

Glen Nichols

Trading Partners: New Views on Theatre Translation in Canada

Abstract

What kinds of modern Canadian plays are most often translated or adapted for production elsewhere in Canada or overseas? How many modern Canadian plays are translations or adaptations of non-theatrical originals (novels, poetry, fairy tales)? Where can one find out if a translation of a Canadian play is available? These are among the questions addressed by the catalogue *From Around the World and at Home: Translations and Adaptations in Canadian Theatre*, the first comprehensive database of Canadian theatre translations. This paper examines the two basic questions of translation in Canadian theatre as revealed by the database, not from the usual point of view of one or several individual works looked at closely, but from the broader perspective of a large statistical overview:

1. What is the state of theatre translation within the borders of Canada? That is, what transfers are happening between linguistic groups within Canada? And what role do inter-generic translations play here?
2. Are there regional variations in terms of overseas influence? In other words, do different parts of Canada look to different parts of the world for theatrical sources?

Published by Playwrights Union of Canada in 2001, the Catalogue contains over 3000 separate entries, including source and target references to Canadian plays translated for production or publication either inside or outside Canada, and Canadian plays which are themselves translations of other domestic or overseas pieces. With the term “translation” including generic as well as linguistic transfers, the Catalogue is designed to serve as both a reference source and the basis for more detailed analysis of the ongoing role of translation in Canadian theatre.

Keywords : translation, adaptation, theatre, Canada, bibliography

Résumé

Quels types de pièces de théâtre sont le plus souvent traduits ou adaptés pour la production ailleurs au Canada ou outremer? Combien de pièces canadiennes modernes sont des traductions ou des adaptations d'originaux non-théâtraux (romans, poésie, contes de fées)? Comment peut-on savoir si une pièce canadienne est disponible en traduction? Voilà certaines des questions abordées dans le catalogue *From Around the World and at Home : Translations and Adaptations in Canadian Theatre*, qui constitue la première base de données exhaustive des traductions du théâtre canadien. Cet article se penche sur les deux questions fondamentales à la traduction dans le théâtre canadien abordées dans le catalogue, non pas de la perspective habituelle où l'on étudie un ou plusieurs ouvrages individuels de près, mais plutôt de la perspective plus vaste rendue possible grâce à un survol statistique.

1. Où en est la traduction théâtrale à l'intérieur des frontières canadiennes? Plus précisément, quels transferts sont opérés entre les divers groupes linguistiques au Canada? Quel rôle joue alors la traduction intergénérique?

2. Existe-t-il des variantes régionales en ce qui a trait à l'influence d'outremer? En d'autres mots, les diverses parties du Canada trouvent-elles leurs sources théâtrales dans diverses régions du monde?

Publié en 2001 par la *Playwrights Union of Canada*, le catalogue contient plus de 3000 entrées, dont les références des ouvrages sources et cibles des pièces canadiennes traduites pour la production et la publication au Canada et à l'extérieur du Canada, ainsi que des pièces canadiennes qui sont elles-mêmes des traductions de pièces canadiennes ou étrangères. En appliquant la définition du mot « traduction » aux transferts génériques aussi bien que linguistiques, le catalogue sert à la fois d'ouvrage de référence et de base à des études plus détaillées du rôle de la traduction dans le théâtre canadien.

Mots-clés : traduction, adaptation, théâtre, Canada, bibliographie

¹What kinds of modern Canadian plays are most often translated or adapted for production elsewhere in Canada or overseas? How many modern Canadian plays are translations or adaptations of non-theatrical originals (novels, poetry, fairy tales)? Where can one find out if a translation of a Canadian play is available? These are among the questions I set out to address when I began a research project several years ago, which has now become a useful reference catalogue entitled *From Around the World and at Home : Translations and adaptations in Canadian Theatre*^[1].

²Designed to serve as both an independent reference source and the basis for more detailed analysis of the broader role of translation in Canadian theatre, the preliminary Catalogue currently contains over 2500 separate entries. These include both source and target references to Canadian plays translated for production or publication, as well as to Canadian plays which are themselves translations of other domestic or overseas pieces.

