Surtitling and the New Networks of Theatre Translation in Toronto

Nicole Nolette

Department of French Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada

nicole.nolette@uwaterloo.ca

Nicole Nolette holds the Canada Research Chair in Minority Studies and is Associate Professor Professor at the Department of French Studies at the University of Waterloo, in Canada. Her book, *Jouer la traduction. Théâtre et hétérolinguisme au Canada francophone*, published with the University of Ottawa Press in 2015, received the Ann Saddlemyer Award from the Canadian Association for Theatre Research in 2016 and the Award for the Best Work in Theatre (2014-2016) from the Société québécoise d'études théâtrales. Since 2018, she has been the president of the Société québécoise d'études théâtrales and since July 2021, the co-editor of the journal *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches théâtrales au Canada*.

Surtitling and the New Networks of Theatre Translation in Toronto

This article deals with human and non-human agents of surtitling in Toronto and beyond. After its emergence at the opera in Toronto, surtitling travelled to the theatre, and to other parts of French-speaking Canada, North America and Europe. In this article, based on interviews with theatre surtitlers and on their archived materials, Nolette tracks the invention, growth, social acceptance, standardization, and stagnation of surtitling technologies in Toronto. She investigates three relational aspects of the process of surtitling as a medium of theatre translation to understand its effects on translators and translations now: its cross-genre moves from the opera to the theatre, its intergenerational passage through informal training, as well as its professional networks as they are mobilized across digital platforms and across national boundaries.

Keywords: surtitling, surtitlers, audiovisual translation, theatre translation, opera, translator studies

The invention of surtitling within a media history of theatre translation

On January 21, 1983, the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto opened Richard Strauss's German-language opera *Elektra* (1909) with great fanfare: that evening, a 35 mm slide system made it possible to project an English text onto the stage frame for the first time. The translation by Sonya Friedman, a veteran of subtitled television broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera in New York, assisted by Gunta Dreifelds, is generally considered to be the birth of the performing arts surtitle (Eatock 2003, R3). At this time, the Canadian Opera Company also trademarked the word "surtitle" to describe its above-the-stage technology more generically known as "supertitle" in opposition to the "subtitle" captions found in movies or television series of which it is a "close relative" (Orero 2007, 25). In the wave that followed the Canadian Opera Company's well-publicized coup, the 1980s and 1990s saw a hundred or so opera companies and houses produce foreign-language shows with surtitles in the language of

the American cities where they were performed, as well as throughout the English-speaking world (Low 2002). In Europe, the surtitling technique developed by the Canadian Opera Company was adopted in Milan before reaching Cologne, Florence, Hamburg, Paris and Barcelona (Kentridge 1989). Other companies, including the Metropolitan Opera which had already used the technique for its televised broadcasts, as well as certain spectators elsewhere refused to use surtitles, denouncing the diffraction of the gaze between the text projected and the stage (Kentridge 1989).

At the theatre, surtitles arrived with equal fanfare for the 2004-2005 programming of the Théâtre français de Toronto (TfT), Toronto's professional French-language theatre company. The media was informed that, from April 22nd, during certain French-language performances, the audience would have access to surtitles in English. Artistic Director Guy Mignault explained in local newspaper *The Globe and Mail* that the goal of the initiative was to "promote francophone theatre and culture to anglophones and to facilitate a rapprochement between our two cultures" (2005, 6). The person who conceptualized and handled the surtitles, thus bridging the gap between the two cultures, would be none other thana Dreifelds, who developed the method at the Canadian Opera Company. After eight years of using surtitles at the TfT, its artistic director explained in 2013 that, thanks to this process, the company had experienced a 20 to 50% increase in audiences (Nadeau 2013). Other francophone minority theatres in Western Canada and Québec followed suit, with an equal increase in spectatorship (Ladouceur 2013, Ladouceur 2015, Nolette 2015). Among the differences between these theatre surtitles and opera surtitles are their placement: "[I]n opera, surtitling displays are mainly placed on the top part of the stage over the proscenium, whereas displays in theatres are positioned in a number of different places" (Oncins 2015, 46), including the rear, the front and the lateral part of the stage, depending on "the technical

facilities available and the considerations of the stage director" (Oncins 2015, 48). Moreover, opera titlers are 'invisibilized' from the performance (Desblache 2007) while theatre titlers are sometimes integrated as part of the scenography (Surbezy 2012).

In this article, I respond to Karin Littau's 2011 call for a "media history of translation" by focusing on the medial practice of surtitling. My approach to a media history of translation is informed by Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, whose use Hélène Buzelin (2005, 193) advocates for in Translation Studies in order to "move further in the development of a more agent- and process-oriented type of research." Maeve Olohan (2011) and Littau (2016) also make use of Latour's actor-network theory to "draw […] attention to how human and nonhuman agents are operatives in the production of translations" (Littau 2016, 909). Studying the process of theatre translation, Sirkku Aaltonen (2013) combined actor-network theory with performance, but considered only translators and the materiality of different texts in her analysis of the human and non-human actors that led to the 2008 Finnish stage production of Wajdi Mouawad's play *Incendies.* My own project is to track the invention, growth, social acceptance, standardization, and stagnation of surtitling technologies, following the stages identified by Ursula Franklin (1990) for "prescriptive" (or non-artisanal) technologies, which Olohan (2020) adopts to describe translation memories. Based on interviews with theatre surtitlers, participant observation and donated personal materials[1], I investigate three relational aspects of the domination of surtitling as a medium of theatre translation to understand its effects on translators and translation processes: the division of labour (or lack thereof) from the opera to the theatre; the standardization of the practice known locally under the name "Gunta's Rules"; and the intergenerational transmission of competence through informal training. In doing so, I show a network of human and non-human agents in

action, as well as the constitutive nature of materiality on the processes of translation for the theatre through surtitling.

