterion of rhyme, but would also undermine the character criterion. Furthermore, it would destabilise the sub-criterion of implicit sense.

We believe that such a choice would result in a translation that is profoundly unbalanced. Its overall degree of fidelity would need to be re-evaluated, recalculated, and adjusted, as the losses incurred from this decision would significantly disrupt the balance among the NPT criteria.

We should also emphasise the importance of maintaining fidelity to the effects, particularly given the highly comic nature of the last line ('It won't be on a plate'). This humour is an essential feature of the song and should also be found in the translated version. Ideally, the humour should be placed in the same place it appears in the original text to retain the intended comedic timing and impact within the performance.

4. The NPT in use

For this last section, we turn to the practical use of the NPT. To illustrate this, we will use the NPT criteria to analyse two excerpts from translations we have carried out, both drawn from the corpus we are currently working on. These excerpts are taken from the 2015 London revival of the musical

Gypsy, with the original lyrics sourced from the booklet included in the sleeve of the official album of the show (cf. Sondheim & Styne 2015).

4.1. Gypsy

The musical *Gypsy* premiered in 1959 and is based on the memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee, a renowned American stripper. It was created by three of the most influential figures in American musical theatre: Arthur Laurents (author of the book), Stephen Sondheim (lyricist), and Jule Styne (composer).

Set during the interwar years, the story unfolds against the backdrop of the decline of vaudeville in the United States. The narrative follows Rose, an overbearing mother, as she embarks on a cross-country journey to pursue fame and stardom for her two daughters, June and Louise.

Below, we analyse our translations of the songs "Mr Goldstone" and "Dainty June and Her Farmboys."

4.1.1. Mr Goldstone

This song appears in the sixth scene of the first act and is set in the apartment rented by Rose and her partner Herbie. Rose is laying the breakfast table when Herbie enters, accompanied by a Mr Goldstone, whom he introduces to Rose. Goldstone works for the Orpheum Circuit, a prominent vaudeville circuit, and represents a significant opportunity—he could be the person to launch June, Rose's youngest daughter, into stardom.
Here are the first two verses of the song:

(2)   Have an egg roll, Mr. Goldstone,
       Have a napkin, have a chopstick, have a chair!
       Have a sparerib, Mr. Goldstone–
       Any sparerib that I can spare,
       I'd be glad to share!

       Have a dish, have a fork,
       Have a fish, have a pork,
       Put your feet up, feel at home.
       Have a smoke, have a Coke,
       Would you like to hear a joke?

> I'll have June recite a poem!

And here is our translation into French:

> Tenez, un nem, Monsieur Goldstone.
> V'là une assiette, des baguettes et puis une chaise !
> Un caramel, Monsieur Goldstone…
> Une p'tite escalope milanaise
> Ou p't'être une merguez ?
>
> Un p'tit plat, une fourchette,
> Un coca, une serviette,
> Une p'tite tranche de mortadelle.
> Un kumquat, une tomate,
> Dénouez donc votre cravate.
> June chant'ra une ritournelle !

It was the distinctive features of this song that led us, at the outset of the translation process, to prioritise the NPT criteria as follows: the two most important criteria are fidelity to the staging and fidelity to the form.

First, let us focus on the staging criterion. A key feature of this song is the strong relationship between the staging and the lyrics; a connection that has been consistently preserved across productions, from the original 1959 version to the most recent iterations. In this regard, the DVD of the official recording of the 2015 production (cf. Price 2015) serves as an invaluable resource.

This connection is brought to life on stage in the following way: whenever Rose mentions the name of an object or food, she physically grabs it and gives it to Goldstone. As the scene progresses, Goldstone becomes increasingly overwhelmed and confused by the flurry of items being thrust upon him.

It is essential to preserve the connection between the original lyrics and the staging in our translation, assuming the director of the French production intends to retain this element. We have therefore ensured that our translation included a similar list of various foods and objects that Rose could offer to Goldstone.

One key translation choice directly impacts the type of suit or outfit that Goldstone wears. Specifically, the penultimate line ('Dénouez donc votre cravate') can only be sung if Goldstone wears a tie.