³Theorists like Zuber-Skerritt, Bassnett, and Littau point out that, due to the complexities of the relationship between theatrical versus performance texts, it is difficult (unlike in the cases of other literary translation) to draw a clear line in theatre between linguistic, generic and performative “translation.” With this complexity in mind, the catalogue is designed to include a broad range of material. Although the following analysis and argument will draw only upon drama to drama translations, the catalogue as a whole also includes inter-generic transfers (for example dramatisations of English Canadian novels such as Lucy Maude Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, or Herb Curtis's *The Americans are Coming*, as well as poetry, stories and so on) in addition to linguistic translations.

⁴This quantitative analysis, based on the first comprehensive extraction of data from the growing catalogue, will attempt to outline how the database can be used to respond to at least two basic questions of translation in Canadian theatre, not from the usual point of view provided by close textual analysis of one or several individual works, or from the perspective of a particular region, but from the broader perspective of a large statistical overview:

1. What is the state of theatre translation within the borders of Canada? That is, what transfers are happening between linguistic groups within Canada?
2. Are there regional variations in terms of overseas influence? In other words, do different parts of Canada look to different parts of the world for theatrical sources?

⁵At first glance, the answers to these questions presented here will substantiate the positions of excellent previous studies of Canadian theatre translation. The broader dimensions of this

present study, however, will also provide useful reconfigurations of these positions. Essentially, my opinion is that the often-cited imbalances in French and English Canadian approaches to theatre translation only describe part of the picture, that in fact the two linguistic communities are much more similar in their translation activities than is usually claimed.

6 Before proceeding with the evaluation of these questions, it is useful to clarify the way the results have been obtained by describing briefly the structure and evolution of the catalogue. The catalogue is managed in Paradox, a PC-based data-management software comparable to Access, familiar to Microsoft users. The entries are grouped by source text. That is, all entries related to a particular source text are given an identification label unique to that cluster. For each text entry, there are 28 information fields, arranged in four categories: identification, publication, production, and miscellaneous.

7 The last three allow a basic description of the text in terms of first production and/or first publication, as well as any other pertinent information such as location of texts in manuscript form, notes about information sources, or alternate media details. The identification section is the most important and complex. In addition to the cluster identification label, the name of the person responsible for the text (author, translator, or director, etc.) and the title of the piece, this section provides information about its language, genre, provenance, and status in relationship to the cluster. It is these areas which have been key in extracting the information used for this quantitative analysis. As the informational fields become more complete through further research, selections based on dates or locations of production, for example, will be possible.

8 Resources used so far to compile the database are varied. Among the many individual articles and occasionally serendipitous discoveries, the principal resources have been: 1) the collection of the Centre des auteurs dramatiques (CEAD) as documented in the *Répertoire du Centre des auteurs dramatiques* (1994 and 1999) and in the two editions of *Quebec Plays in Translation* (1990 and 1998). The CEAD has provided a substantial number of the Quebecois entries; 2) The documentation of the Association québécoise des auteurs dramatiques (AQAD) adds important information from the archives of the National Theatre School; 3) The Playwrights Union of Canada's *Catalogue of Canadian Plays* and *Who's Who in The PUC* (1997-2000) form the bases of the English Canadian entries; 4) A review of a number of national and university library catalogues revealed many new entries; 5) The Canada Council provided a list of unclassified translations from their database of subsidizations for the years 1972 to 1996; 6) And finally, a number of relevant periodicals are being examined: *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Jeu*, *CanPlay*, *Theatrum*, *Performing Arts in Canada*, and *Voix et images* introduce many productions, and occasionally even publications, of translations. These resources have

provided a fair balance of published and unpublished works, as well as a fair distribution of French and English Canadian references. On the other hand, quantitative and qualitative information on translations outside of Canada, in particular for those outside of North America, is less adequately covered, especially for translations of English Canadian works.