The invention and division of surtitling labour

Starting with the invention and trademarking of the surtitling technology at the Canadian Opera Company to its transfer and remediation at the theatre, Dreifelds and her medium are inseparable. The surtitler's own personal materials, including electronic drafts of translations and paper binders of operating instructions, help shed light on the surtitling process's three main components of interaction with material devices, or three "crafts ... that form a whole" (Bataillon, Diez, and Muhleisen 2016, 19). These three components are the translation of the source text; the splitting of the titles; as well as their stage operation during rehearsals and the performance. Sometimes one person performs all three functions, as is the case of Dreifelds in what remains of a translation file for Stephan Cloutier's *Apocalypse à Kamloops*, co-produced by the TfT, Ottawa's Théâtre la Catapulte and Vancouver's Théâtre La Seizième, with the support of the French Theatre of the National Arts Centre, presented in Toronto from 31 January to 11 February 2007.

The paper document digitized in Figure 1 belongs to a binder created specifically for the Toronto performances of *Apocalypse à Kamloops* when Dreifelds was asked to create English-language surtitles.

Figure 1. Digitized paper document, *Apocalypse à Kamloops*, 2007. Personal materials from Gunta Dreifelds shared with permission.

For Dreifelds, the surtitling request for the opera is usually accompanied by a copy of the piano score and libretto, as well as an audio-visual recording of the stage performance – for the theatre it usually includes a version of the dramatic or

performance text, and sometimes a recording of the actors in action. Dreifelds typically splits the original-language text or translated libretto into titles by partitioning segments onto the printed text or score while listening to the video recording or, if it is an original creation produced by the TfT, attending its first rehearsals. On this particular French-language typescript are numerical indications in pencil and some text is highlighted, which suggests partitions for titles done before the work of translation itself. The fourth slide in the series, labelled "1", for example, would be displayed when the artistic director uttered the first syllable of the word "Mesdames", the one labelled "2" would follow when he uttered the word "Bienvenue", and so on. The chosen length of the divided titles depends on rhythm of the performance recorded or rehearsed, and its segmentation by the actors themselves. These elements show Dreifelds at work with the tools she is given, and the tools acting upon the way she prioritizes splitting over translating the titles, performance rhythm over language transfer.

Another electronic document, created on Microsoft PowerPoint and exported as a PDF, contains the English-language titles that complete the translation file for *Apocalypse à Kamloops*. Up until the 1990s, Dreifelds would build surtitles by translating, photographing, and processing physical slides to sort into a projector tray, but as new technologies for personal computing emerged (Bonwit 1998, 30), she started to use Microsoft PowerPoint to translate each segment of text into a slide of a presentation to be projected above the stage. In the Microsoft PowerPoint document of *Apocalypse à Kamloops* featured in Figure 2, which starts with a pre-performance address to the audience by then-artistic director of the TfT Guy Mignault, each numbered square represents a new slide with two-line fragments of English-language text.

Figure 2. Apocalypse 2007TfT PowerPoint document. Personal papers of Gunta Dreifelds shared with permission.

To the right of the numbered square, the slides have a title that is invisible to the audience but visible to the surtitle operator, often a number (1, 2, 3, etc.), sometimes a description of the content ("0.3 logo" or "bl" for black, an empty slide).

In both opera and theatre, surtitle text is usually confined to two lines, although theatre allows more flexibility for one- or three-line variations. The number of characters per title may also vary by context, institution, or even number of lines. This is confirmed by Marta Mateo's research on four opera companies (2007, 176): the average is 35 to 40 characters per line, including punctuation and spaces. At the Canadian Opera Company, where Dreifelds worked, the surtitles have an average of 43 characters per line of text appearing centered in white on a black background. In another Microsoft PowerPoint document prepared by the surtitler, the average was 38 characters (including spaces) per one-line title, 62 characters (including spaces) per two-line title, with a wide variation from 5 to 108 characters. There were no headlines of three or more lines.

Both pieces of the translation file of Stephan Cloutier's *Apocalypse à Kamloops* – the French-language paper binder and the English-language Microsoft PowerPoint presentation – are used in to operate the surtitles during the performance. Sitting in the control booth above the spectators' seats, alongside the stage manager who provides lighting and sound signals at the same time, Dreifelds keeps her eyes on the paper copy in the binder, which enables her to follow the French-language performance taking place, and keeps a finger on the keyboard to advance the slide projection. Sometimes, she will confer with the stage manager if certain elements of lighting design, such as brightness or smoke dim the projected text too much, making it impossible to read by

spectators. These negotiations between the surtitler and the stage manager, rarely written down, often lead to adjustments in the lighting cues or general design of the performance.

