Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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The study of lexical cohesion and singability in opera translation

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1.   Subject of the Thesis

Music has always played in important role in my life since my childhood. Translation, however, entered my life only around 2000, but – together with interpreting and teaching – has become an integral part of my professional life. Although it is always a dream of every translator and interpreter to work from source texts that are related to their interest, I rarely have the opportunity to translate or interpret texts on music.

The subject of my doctoral thesis however has changed this situation, as, to the recommendation of Prof. Dr. Kinga Klaudy I started to investigate how these two areas could be connected in a single study. Finally it was a seminar of Dr. Krisztina Károly where I found my subject matter that meets all my criteria: it investigates new questions from the aspects of linguistics and music alike, it focuses on practical issues and thus the results of the research could bring about improvements in the world of opera, and finally it can be exciting and easy to understand for anyone interested either in opera or translation studies.

2.   Theoretical Background and Benefits of the Thesis

Based on my investigation of this subject matter as well as on the conferences I attended it has become clear for me that opera translation is usually dealt with by researchers from a single angle (considering either the musical or the linguistic attributes), but the number of such studies is also very low.

In the analyses of Kaindl (1995), opera and lyrics are investigated as multimedia texts. He is of the opinion that a holistic approach needs to be applied when analysing the translations of such works, thus it is not enough to deal with the relationship between words and music, but for example the theatrical aspects should also be considered. Gorlée (1997, 2005) also deals with the hybrid nature of operas; she establishes the principle that in operas several semiotic systems and genres are interconnected. Dewolf (2001), and later Orero and Matamala (2007) mostly focus on subtitling that has been the most popular field of study within opera translation so far. The connection between singability and opera translation has been discussed by Ronnie Apter (1985), who also pointed out some potential technical problems that might arise from the inappropriate singing translation of operas. In Hungary the names of Géza Fodor (2007, 2009, 2012) and Ferenc Baranyi (1995, 2006) need to be emphasized; they have analysed vast number of operas with great expertise, reflecting on various aspects, including translation.

However, as far as I know there has not been a single study so far that would discuss the subject matter of translated libretti and/or subtitles from both aspects, i.e. from that of linguistics and music. The reason thereof is pretty obvious: researchers dealing with this topic are usually experts of a single field, thus unable to investigate the other in full detail.

Based on all these the present study is original both regarding its subject matter and the approach applied, as here the libretti are analysed from the angles of not only linguistics but music as well.

3.   Aims and Objectives

In consideration of the so far partially neglected nature of the topic the study has manifold aims and objectives. Primarily it aims at providing a comprehensive view of the specific characteristics of opera translation, as well as the challenges an opera translator faces when working on either a singing translation or surtitles.

In connection to this it is also an important goal of the thesis to introduce the translating profession from a new angle, as though the lenses of opera translation each and every aspect a translator might need to face could be thoroughly reflected on. Thus the reader could become familiar not only with the questions of opera translation, but also with some probably hidden challenges and characteristics of translation in general.

Over and above these general issues the study seeks for the answer to the question which considerations usually influence opera translators most: fidelity or singability?

With the analysis of various translated versions of the same opera the study wants to point out why the conscious and profound knowledge of music and the genre of opera is required for translators if they wish to produce enjoyable and comprehensible texts in the target language.

Accordingly, this thesis wants to point out that a conscious approach, the profound knowledge of the field and targeted training is necessary for translators in connection to this specific genre. Further research questions arising: Is text or music in the first place for opera translators, i.e. is fidelity or singability emphasized? Which aspects of singability are considered by translators of singing translations? When analysing the rewritten versions of already existing translations what kind of improvements can be detected (if any)?

4.   Hypotheses

Although one might think that in opera music is something that could not be neglected, as the majority of translators do not have deep grounding in classical music, according to the first hypothesis fidelity is more important for opera translators than singability (i.e. text is more important for them than music).

Within singability only the most simple requirements, such as the number of syllables are expected to be considered by translators, but according to the hypotheses other aspects, e.g. the selection of the appropriate vowels and consonants, the use of words with the required natural rhythm, or the consideration of tonality symbolism are usually not achieved.

On the other hand, as an increasing number of experts participate in the work of translating operas, according to the fourth hypothesis recent versions of the same opera have better cohesive pattern and are more favourable as far as singability is concerned than the translations made some 50-100 years ago.

To sum it up my main hypotheses are as follows:

1. Translators of singing opera translations mostly focus on fidelity when creating the target language text, thus they prefer text to music.

