

WORDS IN MOTION: TRANSLATION OR ADAPTATION?

By

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the conventional divide between translation and adaptation, arguing that both are inherently interpretive and transformative practices. While translation is typically seen as the linguistic transfer of a text across languages and adaptation as a creative shift across media or cultures, this study proposes a unified framework grounded in theories of intersemiotic translation (Jakobson, 1959) and cultural rewriting (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). Drawing from adaptation theory (Hutcheon, 2006) and semiotics, the article explores how both translators and adapters act as co-authors, reshaping texts according to audience, context, ideology, and medium. This study demonstrates that fidelity in adaptation, much like in translation, often lies in preserving thematic and emotional resonance rather than replicating form. Ultimately, this research invites a shift from rigid binary thinking to a continuum of textual transformation, where both adaptation and translation are viewed as dynamic acts of “meaning in motion.”

Introduction

In the realm of translation studies, the process of converting text from one language to another has long been a subject of profound scholarly debate. The question of how best to convey meaning across linguistic boundaries has led to a wide range of approaches, with direct and indirect translation being two key strategies that shape the trajectory of cross-cultural communication. This paper seeks to explore these two distinct translation strategies within the framework of linguistic theory and qualitative research methodology.

Translation, as a field of study, is not merely about the mechanical substitution of words between languages but involves a nuanced negotiation of meaning, context, and cultural identity. Ashiru-abdulrahman K. (2023) in *La traduction au Milieu de la Mondialisation* postulates that “La traduction est plus qu’un processus bilingue, c’est un acte bi-culturel” Translation is more than a bilingual process; it is a bi-cultural act. Linguistic theory, particularly theories proposed by scholars such as Eugene Nida (1964), also stressed that translation is not a simple act of linguistic transfer but a complex process that demands careful consideration of both form and function. The phrase “*word in motion*” evokes more than the literal transport of text; it signals a dynamic process of transformation, negotiation, and reinterpretation. When a literary novel is reimagined as a film, a play is reinterpreted within a different cultural milieu, or a historical narrative is rendered in another language, a critical question emerges: are we observing a process of translation, adaptation, or a hybrid form that transcends both?

Traditionally, translation has been anchored in linguistic fidelity, aiming to render a text from one language into another while preserving its meaning, tone, and structure. Adaptation, in contrast, implies a more creative and interpretative act; often involving shifts in form, medium, audience, or cultural context. Yet, as critical theory increasingly challenges rigid binaries, scholars have begun to interrogate whether these distinctions hold up under scrutiny. Is every adaptation inherently a form of intersemiotic translation as Roman Jakobson suggests? Or does the very act of re-creating a work in a new context resist such categorization?

This article adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing in-depth analysis of translation practices and the examination of real-world examples. By applying qualitative techniques such as case studies (literary work of D.OFagunwa’s *Igbo Olodumare*, as translated by Wole Soyinka), and textual analysis, the article seeks to offer insight into the decision-making processes behind translation choices. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how translators navigate the spectrum of adapting and translating while considering factors such as cultural context, audience expectations, and linguistic intricacies.

Through this exploration, the article will delve into the theoretical intersections and tensions between adaptation and translation, arguing that both are acts of textual mobility that engage in similar processes of interpretation, transformation, and contextual negotiation. Drawing on perspectives from translation studies, adaptation theory and semiotics, this study aims to deconstruct the conceptual boundaries that separate these fields, offering a framework for understanding the transmedial and transcultural journey of texts in motion and practical insights into the evolving field of translation studies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the intersection of linguistic theories of translation, particularly the concepts of adaptation. This framework draws on key linguistic translation theories such as Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence, Roman Jakobson's classification of translation, Lawrence Venuti's ideas on domestication and foreignization and Linda Hutcheon theory of adaptation. These concepts will guide the exploration of the translation processes discussed in the article and their implications for meaning transfer across languages.