Both pieces in the translation files also bear witness to a period of adjustment before the final performance, but after an initial division and translation of titles. During the technical week of the production and during the run of the show, Dreifelds hones her titles, sometimes to add one, as evidenced in Figure 1 by a title named "7.1" because it fits between the seventh and eighth created at the start of the process. Similarly, titles 12, 13, and 14 are deleted, with the twelfth now reverting to the word "masque" to include the translation: "This production won the Audience Favorite [sic] Masque last December and plays to sold-out houses across Canada" (see Figure 1). Overall, these revisions tend to better respect the text of the performance as the starting point for the translation, as well as the rhythm of its rendering by human actors. Some of these practices also arise from the various constraints of surtitling with respect to space, time, rhythm and coherence, as Linda Dewolf (2003) summarizes the work of non-human actors upon translation for surtitles. As such, a significant portion of Dreifelds' process is inflected by the constraints of framing technologies and stage manipulation of titles, even if the surtitler has some leeway of her own.

"Gunta's Rules" and the standardization of the "core idea"

The way Gunta Dreifelds describes her translation process and her approach also have much to do with the technology she carries and standardizes from the opera to the theatre. Describing her translation practice at the Canadian Opera Company in 1989, Dreifelds explains:

> In the translation, I look for the core idea. While accuracy is important, it's necessary sometimes to employ a careful artistic licence to ensure that the

> translation is consistent with the director's interpretation of the work. Sometimes I use what John Leberg calls an "industrial" language to say the essentials (Kentridge 1989, 49).

What Dreifelds is primarily concerned with in her practice is what Peter Low (2002) calls "gist translation", that is, the translation of the essence of the message. Dreifelds' comments thus raise two issues of translation by surtitling: the objective of capturing the essence of the performance, and the ethos of condensation and economy. Hervé Péjaudier (2010, 89) expresses this well when he says: "In surtitling there is a rhetoric of miniature". The principle of economy at the heart of the practice invented and standardized by Dreifelds results, among other things, in the condensation of two sentences into one, the attribution of one image per title or the lines of several characters on a single title, as well as the use of very short sentences.

At the TfT, the choices that will be made in this regard are known as "Gunta's Rules," named after the surtitler who instituted them:

- Each slide must express an idea, the "gist translation", and so an idea expressed coherently and concisely in a single slide should not spill over into another. If an idea absolutely must spill over across two slides, ellipses are used to close the first title and to open the second one.
- In general, redundancy is to be avoided, as repetition of a refrain is often omitted in opera surtitling. Proper nouns and onomatopoeia are not included in titles because they would repeat information available orally. This rule on non-redundancy extends to multilingual performances where English is spoken on stage in a play written mostly in French: the first language is not repeated in the surtitle but appears instead as a blank slide.

- Blank slides are used between titles when the reading time is shorter than the performance of the lines so that audience members can focus on the stage rather than reread the same title.
- The use of punctuation should be limited to a period followed by a single space; exclamation points and dashes are not to be included in titles.
- The font should be sans serif, either Century Gothic and Ariel, but more recently Kalinga.
- Regular writing conventions apply: contractions (such as won't, don't) are preferred to long forms (such as will not or do not); numbers from one to nine should be written in letters, double figures in digits.

In some ways, "Gunta's Rules" are standardized for the medium, where constraints of space, time, rhythm and coherence lead to what Bruno Péran (2010, 71) —following Teresa Tomaszkiewicz (1993) on subtitling—identifies as the two main operations of translation by titles, deletion and condensatory transformation. Condensatory transformation "consists in reformulating certain elements to obtain more concise forms" (Péran 2010, 71). For example, at the Théâtre du Nouvel-Ontario, a company for which Dreifelds sometimes produces surtitles, Michèle Laliberté (2017, 87) has seen "a 30% reduction in the number of words" compared to the original text.

"Gunta's Rules" are coherent with research on opera and theatre surtitling, such as the 2020 study (Abraitienė and Laura Antanavičiūtė) of the Lithuanian titling of Verdi's *La Traviata* (1983) by the Kaunas State Musical Theatre (2017) and the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre (2009), which testifies to textual compression at word level and, less frequently, at sentence level. In addition to omission, which is common in these two companies, titles require the use of shorter synonyms, the generalization of enumerations, and the simplification of verb tenses.

Peter Low (2002, 101) also explains, in a prescriptive tone, that each title should always be an independent statement, and that ambiguity and obvious repetition should be avoided, or titles made redundant by the gestures of the actors, their acting or the stage design. Linda Dewolf (2001, 181), whose comments overlap somewhat with Low's, explains that repetition and secondary details should be avoided at all costs, syntax, vocabulary and content should be simplified, and each title should contain a logical and self-sufficient unit. These comments on opera surtitling adhere to Gunta's rule on each slide expressing a single idea. As far as theatrical surtitling is concerned, research by Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine and Sophie Grandjean (2001, 242) suggest that it generally proceeds from the "suppression of elements that would only offer redundancy in relation to the scenic action" ("suppression d'éléments qui n'offriraient que redundance par rapport à l'action scénique", whereas surtitler Bruno Péran (2010, 72) explains that these can include the names of characters, onomatopoeia, and words that repeat gestures on stage. These condensatory transformations, which also appear in Dreifeld's work, certainly amputate the poetry of the dramatic text, but they serve the utilitarian function of the surtitle admirably in live performance.

While there are some obvious similarities between "Gunta's Rules" and the informal standards of titling, some are unique to Dreifelds who advocates, for example, the use of blank slides between titles when the reading time is shorter than the performance of the lines. This particular use is reflected in the following anecdote about the surtitles of Bizet's opera *Carmen*, where an empty slide avoids an unexpected reading effect:

> But that [the "industrial language"] doesn't always work because sometimes the essentials are very understated and can ruin dramatic tension. For example, in *Carmen*, Don José's masterpiece aria *La fleur que tu m'avais jetée* is immediately followed by Carmen singing on a repeated low D, "*non, tu ne m'aimes pas*" (no,

> you don't love me). At the dress rehearsal, the audience of school children roared, so I decided to have a blank screen until she says "if you did love me you'd come to the mountains with me." I'd rather have the audience wondering what happens than laughing, which might distract the artists on stage (Kentridge 1989, 49–50).