2. The translators of singing opera translations generally only consider the number of syllables within the frameworks of music related aspects.

3. The translators of singing opera translations are not familiar with the importance of the right vowel and consonant use and the relationship between the natural rhythm of speech and musical rhythm.

4. With the passing of time the revisions, rewritings of existing translations show a tendency of improvement regarding cohesion and singability.

5.   The Research Corpus

The libretto of Mozart-da Ponte's *The Marriage of Figaro*, or to be more precise its various Hungarian translations are in the focal point of the study. The corpus (or rather sub-corpora) of the research consists of the following translations:

1. Da Ponte (original Italian text)

2. Ferenc Ney (1858; known under the title of *Figaro lakodalma* (*The Wedding of Figaro*); singing translation)

3. Dezső Vidor (1926; singing translation)

4. Unknown translator, labelled as: Ney_2 (~1935-40; singing translation)

5. Ágnes Romhányi (unknown date; rough translation)

6. Ágnes Romhányi (1987; singing translation, on the basis of Vidor's version)

7. Unknown translator, labelled as: Dallos_1 (unknown date; singing translation, on the basis of Vidor's version)

8. Unknown translator, labelled as: Dallos_2 (unknown date; singing translation, on the basis of Vidor's version)

9. Unknown translator, labelled: Köteles (unknown date; singing translation, on the basis of Vidor's version)

10. Ádám Nádasdy (2009; surtitles; MÁO (Hungarian State Opera House))

11. Ágnes Romhányi (2010; surtitles)

In order to identify the various versions I use labels that clearly refer to the translator (and the type of translation, if necessary), or, in the case of an unknown translator the musical score containing the text.

The story of the opera (that is essential for the evaluation of the results) in a nutshell is as follows:

Figaro, the barber known from *The Barber of Seville* is preparing for his wedding with Susanne in the castle of Count Almaviva. However, his joy seems to disappear when his fiancée warns him that the count – having grown tired of his wife, whom he could marry only with the help of Figaro – is planning to make Susanne his mistress. The tricky barber cannot let this happen, and with the help of some exchange of roles they finally make Almaviva realize that the countess is still important for him, thus it is not worth cheating on his wife.

In the analysed section, i.e. in Scene 1 f Act 1 Figaro (still unsuspiciously) is measuring their future room, then Susanne (entering the room) warns him about the count's plan. In the beginning Figaro does not want to believe his fiancée, but when she tells him that the count has already started courting her with the help of the court musician, and points it out that the room offered for them by Almaviva also serves this very objective, Figaro becomes furious and swears to cross the plan directed against Susanne and their love.

This is the story of the opera, thus this is the content one should get after summarizing the macropropositions of the different versions – if the texts are coherent.

6. Method of the Lexical Analysis

The analysis itself had to be preceded by the restructuring of the text, because the sentence boundaries do not correspond to one another, thus without the restructuring different sentences would be compared, resulted in misleading results.

The restructuring procedure was followed by the most important step, namely the lexical repetition analysis based on Hoey (1991). Within the frameworks of this each and every sentence of a text had to be compared to all of the other to reveal the repetitive lexical units.

With the repetitive lexical units repetitive ties and bonds could be identified. Regarding the ties their type is unimportant in the research, only their quantity had to be specified in order to get a list of macropropositions for every TL version. According to Hoey (1991) three ties are required between two sentences to have a bond; the research also used the same principle to identify the bonds, and consequently the macropropositions.

The identification of the macroproposition was followed by their analysis. The main question was whether they deliver the gist of the story or not. It was also important to point out the differences between the contents reflected by the macropropositions to see whether there is any improvement between the various versions, i.e. whether later versions are more cohesive then earlier ones or not.

For the visual representation of repetitive bonds so called "repetition matrixes" (Hoey 1991) were used to show the repetitive pattern of the translations and to make it easier to compare the macropropositional contents.

7. Results of the Lexical Analysis

All in all, based on the linguistic analysis it can be drawn as a conclusion that the singing translations usually convey the same message (information), but surprisingly the macropropositions of the original include less propostitional content than the Hungarian translations in general. The differences arising in the central message touch upon two elements, namely the verbalization of the wedding and the count's plan. As for the verbalization of the wedding the Ney_2 and the original Italian versions represent the negative exceptions, as in these translations no reference of the wedding appear at macro level.

At this point of the analysis it seems that the various singing translations are pretty similar to one another as far as the sentences appearing at macro-level are concerned.