Translation Overviews

Translation theory has evolved as an interdisciplinary field, with a strong foundation in linguistics. According to Eugene Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence, the focus in translation is not only on linguistic forms but also on achieving equivalent communicative effect between the source and target languages (Nida, 1964). This is relevant to the spectrum of adaptation and translation because dynamic equivalence calls for flexibility in transposition strategies, where translation could be employed to maintain surface linguistic similarity, and adaptation could adjust the message to match cultural, media or contextual nuances.

Roman Jakobson, in his seminal work on the types of translation, categorizes translation into three types: intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic (Jakobson, 1959). The spectrum of adaptation and translation aligns with Jakobson's interlingual translation, where the transfer of meaning occurs between two different languages. While translation corresponds to a more

linguistic transfer of meaning from one language to another, adaptation might involve more interpretative shifts to accommodate cultural, syntactic, or pragmatic differences between languages and genre. Jakobson's classification highlights the variability in translation strategies and the degrees of linguistic transformation involved.

Adaptation vs. Translation: Conceptual overview

At a foundational level, translation and adaptation are often presented as distinct practices. Translation is traditionally defined as the linguistic transfer of a text from one language to another, with a focus on preserving semantic integrity, stylistic nuance, and communicative intent (Munday, 2016). In contrast, adaptation is commonly associated with creative transformation, often involving the reworking of a source text into a different medium. Examples (novel to play or film), genre, or cultural context. (Hutcheon, 2006).

The dichotomy between adaptation and translation is central to understanding how meaning is negotiated across languages. While translation refers to a transposition method that strives for as close a linguistic equivalence as possible, staying faithful to the original form and syntax. This method often works best in situations where there is a high degree of linguistic similarity between the source and target languages or when the content is relatively straightforward and context-independent. Adaptation involves more significant shifts in form, structure, or meaning to account for linguistic and cultural disparities (Venuti, 1995). Adaptation becomes crucial when the languages involved are distant in structure or when the source text contains culturally specific references or it is a bridge from one genre to another. In these cases, the translator may employ techniques such as paraphrasing, domestication (Venuti, 1995), or even the creation of entirely new expressions to bridge the gap between the languages or genre.

Despite the conceptual separation, both practices involve acts of interpretation, negotiation, and recreation. Translation is rarely a word-for-word exercise, and adaptation is not merely a derivative affair. Instead, both are embedded in reception contexts that demand sensitivity to audience, purpose, and form (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990).

The division between adaptation and translation begins to dissolve when viewed through the lens of semiotics and media theory. Roman Jakobson in K. Ashiru-abdulrahman (2018) proposed three categories of translation:

Intralingual translation (within the same language), Interlingual translation (between languages), Intersemiotic translation (between sign systems). Jakobson's third category, intersemiotic translation, is particularly relevant for understanding adaptation as a type of translation—one that shifts a message from a verbal code (e.g., novel) to another semiotic system (e.g., film, theater, or visual art). From this standpoint, adaptations can be seen not as reinterpretations, but as transpositions of meaning across modalities (Littau, 2011).

Linda Hutcheon(2006) further challenges the rigid boundaries between these concepts by framing adaptation as both a process and a product. She describes it as “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work,” involving both repetition and variation (p. 8). Her theory positions adaptation as a form of intertextual engagement, where the adapted work is in constant dialogue with its source—much like a translated text engages with its original.

Binary Opposition

The persistent effort to place translation and adaptation in binary opposition (like literal vs. interpretive, faithful vs. free, linguistic vs. cultural) limits our understanding of how texts move through contexts and media. As Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) assert, both practices are “rewritings” that serve ideological, political, and aesthetic agendas. The translator, like the adapter, makes choices that are never neutral, shaping meaning in accordance with audience, power structures, and institutional constraints.