This example also shows two functions of the surtitle medium intersecting: the transmission of linguistic meaning and transparency in relation to the stage performance. Where the title loses the transparency that characterizes the medium to acquire an opacity that could distract the young audience, the insertion of an empty slide allows the surtitler to reacquire this transparency, even if it means abandoning the communicative function.

Similar singularities mark the use of punctuation. While Peter Low insists that titles should be broken up with bullet points and punctuation should be used, but avoids the period at the end of the title, Dreifelds uses only the period followed by a single space, thus refusing to incorporate exclamation points or dashes into the body of the text. Figure 3, from Stephan Cloutier's play *Apocalypse in Kamloops* (2007), documented in the previous pages, illustrates the scope of "Gunta's Rules", with the highlighting in purple and superscript indicating the passage to a new slide:

> MIREILLE
> [222] De la roche, de la glace, ça va déplacer de l'air pareil, okay! [223] Où c'est que tu penses qu'a va aller, toute l'eau du Pacifique, hein? [224] J'ai pas envie de recevoir une vague de sept cents pieds dans le front, moi, ça doit fesser solide! (Cloutier 2007, 18)

> MIREILLE
> [222] Some rock, some ice, it's going to move some air right, ok! [223] Where do you think it's all gonna go, all that Pacific water, huh? [224] I don't at all want to get a wave of seven hundred feet in the forehead, me, it's gotta hit solid! (translation mine)

The three lines of speech, already divided by the highlighting and superscript numbers, are rendered by as many one- or two-line titles:

Partial transcription: (Rock, ice. It will still blow everything up. // Where do you think all the water /from the Pacific is going to go? // I don't want to be hit in the face by / a 700 feet wave. That's gotta hurt.)

Figure 3. Screenshot of slides numbered 222-224 (250-252) from the PowerPoint document Apocalypse2007TfT, personal material from Gunta Dreifelds shared with permission.

In this document from Dreifelds' personal archives, the titles follow the surtitler's rule of punctuation by favouring the final period over the exclamation point in the opening line. Furthermore, the first title is the only one to contain a comma, with the second comma in the opening line replaced by a period: "Rock, ice. It will still blow everything up". More significantly, condensatory transformation clearly operates in the translation of the titles, reducing the contribution of the French-Canadian sociolect to the syntactic construction. Some prepositions and articles ("De la") are removed or omitted. At sentence level, the complex question: "Où c'est que tu penses qu'a va aller, toute l'eau du Pacifique, hein?" is simplified into: "Where do you think all the water from the Pacific is going to go?". The last sentence, also quite complex, is divided into two simple sentences. A verbal periphrasis: "J'ai pas envie de recevoir" is compressed into: "I don't want to be hit". And the phrase: "ça doit fesser solide" is replaced by an extremely terse short form: "That's gotta hurt". A short form is also preferred for numbers in writing: "sept cents pieds" becomes "700 feet", thus reducing the number of signs occupied by this part of the title by half. The 233-character line, including spaces, is therefore compressed to 184 characters, including spaces.

In a way, Dreifelds' method seems appropriate for the medium of opera and theatre surtitles. The rhetoric of the miniature is standardized over the surtitles of some 40 shows produced or hosted by TfT in the decade from 2005 to 2015. Titling conventions remain admirably constant in this body of translations, with the fairly strict rules of translation normalizing the product presented during the performance. Among the surtitlers trained in Dreifelds' lineage, these rules are institutionalized to the point of becoming a particular grammar of surtitling. For the audiences who move between Dreifelds' work and that of her successors—and who thus ensure continuity—the rules correspond to a written form, non-human agents that these audiences learn to expect, to the point of requesting them.

The transmission of surtitling skills across generations and platforms

In 2015, the TfT celebrated the tenth anniversary of its famous surtitles: the technology was then at the stage of social acceptation by audiences and of standardization from "Gunta's Rules". At this time, Dreifelds decided to retire, rearranging the human and non-human assemblage between stage technologies, production team and translation agent. The theatre company recruited three people to be trained to do her work: Okens, Hall and Christopher Webb. Of these three, neither Okens nor Hall had any training in surtitling, and neither had a professional background in translation. Dreifelds and the surtitling technologies she manipulated had an important role in shaping the practice in the years that followed as both Okens and Hall gained expertise in surtitling through practicing alongside their mentor and using the same devices. Yet even as the skill was transmitted, Okens and Hall's reasons and methods for surtitling diverged, as did their dreams for their practice.

Okens is a theatre and television costume designer, a multimedia artist and a language enthusiast—she is fluent in French, English and German. Even while working

as a costume designer at TfT, she was interested in Dreifelds' collaboration with the company. In my 2018 interview, Okens described her entry into the surtitling business:

> I was there when Gunta was working with surtitles. Because I'm bilingual, even trilingual, I've always had an interest in languages and how it translates and how there's never exactness... Something gets added or lost every time. [...] I had fun finding out how she interpreted things, how I interpreted them differently, how interpretation depending on where you were raised. I'm also interested because in principle my primary languages should be French and German, but I speak English best. When Gunta decided to retire, I told the company I would like to do the work (Okens 2018).