Regarding the rewritten/revised versions (e.g. Vidor vs. Romhányi, Köteles, Dallos_1, Dallos_2) there are two major directions. The first – characterizing the majority of the cases – do not result in any significant changes; here mostly single words are replaced with synonyms or some other word that might suit the Hungarian sentence better. The second direction brings about more significant modifications, and sometimes even entire sentences are formed without bearing any similarity with the original version (e.g. in the Köteles version). Interestingly these modifications are not enough either to significantly change the content conveyed at macro-level. Thus, at this point it can be assumed that the modifications were based on musical considerations instead of textual ones.

Regarding surtitles it can be said that none of the versions refer to the wedding at macro-level. In the Romhányi version it is the room, whereas in the Nádasdy translation it is the count's plan that do not appear in the macropropositions. The latter is conveyed in the form of a rhetorical question in the Romhányi version.

Surtitles usually use short sentences and only the Romhányi version tries to reflect on the music; this is why these are the only surtitles where emotional elements also appear in macropropositions, as following the music also means the inclusion of the repetitive lines.

8.   Method of the Musical Analysis

The musical analysis of the corpus was conducted in several steps. I made the decision even before the preparatory steps that only those parts will be studied that are central ones from the aspects of vocal technique, as the results would be misleading with the involvement of recitatives.

The most time-consuming step was the preparatory one. In the course of this the texts (and their words) had to be broken down to syllables and matched with the appropriate musical sound. The resulting table included the musical sounds in the order of appearance (column 1) and the seven singing texts (columns 2-8) broken down into syllables, thus it could be seen line after line what syllable is sung to a certain musical sound.

After this preparatory step the translations were analysed based on various aspects. First it was the musical rhythm that had to be compared to the natural (speech) rhythm of the texts, and all dissonances were highlighted.

In the following step a sensitive issue, the use of sound *h* was analysed. The use of this phoneme is always problematic because of unsingable nature and the significant air loss resulting from it. Here the problematic instances were also highlighted.

The third aspect involved the use of vowels and consonants. Here the vowels and consonants appearing at the end and beginning of consecutive words, as problem might arise if these sounds are the identical (if there is no pause between the words). Here again inappropriate solutions had to be listed.

Finally the use of vowels was investigated. Here the most important question was whether translators/reviewers consider the voice range of singers. This aspect is highly important as for singers belonging to different voice ranges the pitch level representing a challenge for proper vowel pronunciation is also different.

9.   Results of the Musical Analysis

The results of the musical analysis regarding rhythm, vowel and consonant use at word boundaries, as well as the use of *h* are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Occurrence of certain problems of singability

	Ney	**Ney_2**	**Vidor**	**Dallos_1**	**Dallos_2**	**Köteles**	**Romhányi**
rhythm	55	53	32	34	32	41	28
sound obstruction	14	11	17	19	19	18	10
sound *h*	24 (23)	35 (33)	39 (20)	25 (21)	32 (21)	34 (25)	26 (16)
Total	93 (92)	99 (97)	88 (69)	78 (74)	83 (72)	93 (84)	64 (54)
Errors/note	13%	14%	12% (10%)	11% (10%)	12% (10%)	13% (12%)	9% (8%)

Regarding the use of *h* two figures are indicated per translation. The reason for that is that the use of *h* at the beginning of words or musical phrases causes an even greater difficulty than 'simply' the use of *h*, thus I wanted to show the proportion of it (first figure *h* at the beginning of words, in brackets *h* at other places).

In the fourth line the total number these errors is listed (here again there are two separate figures for the two *h* scenarios). Based on all these as far as singability is concerned the Ney_2 version is the most problematic, followed by the Ney, the Köteles, the Vidor, the Dallos_2 and the Dallos_1 texts.

Finally it can also be seen expressed in percentage what proportion these errors represent compared to the number of musical sounds.

The use of vowels are not included in the table above as there is only a low number of high pitch sounds in the analysed section, thus I rather wanted to find tendencies instead of focusing on exact numbers.

All in all the conclusion can be drawn that although the vowel use of the different versions show a divergence from that of spontaneous Hungarian speech, there are no real tendencies to show. Although the conscious vowel use would be desirable from the aspects of the singers and the audience alike, primarily at a high pitch none of the texts show it. Thus it can be assumed that the translators were not familiar with the connection between vowels and perception, as well as that of vowels and singability.