Consider, for instance, a stage adaptation of a novel performed in another language, or a subtitled film with localized idioms. These examples blur the lines between adaptation and translation, suggesting that the two may operate along a continuum of transformation rather than existing in isolated categories. For instance the literal, interlingual translation from wole Soyinka's translation of the Forest of Olodumare:

“My father punished Soponna, humiliated glandular ailments, ruined the very name of rheumatism, stomach pains turned to ancient fables, headache was reduced to infancy...” Wole Soyinka, *In the Forest of Olodumare*

In this textual transformation Soyinka retains many disease names in direct, literal fashion (e.g. rheumatism,” “stomach pains,” “headache) rather than recasting them in culturally adapted idioms. This mirrors a strategy where the translator prioritizes direct equivalence over adaptation. There are Minimal cultural substitutions. Instead of replacing Yoruba metaphors or cultural concepts with familiar English ones, Soyinka retains the exotic flavor and complex structure of the original. He does not domesticate the metaphor entirely but allows its foreign resonance to remain.

Another excerpt from Soyinka's *In the Forest of Olodumare* has a shift away from literal translation toward a more interpretive, culturally accessible rendering, adaptation:

“All around me the forest lay wrapped in silence. This was not the silence of peace but of watchfulness, as if the trees themselves waited to see who dared trespass the sacred groves of the Immortals.” Wole Soyinka, *In the Forest of Olodumare*

The original Yoruba text uses more concrete imagery, with local expressions rooted in Yoruba cosmology. Soyinka expands this into poetic, almost cinematic English “the silence of peace... of watchfulness” adding psychological depth that is not literally present in the source. Also cultural transposition such as ... “Sacred groves of the Immortals” is a cultural reference to Yoruba Igbo Orisha (groves of deities), but Soyinka adapts this into a form intelligible to global readers without heavy footnoting or direct transliteration.

Recognizing both translation and adaptation as modes of textual mobility, each marked by differing levels of fidelity, creativity, and cultural mediation, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex trajectories texts follow. This perspective moves the discourse beyond rigid categorizations, framing translation and adaptation as fluid, intersecting practices shaped by context and purpose.

Translation as Adaptation: The Creative License

Culture and Context

Translation in modern theory is increasingly understood as an act of cultural negotiation. In this expanded view, translation involves more than transposing words; it requires recontextualizing ideas, idioms, and cultural references so that they resonate within the target culture. This process, often referred to as cultural translation, positions the translator not merely as a linguistic intermediary but as a cultural mediator. It is not merely a linguistic process; it is deeply intertwined with cultural and contextual factors. Lawrence Venuti's concept of domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 1995) speaks to the extent to which the translation adheres to the cultural norms of the target language (domestication) or retains elements of the source culture (foreignization). This aspect becomes particularly significant, where the translator's choices may lean towards cultural translation to make the text more accessible to the target audience. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that meaning is constructed in the "in-between" spaces of cultures, where translation becomes a site of hybridity and re-signification.

Thus, cultural translation inherently involves adaptation of metaphors, humor, idioms, historical references, and even narrative structure based on the expectations and cultural frameworks of the target audience. A literal translation, however accurate, may fall flat if it fails to communicate the spirit or effect of the original text. Furthermore, cultural and contextual considerations are crucial in shaping the decisions made in both Adaptation and translation. Both process are influenced by the social, political, and historical contexts of both the source and target cultures. This view aligns with Walter Benjamin's idea of adaptation /translation as a process that involves the "pure language" of the original, suggesting that translation is not only about linguistic equivalence but also about the transfer of the "spirit" or essence of the source text (Benjamin, 1923).

Translators as Co-Authors

Given these interpretive responsibilities, many theorists now view the translator as a co-author rather than a neutral agent. Translation is increasingly recognized as a creative, authorial act, involving decisions about tone,

emphasis, pacing, and even ideology (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). In this regard, translation begins to mirror adaptation in its creative license and re-authoring of meaning.