For this emerging surtitler, the primary interest is working with languages, interpreting texts and reclaiming her linguistic heritage.

Like Dreifelds, Okens (2018) sees the division of titles and translation as a joint process. For her, dividing the titles is a way to prolong the artistic work, to "read a text and to anticipate where there will be a breath if it isn't in the stage directions". That is what, for Okens, plays:

> a large part of the art of translation for the theatre, for surtitles. Eventually you'll see a sequence and you'll know where the breaks are. I imagine at that point that the person is angry, there's a breath. Or if you want to be suspenseful, you'll put a little pause there. And sometimes I'm wrong, and sometimes I'm right, but I like that little game, which has nothing to do with the text, the words necessarily, but with telling a story (Okens 2018).

For Okens, the linguistic translation takes place in two steps. First, she will do a first draft in English based on the French text:

> I go through the translation for the first time without thinking too much about it. If I spend twenty minutes on a word, it's not a good thing. [...] I do the best I can with what I have. If I have a question, I put an exclamation mark or a question mark (Okens 2018).

Typically, when she receives a surtitling contract, Okens challenges herself to translate five pages a day, a job she often does in the evenings because of her full-time job in another field. Her first draft is followed by an editing process where she puts aside the source text to consider solely the English-language PowerPoint document: “I read it and think, ‘It looks like a Francophone trying to speak in English. What would it really be like that in English?’ Often you have to switch the front of the sentence with the back and that fixes everything.” (Okens 2018). In her words, the final step of the translation involves domesticating the text to make the reading process more immediate and more invisible in English.

Hall, on the other hand, was trained in theatre management at Ryerson University in Toronto. Unlike Okens, Hall does not speak of a love of languages and does not identify herself as a translator. The two women’s conception of the work of surtitling therefore differs. Whereas for Okens, surtitling is an artistic act of translation, for Hall (2018), it is more about theatrical direction and manipulation:

> I’m not a translator, I just do the surtitles. It wasn’t something I had planned to do. I’ve been doing theatre since I was eight I think, this was the first time I did a play. And that’s it, that’s what I wanted to do. I was studying theatre and theatre administration at Ryerson University.

But then Hall volunteered for the TfT, where she says she went “from the stage manager, to stage manager and translator, without having done any translation, but I had done a lot of surtitles. And I’ve done a lot of stage-managing so I understand how to split the text into titles.” (Hall 2018). Hall’s surtitling process stems from this skill in directing, manipulating and splitting text:

> Usually what I try to do is go to one of the first readings of the text [to] place my cues. [...] I like to place my cues before I start translating because when you translate, you do it directly in the PowerPoint for the slides. You don’t do a full

> translation of the text because then you're doing the work twice. [...] I place my cues, then do the translation so that it works within the structure of the cues that I created as much as possible. (Hall 2018)

When she cannot attend a reading of the text, Hall still divides the text by guessing where to place cues based on her experience with acting and the actors' breathing, and when a recording of the guest production is available, she listens to it first.

Hall herself explains how her approach differs from that of Okens, resulting in divergent outcomes in terms of the surtitling process and the proposed product:

> I'm always like: "How are we going to divide the text? Where do we put my cue? How does it work when we actually the stage management?" Automatically, it's stage management and that's what I do, stage management. And she's more about the texts, the words. We have two completely different brains and two different processes (Hall 2018).

Okens (2018) also considers Hall to have "the eye of a stage manager, while I have the eye of an artist. Together, we're the perfect person. That's why we often send each other texts", often by email. In doing so, they are verifying their linguistic translation and the distribution of lines into titles, and exchanging on common problems. Because their interests and skills are complementary, they can collaborate to ensure a better-quality product.

These collaborative endeavors also extend beyond Toronto, where both surtitlers work. At first glance, this intensification is a result of Okens designing surtitles for the Théâtre du Nouvel-Ontario in Sudbury from her home in Toronto, a practice initiated by Dreifelds since at least 2013. Once received in Sudbury via email, the surtitles are checked for content and technique during dress rehearsals, adapted by the designer based on feedback from the cast, and then handled by the same person who checks them. Another form of digital communication, that of social networks, also marks the

intensification of the networks mobilized by translation agents across Canada and beyond. In 2018, the Toronto-based surtitlers started a private Facebook group to reach out to about 15 colleagues in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. The translation ethos specific to the medium of surtitling is made explicit in the group's name, which is anonymized here. For the members of this group, translations for surtitles should be condensed and handled efficiently during the performance, allowing the audience to read quickly to better focus on the action on stage. They should also capture the humor of the show but not steal the show from the actors by anticipating punchlines or unveiling dramatic reveals too quickly.

The discussions in this private group, shared with permission, mobilize a new, largely female, collaborative translation community. Members discuss issues raised by the practice of theatre translation and adaptation between human and non-human agents. They focus on the hardware devices and infrastructure at their disposal. Which software, such as PowerPoint or Keynote, is the best for designing and manipulating surtitles, for example? Do the theatre institutions where they work use a master slide to controls the layout, theme, colors, and organization of the slides? The surtitlers discuss the introduction of smart captioned glasses for the hearing impaired in European and British theatre institutions. They explain trying to convince theatre management at their own institutions to invest in this technology—to no avail, so far. In this digital discussion that crosses Canada, international examples of human and non-human interaction also appear. For example, one participant announced that she was be going to Belgium to learn how to use Torticoli software, developed specifically for surtitling. Another shared an article on translation screens, intermediality and the contemporary stage in Germany.