⁹To date (1999), the database contains 2515 entries, composed of 1060 different clusters; that is, 1060 source texts, each with at least one, and in many cases more than one, derivative or target text. The majority of clusters are single-pole source/target pairs. There are also a number of flat-top clusters where a single source may have two or many equally dependent translations (for example Michel Tremblay's *Les belles soeurs* shows 13 different translations). Finally, less common, but often more interesting, are chain clusters in which a particular target text may be a translation of a translation of a source text. A simple example of this would be Marc Gélinas' English translation of Robert Gurik's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* entitled *Hamlet, Prince of Quebec*. There are of course combinations of these paradigms, as well as clusters with multiple sources and a number of other variables. These details point to the complexity of the catalogue and to the sophistication of translation within the realm of Canadian theatre.

¹⁰The first part of the paper will address the role of translation within Canada itself by looking at English and French Canadian dramatic texts as sources of theatre translations. Including all text genres, the catalogue contains a total of 166 English Canadian works used as sources for translations and 305 French source texts. Of these, 55.5% (92) of the English source texts are plays; the rest (45%) are novels, stories and other types of source texts. On the French side the numbers are notably different with 79% (242) of the source texts being plays.

Table One

V. <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

Source texts by provenance (All Genres / Drama Only)

Table One puts these factors into the context of the other major languages of source texts. It is worth noting that the Canadian sources (English and French) combined comprise not quite half of the total source influence (471 or 44.4% of all genres, 334 or 45% of drama only) showing a slightly greater interest in non-Canadian sources for drama translations in this country. Another factor is the percentage of drama texts: 70%. That is, out of every ten texts used as the basis of theatrical translations, on average seven are plays and three are some other type of work. The variations are also quite striking with French Canada and the USA well above that average and English Canada and France well below (79% and 87.5% versus 55.5% and 54.5%), indicating, in the case of the latter examples, that nearly half of their influence on

Canadian theatre translation is through inter-generic sources (stage translations of longer or shorter fiction primarily, as well as of monographs and collections of poetry among other types of texts, both within and across language boundaries).

¹¹Thus, as a baseline, there are 92 English Canadian source plays and 242 French Canadian source plays. This appears to be a considerable imbalance with a ratio of 1:2.63 (over two and a half French Canadian source plays for every English Canadian one). The apparent imbalance becomes even more graphic when the multiple translations of individual sources are taken into account. The catalogue records 106 translations of the 92 English source plays. This is an increase of about 15% (or an average of about 1.2 translations per source play). On the other hand there are 383 translations of the 242 French Canadian source plays. This is an increase of 58% (or an average of nearly 1.6 translations per source text). If we compare the number of translations (106 versus 383) we can see the ratio of “imbalance” is 1:3.6 (over three and a half translations of French Canadian texts for every translation of an English play), 37% greater than the French/English source text imbalance.

Table Two

Cf <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

Sources / Translations in English & French Canada

This seems like a huge difference (nearly 4 French Canadian source plays are being translated for every English Canadian source play), and indeed this has been well-documented already in a number of earlier studies of the subject. As early as 1977, Philip Stratford pointed out the differing translation interests across the linguistic divide in Canada. And this view continues to be held through a number of studies, including Louise Ladouceur's 1997 article “Du spéculaire au spectaculaire...” in which she very carefully shows that the imbalance between the two translation approaches has begun to change over the last decade. These precedents are significant and this paper does not contradict them; indeed, the present analysis lends even more weight to their conclusions. However, I would like to nuance the widely held thesis of imbalance by suggesting that a broader perspective on translation activity reveals a more harmonious set of responses from across the country.

¹²The first step will be to deconstruct the translation numbers just mentioned above by simply removing one author from the mix. In the area of French sources and translations Michel Tremblay figures extremely prominently. Indeed, nearly 10% of all French Canadian source plays (22 texts to be exact) are from his pen alone and the large number of multiple translations of his works (100 translations) make up over a quarter of the total number of translations. If we subtract Tremblay's impact in terms of source texts and translations of his

works from the overall French Canadian numbers, we discover that the underlying activity is really very close to that in English Canada. The comparison of source texts to translations shows a 28% increase which equals about 1.29 translations per source play. This is very different from the 58% increase and 1.6 translation rate of the full French Canadian activity and is significantly closer to the activity rates of English Canada.