Consider the multiple English translations of D.O Fagunwa's "Igbo Olodumare" or Homer's Odyssey. Each translator inevitably inflects the work with personal, cultural, and temporal biases. Soyinka W. (2010) *In the Forest of Olodumare* for instance, received widespread praise for its rhythmic clarity and interpretive boldness, including a deliberate choice of Borrowing source lexicon in order to add local colour to the title (Olodumare) through a contemporary lens, an editorial decision that demonstrates the translator's agency in shaping reception.

Such examples confirm that translation, far from being a mechanical or derivative act, is often a transformative process shaped by the translator's aesthetic, political, and ethical decisions; a process not unlike that of adaptation, where fidelity lies not in word-for-word replication, but in evoking the original's impact in a new context.

Intersemiotic Translation

Beyond linguistic and cultural translation lies a more expansive practice: intersemiotic translation, or the translation of content across sign systems from verbal to visual, textual to musical, and beyond. Jakobson (1959) first theorized this broader approach, asserting that translation includes any transference of meaning between semiotic systems. This opens the door to understanding adaptation as a form of translation, where the "language" is visual (cinema), embodied (theater), or sonic (music).

For instance, Wole Soyinka's book *Death and the King horseman* (1975) made into theatrical production as "Elesin Oba" (2022) can be read as an intersemiotic translation of an epic into a minimalist, cross-cultural performance. Similarly, graphic novel versions of Shakespeare's plays, or ballets inspired by literary works, involve translating narrative, emotion, and tone into entirely new modalities color, gesture, movement, sound. These cases emphasize that translation is not bound to language alone; it is multimodal and experiential, aligning closely with adaptation in its process of semiotic transformation.

Adaptation as Translation: Fidelity, Intent, and Interpretation

Adaptation as Reinterpretation

Just as translation is increasingly acknowledged as an act of interpretation, so too is adaptation. Far from being a mere retelling or derivative form, adaptation is an act of reinterpretation, wherein the adapter, much like the translator decides which aspects of the source text to preserve, transform, or omit. The traditional concern with fidelity, a benchmark often used in evaluating both translations and adaptations proves to be more complex upon closer inspection.

In the realm of adaptation, fidelity is not necessarily about textual replication but about capturing the core narrative, thematic resonance, or emotional truth of the original (Hutcheon, 2006). For example, “*Olurounbi et le prix d’un Pari*” a modern reimagining of Olurounbi folklore, which maintains narrative structures and character relationships from myth stories while radically altering setting, tone, and cultural references. This “loose” fidelity reflects an interpretive, culturally situated approach akin to translation strategies that favor domestication over literal transfer (Venuti, 1995). Adaptation, then, functions as a form of translation that responds not just to the “what” of a text, but to the “why” and “how” its context, audience, and intended impact.

Medium as Language

One of the strongest arguments for seeing adaptation as a type of translation lies in the understanding of medium as language. Just as words are the translator’s primary material, images, sounds, and performance elements become the expressive tools of the adapter. Drawing on semiotic theory, media scholars like McLuhan (1964) remind us that “the medium is the message” ; that is, the form in which a message is communicated profoundly shapes how it is interpreted.

Intersemiotic translation, as theorized by Jakobson (1959), provides a framework for viewing adaptation as a translation between sign systems. For instance, when a novel is adapted into a film, the written word is translated into a combination of visual framing, dialogue, music, performance, and montage; each of which “speaks” in a different semiotic register. This is not a process of reduction or simplification, but a remediation that involves

interpretive re-encoding (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Therefore, medium is not merely a vessel but an active co-creator of meaning and adaptation, like translation, must work within the affordances and constraints of its chosen medium.

Examples from both classical and contemporary media highlight how adaptation operates as a form of translation that is both creative and referential. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, adapted into a television series by Hulu in 2017, did not only translates the dystopian novel into visual narrative but extends its themes in response to contemporary sociopolitical climates (Deer, 2020). The series adds scenes, characters, and dialogue absent in the novel, yet it remains faithful to Atwood's original critique of gender, power, and control. The adaptation thus performs a kind of politically situated intersemiotic translation, updating its relevance while maintaining its ideological core.

Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) is another striking example. The film retains Shakespeare's original language but sets the narrative in a hyper-stylized modern environment, fusing Elizabethan dialogue with 20th-century visual and cultural cues. This juxtaposition challenges conventional notions of fidelity and demonstrates that translation of meaning can be achieved even when the verbal code remains unchanged.

These examples reinforce the idea that adaptation is not antithetical to translation but functions analogously, navigating issues of audience, context, fidelity, and transformation.

Points of Convergence: Toward a Unified Framework

Although historically, adaptation and translation are treated as distinct disciplines yet both share a set of foundational concerns: fidelity, audience reception, context, authorship, and the transference of meaning. Both require a deep engagement with a source text and involve acts of selection, interpretation, and transformation.

Translation or Adaptation

Similarities	Distinctions
1. Both practices must decide what to preserve, what to alter, and how best to communicate across boundaries, be they linguistic, cultural, or medial.	1. While adaptation involves changing a novel into a film, a folktale into a book or moving a poem across languages, Translation has to conform to the same genre into another language
In both cases, there is no pure transfer, only a series of calculated decisions about form, tone, and meaning.	2. Translation is always a domestication or foreignization of a text never a neutral act and Adaptation involves the tension between honoring the original and making it legible and engaging for new audiences.
Both processes are shaped by institutional and ideological forces. Processes are shaped by institutional and ideological forces. Adaptation embrace concept of appropriation, where texts are continuously reshaped through dialogue with the present moment.	
Translation and adaptation are forms of “rewriting” that are influenced by power relations, market demands, and cultural politics.	Adaptation is a subset of translation, specifically as intersemiotic translation
Related forms of transcultural and transmedial negotiation	Adaptation, audiences often bring knowledge of the original, shaping their expectations and interpretations. A film adaptation may resonate differently for a viewer familiar with the source than for one encountering the story for the first time while in translation, translated texts are received in varying ways depending on how successfully cultural nuances are conveyed or localized.
Both practices fall under the broader umbrella of textual mobility, wherein texts travel across languages, cultures, genres, and media.	

Both are Meaning-making across systems, encouraging interdisciplinary approaches that draw from semiotics, media studies, literary theory, and cultural studies.	
Both translation and adaptation rely heavily on how a receiver interacts with the text.	
In both practices, the text is incomplete without the audience. Their engagement becomes part of the adaptation or translation process itself, completing the circuit of meaning.	

This analysis highlights the intricate dynamics of translation as it negotiates the continuum between translation and adaptation. Viewing these processes along a spectrum provides a useful framework for understanding translation not as a fixed act but as a fluid interplay of linguistic rendering, cultural negotiation, and contextual sensitivity.

Rather than continue to treat adaptation and translation as mutually exclusive, recent scholarship advocates for a more integrated and fluid framework because what's at stake is not simply language, but creativity Across Languages.

Conclusion

The exploration of adaptation and translation reveals that the distinction between both is far less rigid than the traditional conception. Both practices involve complex, creative processes of interpretation, negotiation, and transformation across linguistic, cultural, and semiotic boundaries. As this article has demonstrated, adaptation can be understood as a specialized form of translation specifically, an intersemiotic translation that negotiates or reproduces meaning across different media or sign systems. This unified framework challenges the entrenched binaries of literal versus free, faithful versus creative, and linguistic versus cultural. Instead, it foregrounds the dynamic interplay between source and target contexts, the concept of translators and adapters as co-creators, and the crucial role of audiences in

completing the communicative act. By embracing the fluidity between translation and adaptation, scholars and practitioners alike gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of how texts migrate, transform, and resonate across time and space. Ultimately, the “word in motion” is emblematic of the perpetual movement of meaning, revealing that translation and adaptation are not merely technical exercises but profound cultural acts that continuously shape and reshape our collective narratives.

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