Next, we consider fidelity to the form, focussing specifically on the sub-criteria of rhythm and rhyme. For this short analysis, we will not address the sub-criteria of naturalness and singability. On the one hand, we believe that our translation is idiomatic enough to make further evaluation of the naturalness criterion unnecessary. On the other hand, assessing singability requires input from a professional singer, which falls outside the current scope of our research. Such an evaluation will be conducted once our translations have been finalised. For now, the elisions in our translation, represented by apostrophes, are only provisional.

One final comment before continuing our analysis: it is crucial to recognise that two types of constraints govern the way our translations are created. We distinguish between variable constraints, which differ from one source text to another and will be discussed below, and fixed constraints, which we adhere to consistently. Fixed constraints include maintaining the exact same number of syllables between the source and target sentences, as well as preserving rhymes, provided that rhyme is a distinct feature of the original text. As a result, in all our translations, we maintain a baseline level of fidelity to the criterion of form. This decision stems from one of our primary objectives: producing singable French translations. A complete disregard for the form criterion would make it impossible to uphold the original *skopos* of the text.

Returning to our analysis, Rose is meeting the man who has the potential to change June's life, and her overwhelming joy is palpable. This state of mind is conveyed through a sustained rhythm and rapid speech delivery, which mirror her excitement and inability to contain herself. Additionally, her exuberance is reinforced by the succession of rhymes, whether they appear within a line or at its end.

Given the emphasis placed on the sub-criteria of rhythm and rhyme in this song, we implemented a series of constraints in our translation process to preserve equivalence with the original text in these aspects.

These constraints served as safeguards against excessive freedom, which could have disrupted the balance of these critical sub-criteria. Specifically, the variable constraints adhered to in translating "Mr Goldstone" included maintaining the original rhyme scheme, preserving both mentions of the noun 'Mr Goldstone,' retaining sonic elements such as assonance and alliteration, and, crucially, adhering to the syllable count within enumerated items (notably those in the first, second, and fourth sentences of the second verse).

We have, however, allowed ourselves a reasonable degree of flexibility regarding the rhythm criterion, particularly in relation to the structure of certain original lyrics. Specifically, we chose not to render every occurrence of the verb 'have' into French, despite its repetition contributing to the song's rhythmic identity. This decision was made to avoid unnecessary complexity in translating phrases and sentences with no more than three syllables. Another factor influencing this choice was the performative aspect of the verb 'have,' which, in addition to being uttered by Rose, is accompanied by a gesture. In this context, the verb operates as both a spoken element and a physical action, with each conveying the same meaning. Consequently, it appeared both justifiable and acceptable to omit one of these elements in the translation. Given that a gesture can function independently as a carrier of meaning, it does not necessarily require a verbal accompaniment to be understood by the audience.

4.1.2. Dainty June and Her Farmboys

This song, performed by June, appears in the eighth scene of the first act. A brief excerpt is provided below. The song is a newly devised vaudeville number created by Rose, serving as a replacement for the earlier "Baby June and Her Newsboys" number. Similar to Jack's interaction in "I Guess This Is Goodbye," June addresses her companion, a cow named Caroline, referenced in the verse by the pronoun 'she'. Beneath the cow costume is Louise.

Here is the selected excerpt:

(3) She likes to moo in the moonlight
     When the moody moon appears.
     And when she moos in the moonlight,
     Gosh, it's moosic to my ears–
     She's so moosical!

And our translation into French:

     Elle r'mue sa queue et fait meuh meuh
     Dès qu'elle meuh voit. J'suis sous l'charme.
     Et oh mon Dieu, à chaque meuh meuh,
     J'ai les yeux tout pleins de larmes.
     C'est si meuh-lodieux !

Beyond implicit adherence to the fixed formal constraints—which will not be revisited in this section—the primary NPT criterion warranting further consideration in the translation process is fidelity to the effects.