Table Three

Cf <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

Translations With and Without Tremblay

I am not suggesting that Tremblay not be counted as a source at all, but merely wish to point out that the underlying theatre translation activity in French and English Canada is less differentiated than it appears to be at first, that the apparent imbalance in the activity is largely the result of distortion caused by the domination of one playwright. It is incredible that the output of, and response to, one author can have such a radical influence on the profile of theatre translation in general.

¹³In addition, examination of the inter-lingual penetration between the two groups, reveals an interesting underlying relationship. Of the 106 translations of English Canadian plays, 78 (or 73.5%) are recorded as being translated into French within Canada. That is, from the source perspective, nearly three-quarters (73.5%) of all translations of English Canadian plays are destined for French Canadian stages. On the other side, 237 or 62% of all translations of French Canadian plays (total 383) are translated into English within Canada.

Table Four

Cf. <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

Rate of Inter-lingual Penetration (by Source)

Thus, from the reciprocal points of view of the source communities, there is a relative balance depicted here which is not apparent from the raw numbers; indeed, a reversal of the usual imbalance is suggested. Although the basic number of translations of English Canadian plays is dwarfed by those of French Canadian plays, the actual rate at which the two groups exchange material between themselves is quite close (73.5% minus 62%, a difference of only 11.5%). And surprisingly, given the usual complaints of French Canadian indifference to English Canadian theatre, the rate of translation of English Canadian plays into French Canada is the greater of the two.

¹⁴The second part of this paper will consider the translations from the point of view of the target communities. The first part assessed the sources of dramatic translations in general and then focused on English and French Canadian plays as sources of translations for each other. In this second part of the paper I will address the inverse of these questions: the translations into English and French Canada of texts from world literature as well as from each other. The initial data will corroborate previous research in the area, but once again a more nuanced and balanced picture emerges.

¹⁵The catalogue includes 344 drama to drama translations into English Canada, regardless of the source language. Likewise, there are 521 drama to drama translations into French Canada. So once again, the apparent degree of activity is significantly higher on the French Canadian side than on the English Canadian side. However, when Canadian-only texts are extracted, an even more “dramatic” situation is revealed. Of the 344 total number of translations into English Canada, 237 (69%) are from French Canada, whereas of the 521 translations into French Canada only 78 (15%) are from English Canada.

Table Five

Cf. <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

Rate of Inter-lingual Penetration (by Target)

In other words, nearly seven out of every ten translated plays in English Canada originate from elsewhere in Canada (69%). In French Canada significantly less than one in six are from Canada (15%). This kind of asymmetry in the interchange between English and French Canada has been well-documented already, most recently in the work of Louise Ladouceur, who has also plotted changes in this interrelationship over time.

¹⁶This striking imbalance of participation between the two communities (15% versus 69% or a ratio of 1:4.6) can be resolved, however, by situating the activity within the broader influences of non-Canadian works on Canadian translations. In English Canadian theatre, after the 237 texts based on French Canadian sources are considered, the next largest single language source is material from France, but at only 19 pieces (5.5%) it comes far, far behind the impact of French Canada. Other source areas include Britain at 14 pieces (4%), Germany at 13 (3.8%), Greece at 11 (3.2%), and Russia and Norway at 10 each (3%). A number of other sources include five or fewer plays each and make up the remaining 6.1% of translation sources for English Canadian plays. Quite evidently, French Canada is the dominant focus of translation activity in English Canadian theatre. No other single source area is paid anywhere

near the same degree of attention, and even collectively all other source areas pale in comparison.

¹⁷For the sources of French Canadian translations the story is very different indeed. As we have seen, a respectable, but, shall we say, “underwhelming” 15% have English Canadian sources. There is an even larger number (103 pieces or 19.8%) of plays based on British models. However, the giant influence is the United States with more than double the English Canadian rate: there are 178 plays (34%) based on US models listed in the catalogue.