10.   Hypothesis Verification
10.1.   Verification of the first hypothesis

Translators of singing opera translations mostly focus on fidelity when creating the target language text, thus they prefer text to music.

Based on the analyses fidelity played a more important role for translators than musical requirements. The lexical cohesion analysis usually showed similar results, at macro-level mostly the same propositions appeared.

The next group of aspects belongs to singability. These requirements seemed to be very difficult for translators to meet. Except for the number of syllables they were unable to concentrate on such basic areas as the use of *h* or proper rhythm. Thus in the case of singing translations translators clearly focused on fidelity as opposed to singability.

For translations serving as surtitles quantity limitations represent the greatest challenge. Although only two sets of surtitles were analysed within the research, they seem to represent two opposite approaches. While Nádasdy focused both on text reduction and fidelity (even at the level of words), Romhányi focused on musical aspects too. Although this latter might seem to be unimportant, based on the results of the lexical analysis the retention of the discursive is higher if musical aspects are also considered.

All in all, for translators fidelity was of the highest importance and although there is still room for improvement in this field, it shows much better results than the singability analysis.

10.2.   Verification of the second hypothesis

The translators of singing opera translations generally only consider the number of syllables within the frameworks of music related aspects.

Based on the musical analysis it can be drawn as a conclusion that the majority of them were either unknown for the translators or they were completely unable to pay attention to them. Adjustment to the number of syllables is a basic requirement; this was strictly observed by almost every version, with the exception of the Ney, and the Ney_2 texts.

As opposed to the hypothesis the rhythm related criteria also seems to be considered by translators (as much as possible).

10.3.   Verification of the third hypothesis

The translators of singing opera translations are not familiar with the importance of the right vowel and consonant use and the relationship between the natural rhythm of speech and musical rhythm.

As already mentioned in the verification of the second hypothesis the will to find words of a natural rhythm that harmonize with the music has been gaining ground in opera translation.

As opposed to this the use of vowels and consonants does not play an important role in the work of translators. At several occasion this task might be impossible, but based on the results of the research translators are unaware of even the very existence of this (difficult but) important requirement, which is central both from the aspects of perception, but also from those of singability.

The avoidance of 'jamming' consonants/vowels and the extensive and unjustified use of *h* are however requirements that are easy to meet. As opposed to this the number of errors deriving from this area does not show any improvement with the passing of time.

Based on all these one can reach the conclusion that Hungarian opera translators are increasingly aware of the importance of rhythm, but they do not know much about the importance of the use of consonants/vowels, especially in connection with vocal technique, or that the proper selection of vowels can significantly increase the level of perception, especially at a high pitch.

10.4.   Verification of the fourth hypothesis

With the passing of time the revisions, rewritings of existing translations show a tendency of improvement regarding cohesion and singability.

Based on the lexical analysis the first part of the hypothesis cannot be verified. The majority of the singing translations had a similar representation of the main message of the text and the most important pieces of information at macro-level. As opposed to the singing versions the two sets of surtitles show significant differences.

Contrary to the cohesion related results the outcome of the musical analysis shows some improvement within the sequence of translations, but it is solely about the aspect of rhythm.

Consequently it cannot be verified from the fourth hypothesis that there is a real tendency of improvement over time at the level of cohesion, but as for singability some development can clearly be pointed out (at least in connection with rhythm).

11.   Closing Remarks

The thesis investigates opera translation from the aspects of linguistics (lexical cohesion) and singability through the analysis of seven singing translations and two sets of surtitles of Mozart-da Ponte's *The Marriage of Figaro*. By having gone through the 150 years long history of the translation of this opera I tried to point out the major characteristics of the practice and development of Hungarian opera translation.

It is clearly shown in the results that Hungarian opera translation for the moment lacks well defined principles, criteria or a clear approach. The translators individually choose the aspects of the translation to be followed, and they usually only consider the most basic requirements (such as the number of syllables). Unfortunately the majority of translators do not know much about vocal technique, and as result their works are often full of with solutions that are unsingable.

In my opinion it would be highly desired to work out a methodology based on solid professional grounds, as for the lack of this the translations will not meet the requirements of either the singers or the audience.

The results discussed in the thesis rely on the analysis of a single scene of a single opera (*The Marriage of Figaro*). For this very reason it would be desirable to carry out further research with other operas, a bigger corpus or other language combination. As opposed to this I am of the opinion that this paper can represent a good starting point for further studies and can raise attention to and contribute to the improvement of this somewhat neglected area of translation studies and consequently to the higher enjoyment value of operas.

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