The original element that must be reproduced in our translation is the comic effect derived from various plays on sound. This feature, which encapsulates the essence of the song, is therefore given the highest priority. The humour in the original text is rooted in the repeated occurrence of the sound /mu:/ (pronounced 'moo'), evoking the cry of a cow in English. To replicate this effect in the French translation, we employed a series of words containing the sounds /mø/ or /ø/ (pronounced 'meu' and 'eu' in French), which mimic the sound a cow makes in French. Additionally, we modified the spelling—and consequently the pronunciation—of certain words in the translated version, mirroring the wordplay found in the original text with terms like 'moosic' and 'moosical'. For example, the French pronoun 'me' and the adjective 'mélodieux' are rendered as 'meuh' and 'meuh-lo-dieux', respectively.

It is worth noting that we also gave consideration to the character criterion and, to a lesser extent, the staging criterion. Altering Caroline's species was deemed impractical for several reasons: 1) given the farm setting, Caroline must remain a farm animal; 2) she must be naturally large enough to allow Louise to fit under the costume; and 3) her cry must correspond to a sound familiar in French, making it easier to integrate into the translation. Furthermore, Caroline is referenced multiple times throughout

the show. Changing her species would have necessitated additional and significantly more complex staging adaptations.

A final question remains: why did we choose to somewhat deprioritise the content criterion? While our translation remains largely faithful to this criterion—retaining a narrative in French that aligns with the lexical field of emotions—we could have produced a version conveying an entirely different meaning without compromising the overall balance of the NPT. The rationale behind this decision is straightforward but requires a more detailed examination of the show's overall structure.

Gypsy belongs to the genre of integrated musicals, a form in which songs serve to advance the plot and develop characters. This genre emerged with the creation of *Oklahoma!* in 1943 by Rodgers and Hammerstein II.

While *Gypsy* as a whole falls within the category of integrated musicals, not all of its songs share the same narrative function. Some songs do not advance the plot and contribute minimally, if at all, to character development. These include the vaudeville numbers: "Baby June and Her Newsboys," "Broadway," and the various renditions of "Let Me Entertain You." "Dainty June and Her Farmboys" can also be included in this list, as it is, like the aforementioned songs, a diegetic number—one in which the characters are aware that they are singing as part of the narrative. These songs temporarily pause the progression of the plot, albeit briefly.

If the meaning conveyed by a song's lyrics is deemed unimportant, it can be assumed that the original lyrics may be freely rewritten in the target language. However, this flexibility in rewriting has its limits. The overall balance of the NPT will only be maintained if the key features of the original song are preserved in the translation. In this specific case, the song must include a cow and incorporate sound-based wordplay that evokes the animal's mooing.

These considerations underscore why we could have opted for a freer translation of this song without compromising the overall balance of the NPT criteria, even if, at first glance, such a decision might seem counterintuitive.

5. Conclusion

Although this initial trial of the NPT is encouraging regarding the relevance of the tool and its criteria, the first version of the model will be re-evaluated after the finalisation of our translations. This revision phase will be crucial in our effort to design the most effective tool possible.

A recent event further underscores the potential value of this type of research within the field of translation studies. In April 2024, we hosted a symposium at the University of Liège (Belgium), which included a round-table discussion with a translator specialising in adapting British and American musicals into French. During the discussion, the translator revealed that he had, somewhat unconsciously, developed his own pentathlon approach throughout his career. His admission lends legitimacy to our goal of illuminating a field that translation experts rarely address and supports our aim to describe and explain the methodological considerations that inform a translator's work on musical theatre songs.

We hope to have highlighted the inherent challenges of this unique form of translation. As Golomb aptly states, the role of the musical theatre song translator is to "exercise damage control and try to choose the components one sacrifices advisedly, locally, and individually" (Golomb 2005: 137). Translating in an informed manner—balancing gains and losses while carefully evaluating the trade-offs of each choice—is a complex and nuanced task.

In essence, translating a song requires a commitment to being faithfully flexible and flexibly faithful.

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PIERRE ROBAUX has been working as a PhD assistant in the Department of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Liège (Belgium) since September 2023. Through his work, which focusses on the translation of musical theatre songs, he seeks to prove the relevance of his *New Pentathlon Tool*—a tool for translation and quality assessment—based on Peter Low's *Pentathlon Principle* and centred on two closely related concepts, fidelity and flexibility.

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