¹⁸Following these major influences come Germany with 30 pieces (5.8%), Italy with 23 examples (4.5%), Russia with 16 pieces (3%), Spanish language sources with 13 plays (2.5%), and Greece with 11 (2%). Again, as in English Canada there are a number of plays (35 or 6.8%) with sources in a wide variety of languages, none of which have more than 4 each.

Table Six

Cf. <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

Analysis by International Source

This overview shows very different general approaches to translation in English and French Canada. In comparison to the dominant fascination with a single source area for translations in English Canadian theatre, French Canadian theatre seems to cast its net a bit wider and more evenly. Even the largest single source area (the United States) still only comprises 34% of the total.

¹⁹However, if we look at the number of French Canadian translations based on English-language sources as a whole (that is, from English Canada, the United States and Britain together), we find 359 pieces or 69% of the total. This is actually very close to the number of plays in English Canada based on the total of French-language sources (French Canada and France combined): 256 plays or 74.4%. Thus the rate of reciprocal exchange (English to French, French to English) is really very close, showing that when we rise above simple geo-political boundaries to look at general linguistic exchange, there is again a remarkable equilibrium demonstrated between the two approaches.

²⁰In addition, the 78 plays based on English Canadian sources actually make up a fairly substantial 21.7% of the total English-language influence in French Canadian theatre (total of 359 plays), followed by British sources with 28.6% (103 plays) and 49.6% (178 plays) for those from the U.S. These numbers would seem to support the usual picture of imbalance with English Canadian influence lagging behind the others, but I think another explanation is worth

exploring. Not surprisingly, the two language groups tend to look to each other for the lion's share of their respective translation sources at nearly equal rates (69% and 74.4%). However, to find English-language sources for these translations, French Canadian theatre sees three important areas: the U.S., Britain, and Canada, and draws on them proportionately. From the English-Canadian point of view, which draws the vast majority of its French models from the source nearest to it, from within Canada itself, this appears to be a huge imbalance since the exchange between the two groups within Canada is far from equal; however, from the French-Canadian theatre perspective, the practice is justified considering the interplay of the larger theatre and language communities. Indeed, given the relative attention to Canadian works out of the worldwide English-language corpus (nearly 22%), a fairly significant voice is actually accorded to works from “home.”

²¹The suggestion of equilibrium is further revealed by an exploration of the dynamics of this phenomenon in more detail by looking at how these three English-language source areas (English Canada, Britain, and the U.S.) appear in French Canadian theatre translations. The first thing to look at is the kinds of plays being translated. This is partly in response to the suggestion that the relative lack of interest in English Canadian plays has been the result of a paucity of theatrically-interesting plays in English Canada (Ladouceur, *et al.*), especially a dominance of linear realism which is supposedly not of interest in French Canadian theatre. In fact, the distribution of kinds of plays across the three source areas is fairly consistent, and indeed the rate of borrowing of linear “realistic” texts is notably greater from among the dominant non-Canadian source areas.

²²After breaking the lists of French Canadian translations into source areas (English Canada, Britain & the U.S.), I then separated plays that are clearly on the lighter end of the theatrical spectrum... the lighter Broadway and West End material, plays common on the summer/dinner-theatre circuit, none of which challenge theatrical conventions. Among many others, these include works from Canada by playwrights like Norm Foster, John Gray, Eugene Lion, Joe Palmer, and Sheldon Rosen; from Britain by Alan Ayckbourn, John Chapman, Agatha Christie, Don Churchill, Ray Cooney, Noel Coward, Joseph Kessler, Paul Wheeler and Ron Harwood; and from the U.S. by Lee Blessing, Sam Bobrick, William Gibson, Nick Hall, Tom Jones, Steve Martin, Murray Schisgal, Jack Sharkey, Neil Simon, Tom Topper, and William Zandt.

²³Of the 78 English Canadian plays, 22 (28.2%) fall into this category; of the 103 from Britain, 29 (28.9%) are “popular” pieces; and out of the 178 U.S. plays, 65 (36.5%) are lighter fair. So, despite claims that French Canadian theatres prefer the more challenging American

plays over the simpler realistic English Canadian repertoire, a significantly higher percentage of the translated American plays are actually exactly that: simple realism or farce.