In the sharing of these practices, the surtitlers unfold a theory of theatrical translation where the agency of technology is felt and understood. Once unfolded, the practical experiences that mobilize this theory allow for a better understanding surtitling, the translational norms that are constructed within it, as well as the passage of these norms from opera to theatre, from one surtitler to the next. They also make visible the act of trust that enables the conception and manipulation of titles, an act that unites the surtitlers to the production team and to the audience, but also human and non-human agents of translation. In the theatre space just as much as in the Facebook group, the act of collaboration and trust that translation mobilizes extends beyond professional colleagues to a discussion of norms and technological devices that could further the practice.

Stagnation and Beyond

As surtitling becomes a popular medium of theatre translation, and in some ways so standardized that its Toronto designers are hesitant to change its rules, could it become stagnant, as anticipated by Ursula Franklin about the life course of all technologies (1990)? Put another way, are the titles at the TfT meant to continue abiding by the rules of opera surtitling? Both Hall and Okens agree that their titling practice and expertise are rooted in the training provided by their predecessor and that training's impact on the formatting of titles. Hall (2018) puts it this way: "I learned everything from Gunta Dreifelds. […] She can say she's been doing surtitles [for 40 years] ... That's longer than anyone else on the planet!" And she adds, about her process: "I always use numbers for cues. That's how Gunta taught me to do it." But with Dreifelds' retirement, her legacy in Toronto and beyond is set to change. Okens (2018) recognizes this, noting the differences between her practice in her own city and that of surtitlers at the Théâtre

la Seizième in Vancouver, particularly with respect to the paper-based book for managing stage titles:

> We seem to be doing this completely differently from people in Vancouver. They don't seem to have an annotated text necessarily. Melanie and I are doing what Gunta did and I wonder, "Why don't we do it like that?" I'm sure these are questions Gunta asked herself at some point. But I also think that after 30 years in the business, you must be so used to your method that you don't want...

Although she stops short of saying the word "change," it is indeed change that can be anticipated in a time of intergenerational and technological transition.

For Hall (2018), the changes in surtitling practice are relatively minor, allowing her to cross the fine line between the crafts of the stage manager and title designer. To increase the visibility of the projected text. for example, she will change the title font from Kalinga to Arial Narrow, which breaks with "Gunta's Rules":

> Usually I use Kalinga. Sometimes you do the focus [of the projector] and there's something that doesn't work and someone says it's not big enough for visibility. Suddenly, with the focus, the sentences stick out a little bit on the sides [of the titles]. Sometimes it's easier for me to change the font in my software than to do a full re-focus of the projector. This is one of the cases that I did that, I changed it to Arial Narrow. Usually its Kalinga: that's what they use in the opera and that's what we use.

In this example, a media filiation runs directly between opera and theatre on the one hand, and between Dreifelds and Hall on the other. Dreifelds' use of the same font maintained a consistency of surtitling across both media, but as theatre-related staging concerns emerged for Hall, she made changes to how her titles were conceived in the presentation software, rather than resorting to stage management solutions. This example emphasizes how the stage and the audience members' line of sight can become non-human and human actor in the practice of designing titles. It also shows the practice

at the TfT coming closer to theatre surtitling—which can be projected anywhere onstage depending on scenic concerns—than to its static operatic counterpart.

In addition to modifying the font of her titles, Hall also thinks about a new purpose for ellipses, used in "Gunta's Rules" to continue an idea on another title when it is too long. For the play *Five Faces for Evelyn Frost*, presented at the TfT in the autumn of 2017, the surtitler instead chose to use ellipses to replace a list of proper nouns:

> Instead of repeating "I have read" every time, I put it once with three dots and that's it. So it's understood that the word that is repeated is "I have read..." I think that audiences are smart and they will understand that it is a list and that it is proper names (Hall 2018).

The repetitive dramatic construction of *Five Faces for Evelyn Frost*, based on Guillaume Corbeil's contemporary text *Nous voir nous (Cinq visages pour Camille Brunelle)* (2013), lends itself well to a modification of the conventions of surtitling. Moreover, several of "Gunta's Rules"—the primacy given to the stage, the refusal of redundancy, and the non-repetition of proper nouns—conflict with the convention given for ellipses. Faced with this internal divergence of norms, the surtitler agreed to break one of the conventions, deemed minor in relation to the others. In a new relationship between the human and the non-human, the three dots thus take on a particular function for the performances of a single show, notwithstanding the grammar inculcated on the audience by other TfT productions.

The major changes desired by Okens, on the other hand, are in part consistent with those mentioned by the theatre companies, centers, and festival managers working in French in Canada who participated in a 2017 survey by Michèle Laliberté. Of the 65 respondents, 54% were not satisfied with the PowerPoint software. Their reasons ranged from the management of the layout to the inconvenience of operating between Windows and OS X, from to the sobriety of the graphic presentation that complicates its integration

into the performance to the difficulty of editing, also "not adapted to the reality of live performance." (Laliberté 2017, 91) According to Okens, the changes to be made to Dreifelds' system should first address the technical difficulty of editing while stage-managing. An example of this came with the translation of a new play that was being reworked as rehearsals progressed.

> There were scene changes. And when you're doing that by hand, it becomes difficult to write in [the managing text]. I understand how the system was created for opera, which never changes, but it doesn't work as well for new plays. I wonder if there's a better way, now with the technology we have. […] What I would like to have is the PowerPoint presentation and the managing text together. Instead of having a pen and paper for the managing text, it's all integrated within the same computer screen. When you change a slide, it re-numbers the text. At the end, you can just print the text, or even better, you annotate it online (Okens 2018).