²⁴This trend is even clearer when we compare the relative contributions of each group to the whole. There are 116 “popular” plays listed altogether (22 + 29 + 65), which equal contributions of 19% (English Canada), 25% (Britain), and 56% (U.S.). When these percentages are set against the relative contributions to the general corpus (21.7%, 28.6%, and 49.6%) for each group it is easy to see that the U.S. provides a noticeably higher number of popular plays relative to its overall influence than do the other two areas (19% versus 21.7%, 25% versus 28.6%, and 56% versus 49.6%).

Table Seven

Cf. <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

English-Language Sources of French Canadian Translations

In fact the impact is even greater if more canonical works are also considered. Realistic plays by writers like David Mamet, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O’Neill account for a significant number of translations of American plays, yet are not included in this group of popular, lighter works. Their inclusion would further point to the systemic influence of American realism on French Canadian theatre translations. However, their impact is included in the second and final part of this argument: the analysis of the numbers of plays per author.

²⁵This final point is intended to reveal that while there are more American and British plays than English Canadian plays, they tend to be multiple translations from a few authors, whereas from English Canada the plays tend to be spread around a wider range of playwrights.

Table Eight

Cf. <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2002/v15/n1/006803ar.html>

Rate of Plays per Author in French Canadian Translations

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calculated excluding Shakespeare (46 authors, 63 plays)

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calculated excluding Shakespeare (206 authors, 319 plays)

The British case is a difficult one due to the overwhelming presence of Shakespearean texts in French Canadian translations (40) which alone accounts for over 11% of the entire translation

corpus, and nearly 40% of the British influence. If we set his works aside, the overall rate of British translation is 1.37 texts per author, virtually the same rate of translation as that for plays from English Canadian authors. The American ratio, though, is significantly higher at 1.76. Although abstract, this ratio points to the dominance of fewer authors, a fact supported by direct examples. Out of the 101 playwrights in the list, the five top playwrights in the American translation repertoire account for an outstanding 30% of the plays. These authors are Sam Shepard (6 translations), Neil Simon (9), David Mamet (10), Arthur Miller (11), and Tennessee Williams (18 translations!).

²⁶From English Canada, the only “dominant writers” are Norm Foster with five translations of his works, and George Walker with four. A few (like Tomson Highway and Brad Fraser) have three translations, but the impact of these clusters is minimal. The large majority of plays are distributed among a maximum number of authors.

²⁷While far from conclusive, the results of this quantitative analysis of the preliminary catalogue substantiate the essential patterns in Canadian theatre translation practice as noted in various studies in the past. However, they also allow important nuances in the activity to become apparent, nuances which open new understandings of how theatre translation has been functioning in Canada. Viewed from both source and target perspectives, there appear to be radical imbalances in the way French Canada and English Canada approach theatre translation. As many have already cited, French Canadian theatre pays far less attention to English Canada than the other way around. This basic phenomenon is indisputable, but is only a small part of the picture. For example, the main reason more French Canadian plays than English Canadian plays appear as sources for translations is due to the overwhelming popularity of Michel Tremblay. In reality, the rate of background translation activity is actually fairly consistent across the country. Likewise, if one looks at the reciprocal exchange of sources for translations a near equilibrium is revealed (73.5% and 62%). Finally, although only 15% of all French Canadian translations come from English Canadian works, and 69% of English Canadian translations are based on French Canadian plays, the “imbalance” virtually disappears if one examines this in larger linguistic terms. The overall rates of English to French and French to English borrowing is almost identical when all international sources are considered. And the English Canadian component of this is substantial.

²⁸With hundreds of plays, through a multitude of relationships to a wide variety of source text types, theatre translation in Canada is a vibrant and complex phenomenon. This quantitative analysis covers only a small corner of the field, using only a very limited range of query variables, but it substantiates the validity of earlier studies while also revealing how the usual

understandings of Canadian theatre translation can be nuanced through the perspective of a wider-angle lens.

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Note

[1] Since this article was written in 1999, the database was completed with over 3000 entries and published by Playwrights Union of Canada (2001).

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