The dream software would take an integrative approach to the managing text and presentation slides, flexibly linking the source and target-language documents thorough the numbering system. There is no mention, in the surtitler's words, of a desire to change the ethos of translation consisting of deletion and condensation, contrary to Laliberté's desire in 2017 to create software that would reduce the importance of these operations and the loss of content inherent in the theatre translation process.

In addition to this change in the title creation platform, Okens hopes that the TfT will move from a more synthetic form of surtitling, typical of opera, to a form of surtitling as score or as scenography, more common in theatre. Synthetic, score, and scenography are three categories of theatre surtitling defined by Agnès Surbezy (2012) to designate, in the first case, a synthetic practice of "laying down milestones" (102) of the plot for the spectator. In the second case, surtitles "play on typography, colour, and formatting to add an extra meaning and guide the reading" (106); in the third case, the text leaves the frame of the stage and "comes to be inscribed directly into the scenography" (107). Speaking to

the latter category, Okens (2018) testifies to her experience as costume designer of the play *Ultrasound* by Canadian playwright Adam Pottle, staged at the Cahoots Theatre Project in Toronto in 2016, where "surtitles were built into the set [and] "followed the action. […] The text would start low, on the screens behind [the actors], and as they got more excited, the texts would go up the screen to the ceiling".

As for Hall (2018), she recalls that surtitling as scenography has sometimes been used at TfT, as in the case of the performance *Les Zinspirés 3D*, created from texts written by young people in 2014:

> The set designer had put in a kind of comic book and created flat screens painted like clouds that hung from the grid. There were two, maybe three clouds, but we used two on each side of the stage and to project onto. The surtitles were part of the set and that's always much more beautiful. It was really just screens, flat pieces of wood, but perfect. And when there were no surtitles, it was just a set. There wasn't another screen hanging there.

In these comments about scenographic design that would project titles onto flat clouds made of wood, surtitling as scenography is valued for its ability to make the title invisible. This value attributed to invisibility is paradoxical, considering that Surbezy predicts that scenenographic surtitling leads to an increased visibility of the translation and to an expansion of its possibilities in performance. Valuing invisible surtitling in scenography is not so paradoxical, however, given the media transfer from the opera where titling invisibility is a foregone conclusion, given the primacy given to immediacy in translation at the TfT, and given the pull towards the integration of non-human elements onstage in this particular performance. As technological changes are thought through in a specific theatrical network, human and non-human actors react in unexpected and unpredictable ways. Forms, materials, audience expectations, and designers realign sideways and backwards.

Conclusion

In tracking the invention, growth and standardization of a Toronto network of theatre translation using personal interviews and materials shared by surtitlers, I have shed light on a particular material process across two decades and I have showcased the interdependence between human and non-human agents of translation. As such, surtitling is the outcome of material interactions between humans (e.g. first reading and acting providing cues, comparing titles with other surtitlers working on the same plays, networks) and non-humans (e.g. software, inherited rules, language or professional backgrounds relevant to differing practices). At the Canadian Opera Company and at the TfT, Dreifelds invented a new translation practice for performing arts and standardized norms for designing translations on personal computer screens and projecting titles onto other screens during a live event. Some of these rules are shared by other opera and theatre companies, a sign of growth as well as of institutionalization. Within the performance culture of the TfT, and because of Dreifelds' dominant role, surtitlers mediate encounters between a theatre institution and its audience by engendering a specific translation form that shared most of the characteristics of opera surtitling. As agents of translation, Dreifelds' successors, Hall and Okens, mobilize knowledge about technology to grow and institutionalize their practice or to reflect on and enact possible changes. The labour of theatre surtitlers in the specific context of Toronto is therefore an ongoing collaboration with objects, infrastructures, and human beings–a network of practice and rehearsals in and towards a shared experience of performance.

Across the generational divide, and even as new title formatting and scenographic staging practices emerge from interactions between human translators, non-human translation and communication devices, as well as local norms of media use, this

collaborative labour can represent a refusal of deep change in the institution's ways of doing things as conventionalized by a pioneer and seasoned surtitler. This attitude reflects an ethos of translation for surtitles, that of accommodating the audience through mediation aimed at immediacy. As Hall (2018) explained at the end of my interview with her:

> For at least five seasons, that's how we've done surtitles and the conventions in sentence structure, so I'm never going to change unless it's absolutely necessary. Because now the audience who are subscribers every year, who come to all the shows, they're used to seeing that. They are able to read it super quickly and understand, they know what it means. I don't want to change it because I want them to focus on the surtitles as little as possible.

That is, audiences too are human actors constraining changes to non-human formatting rules and technologies. Trained by the surtitled programming at the TfT, audience members now not only accept "Gunta's Rules", a necessary step for the life course of technologies, but require them. They expect to focus on the performance on stage rather than its textual translation, which is considered separate from the performance. This human result of a non-human opera-derived form entrenched early in the technological practice of surtitling means that subsequent surtitlers feel that there is less leeway for further theatrical, scenographic, material experimentation in their work, a feeling of status quo or stagnation that can perhaps only be assuaged by ensuring further connective networking and collaboration.

Acknowledgments

This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The author would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the Théâtre français de Toronto, Gunta Dreifelds, Melanie Hall, and Nina Okens, whose participation to this research project and permissions made it possible to get closer to the theatre translation process.

1. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE# 31460).

References

Aaltonen, Sirkku. 2013. “Theatre Translation as Performance.” *Target* 25 (3): 385–406. Doi:10.1075/target.25.3.05aal

Abraitienė, Lina, and Laura Antanavičiūtė. 2020. “Text Compression in Surtitles: A Case Study of the Opera *La Traviata*.” *Sustainable Multilingualism* 16 (1): 145–74. Doi :10.2478/sm-2020-0008.

Bataillon, Michel, Pierre-Yves Diez, and Laurent Muhleisen. 2016. *Guide du sur-titrage*. Paris : Maison Antoine Vitez.

Bonwit, Stuart. 1998. “Mac at the Opera.” *Washington Apple Pi Journal*, May-June 30. https://www.wap.org/journal/surtitles/surtitles.html

Carillo Darancet, Juan Marcos. 2020. “The Drama of Surtitling: Ever-Changing Translation on Stage.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility*, edited by Łukasz Bogucki and Mikołaj Deckert, 173–88. Springer Nature.

Desblache, Lucile. 2007. “Music to My Ears, but Words to My Eyes? Text, Opera and Their Audiences.” *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series–Themes in Translation Studies* 6: 155–70.

Dewolf, Linda. 2001. “Surtitling Operas with Examples of Translations from German into French and Dutch.” In (*Multi) Media Translation: Concepts, Practices, and Research*, edited by Yves Gambier and Henrik Gottlieb. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Dewolf, Linda. 2003. “La place du surtitrage comme mode de traduction et vecteur d’échange culturel pour les arts de la scène.” *Theatre Research in Canada / Recherches théâtrales au Canada* 24 (1). https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/TRIC/article/view/7068/8127.

Eatock, Colin. 2003. “COC Celebrates Its Surtitle Revolution; It’s Been 20 Years since an Innovation by the Canadian; Opera Company Changed the World for Operagoers.” *Globe and Mail*, January 21.

Franklin, Ursula. 1990. *The Real World of Technology*. CBC Massey Lectures Series. Montreal: CBC Enterprises.

Hall, Melanie. 2018 Interview by the author.

Kentridge, Catherine. 1989. “Surtitles. Today’s Language of Opera.” *Canadian Opera Company Magazine*, June: 45-50.

Ladouceur, Louise. 2013. “Surtitles Take the Stage in Franco-Canadian Theatre.” *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies* 25 (3): 343-64.

Ladouceur, Ladouceur. 2015. “De l’emploi des surtitres anglais dans les théâtres franco-canadiens: Bénéfice et préjudice.” *TTR: Traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 28 (1-2): 239-257.

Laliberté, Michèle. 2017. “Un surtitrage fonctionnel, artistique ou intermédial ? Réalités théâtrales multilingues à l’ère numérique.” *Theatre Research in Canada / Recherches théâtrales au Canada* 38 (1). https://journals-lib-unb-ca.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/index.php/TRIC/article/view/25719

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Littau, Karin. 2011. “First Steps towards a Media History of Translation.” *Translation Studies* 4 (3): 261–81. doi:10.1080/14781700.2011.589651

Low, Peter. 2002. “Surtitles for Opera: A Specialized Translation Task.” *Babel* 48 (2): 97–110. doi:https://doi.org/10.1075/babel.48.2.01low.

Nadeau, Jean-Benoît. 2013. “La belle effronterie.” *L’Actualité*, February.

Nolette, Nicole. 2015. *Jouer la traduction. Theâtre et hétérolinguisme au Canada francophone*. Ottawa: Les Presses de l’Université d’Ottawa.

“Not Lost in Translation.” *Globe and Mail*, April 14 2005: P6.

Okens, Nina. 2018 Interview by the author.

Olohan, Maeve. 2020. *Translation and Practice Theory*. 1st ed. London; New York: Routledge.

Oncins, Estella. 2015. “The Tyranny of the Tool: Surtitling Live Performances.” *Perspectives* 23 (1): 42–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2013.793374.

Orero, Pilar. 2007. “Sampling Audio Description in Europe.” In *Media for All: Subtitling for the Deaf, Audio Description and Sign Language*, edited by Jorge Diaz-Cintas, Aline Remael, and Pilar Orero, 111–25. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Péran, Bruno. 2010. “Éléments d’analyse de la stratégie de traduction mise en œuvre dans le surtitrage.” *Traduire. Revue française de la traduction*, 223 (December): 66–77. doi:10.4000/traduire.288

Pridmore-Franz, Milane. 2017. “A Study on the Audience Reception of Theatre Surtitles: Surtitling in a Francophone Minority Context in Canada and the Language Learning Potentials of Theatre Surtitles.” MA thesis, University of Alberta.

Surbezy, Agnès. 2012. “Quand le texte s’affiche sur scène. Réflexion sur quelques exemples de surtitrages.” In *Babel revisitée. L’intervalle d’une langue à l’autre, du texte à la scène*, edited by Béatrice Bonhomme, Christine Di Benedetto, and Jean-Pierre Triffaux, 97–112. Paris: L’Harmattan.

Schwartz-Gastine, Isabelle, and Sophie Grandjean. 2001. “Surtitrage : texte projeté, texte-image ?” In *La Scène et les images*, edited by Béatrice Picon-Vallin: 213–57. Paris: Editions du CNRS.

Tomaszkiewicz, Teresa. 1993. *Les opérations linguistiques qui sous-tendent le processus de sous-titrage des films*. PhD diss., Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu.