

tłumacz!

překládej!

Перекладай!

**TRANSLATE!**

prekladaј!

տարգմեց!

tölgi!





# Theatre Translation Handbook

## A Brief Insight into a Central Discipline of International Theatre



Hrvatski centar ITI  
International Theatre Institute



drama  
panorama





# Theatre Translation Handbook

## A Brief Insight into a Central Discipline of International Theatre

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

This handbook is a guide for anyone who wants to explore the many facets of theatre translation and needs an introduction to the subject. It was created as part of the PerformCzech SKILLS: Drama Revival project, an educational and networking program for translators of contemporary drama. The aim is to provide the younger generation of translators with tools and activities to strengthen their professional skills and knowledge and foster motivation to explore and circulate contemporary new plays from the Central and Eastern European region. The program includes both a theoretical knowledge base and practical activities for playwrights, translators, theatre makers, and academics working with new plays. The program also provides support in mapping and understanding dramatic literature in the Central and Eastern European countries.

### **Project partners:**

**Tech Degh / Armenia // The Croatian ITI Centre / Croatia //**  
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## **THE ROLE OF A THEATRE TRANSLATOR:**

**International** theatre is unthinkable without the work of theatre translators, who are usually leading experts in the theatre culture of the language area they deal with. Through their translations, they convey dramatic literature as a **literary** work, but also as part of a particular **theatre tradition**, with a specific **aesthetic** and **cultural-political context**, which is connected to the practice of theatre as a living organism with all the components of theatrical synthesis.

Theatrical translators are not only involved in the translation of plays or other texts created for a production from the source language into the target language (which refers to both the translation of a dramatic or production text and the creation and translation of surtitles), but can also collaborate on all the other translation processes associated with the creation of a theatre production. This includes **interpreting work during the rehearsal process**, e.g. interpreting for an international production team working in multiple languages and on a range of variations of language mediation for international productions (i.e. surtitling, synopses, live interpretation on stage, etc.), but also providing expertise with regard to cultural context or language specifics, e.g. at the first reading rehearsal.

In addition to their translation work, they sometimes act as organisers, mentors, and editors, providing academic commentaries, writing studies for theatre programs or prefaces for published editions of plays. Their work is thus very complex and can include one or more of the following:

- 1) translation of a dramatic text for a planned staging,
- 2) oral translation during rehearsals,
- 3) translation and editing of surtitles  
(multi-media translation associated with the staging).





## **THEATRE TRANSLATION AS AN ARTISTIC ACTIVITY:**

As an artistic activity, theatre translation is often a low-visibility component of productions of foreign plays or visiting international productions. In the theatre, the situation is often even more complex and less transparent than in literary book publishing. For example, the individual behind the conception, translation, and composition of the surtitles is often undetectable from theatre programs, or this creative activity is listed in small print as part of the technical services.

Playwrights are often far more aware than producing theatres of the essential work the translator does for their play, as we see when the author is dragged on stage after the premiere and takes the translator along with them.

Words give a production its backbone and represent a central cipher in theatre's semiological system; thus, it is important to know who is behind the texts. The translation can be seen as a dramaturgical gesture of its own, as it reflects a number of other dramaturgical and directorial choices.



## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

In collaboration with the German Association of Playwrights (Verband der Theaterautor:innen or VTheA), the German organisation Drama Panorama: Forum für Übersetzung und Theater e. V. formulated an *Open Letter on the Naming of Translators*.<sup>1</sup> The letter attempts to raise the profile of authors and translators who are responsible for the linguistic component of the final theatrical form in the theatre. "Unfortunately, translators are still rarely mentioned in text materials and reviews of translated plays. The transparency of these crucial creative processes and those enacting them is a matter of information for the audience, but also a matter of respect, not only for the creators but also for the audience. Whose text are we hearing? Who is the author of the words on the basis of which the audience experiences the story in the theatre?"

<sup>1</sup> The open letter is available [VIA LINK HERE](#)



## **THE ROLE OF THEORY IN THEATRE TRANSLATION: BRIDGING BOUNDARIES VIA SEMIOTICS<sup>2</sup>**

It is essential to acknowledge that numerous practising theatre translators possess limited knowledge of the theoretical foundations of theatre translation. Nonetheless, they achieve considerable success and productivity in translating theatrical works in collaboration with theatres and independent artists. Conversely, recent decades have witnessed a marked increase in scholarly interest in the theoretical aspects of drama translation, culminating in the emergence of theatre translation studies as a distinct academic discipline. Bridging these two diverse approaches – practical and theoretical – may facilitate the generation of innovative ideas and deepen our understanding of the multifaceted perspectives inherent in theatre translation. By integrating practical insights with academic research, we can enrich the field and enhance the quality and impact of translated theatrical productions.

The interest in theatre translation within translation studies has evolved into a theoretical field recently, yet it is inaccurate to assume this emergence lacked a solid foundation. Rather, this field has crystallised at the intersection of theatre studies, literary studies, linguistics, and translation studies, integrating theoretical foundations and practical methods from each discipline. In 1913, Ferdinand de Saussure

<sup>2</sup> This chapter was written by Anna Sergejevna Halas and is a summary of the findings from her dissertation, *A Socio-cultural Model of Theatre Translation Criticism*, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, 2023.



revolutionised linguistics by declaring language a system of signs, elevating the field to a scientific discipline through the introduction of semiotic principles of analysis. Following this, the semiotic approach to theatre saw intermittent development by Russian Formalists, but it did not fully mature into a comprehensive theory. Despite their partial development, the Formalists' ideas significantly influenced theatre studies.

The genesis of a radically new approach to understanding drama and theatre, which had essentially remained unchanged since Aristotle, can be traced to 1931. This year marked the publication of Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* and Jan Mukařovský's *Attempted Structural Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Actor* in Czechoslovakia. Zich challenged the primacy of the written text as the dominant theatrical system, positioning it instead within a hierarchy of systems that constitute a complete dramatic performance. Concurrently, Mukařovský pioneered the study of performance semiotics by classifying the repertoire of gestural signs. These works collectively laid the groundwork for contemporary theoretical frameworks in drama and theatre studies.

In the 1930s and 1940s, scholars of the Prague Linguistic Circle systematically applied the semiotic approach, establishing the foundations of contemporary theatre studies. They posited that all elements within the theatrical system function as signs, often assuming meanings distinct from their real-life counterparts. Since then, semiotics has emerged as a fundamental framework for the analysis of theatre and drama within Western cultural contexts. While early works on theatre semiotics primarily focused on identifying signs, subsequent theorists sought to classify and analyse their functional purposes.



Polish theatre scholar Tadeusz Kowzan advanced this analytical approach by proposing a summary table of thirteen sign systems, categorised based on their relation to the actor and their spatial and temporal location. Although his correlation of signs received criticism, Kowzan's classification became foundational for subsequent efforts to represent the components of a performance.

Despite the introduction of numerous theoretical approaches to theatre translation since that period, variants of semiotic approaches continue to dominate theatre translation studies as the leading research paradigm. A renewed wave of research on the semiotics of theatre emerged in the 1980s, marked by significant contributions from scholars such as Keir Elam (*The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 1980),

Marco de Marinis (*The Semiotics of Performance*, 1982), Erika Fischer-Lichte (*The Semiotics of Theatre*, 1992), Marvin Carlson (*Theatre Semiotics*, 1990), Susan Melrose (*A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text*, 1994), Elaine Aston and George Savona (*Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, 1991), and Fernando De Toro (*Theatre Semiotics: Text and Staging in Modern Theatre*, 1995). These studies addressed a comprehensive range of issues, from text creation to audience perception, through the lens of semiotic analysis. Semiotic analysis offers a framework for *identifying* and *interpreting signs* within the system of a play. This approach facilitates an understanding of the interdependencies among subsystems and their roles in theatrical communication, allowing for the inclusion of a wide range of elements that must be conveyed to the target culture.



It is essential to examine how insights from theatre translation theory, in particular semiotics, can inform and enhance the process of translating a play for theatrical performance. Diverse perspectives on the nature of the theatrical sign have given rise to two primary schools of thought: the analytical approach and the integrative approach. The analytical perspective views each performance element as an individual sign with its own intonational dynamics, suggesting that these signs collectively generate a rich informational polyphony. In contrast, the integrative perspective highlights the intricate interplay between signs, where elements of the verbal text, interwoven with the performance's physical aspects, lose their discrete meanings and merge into a cohesive whole. This process produces what can be described as a "super-meaning", where the combined elements convey richer, more nuanced interpretations. The integrative approach to theatre signs in translation involves more than just translating dialogue; it encompasses the full spectrum of theatrical elements. As a result, it has emerged as the prevailing methodology in contemporary theatre practice and scholarly research.

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Although semiotics may appear abstract, its analysis of signs and symbols proves valuable in theatre translation by examining how meaning is created through elements like dialogue, gestures, and visual symbols. By examining these signs, translators can ensure that both the literal and contextual meanings are preserved when adapting a play for a different linguistic and cultural audience. This approach also involves adapting non-verbal elements, such as stage design and costumes, to maintain the play's original emotional and thematic impact in the translated version.



By examining a specific example, we can explore how a profound understanding of theatrical signs and their underlying principles can improve the translation of theatrical texts. In the translation process, theatre translators must often address genderlects, which are distinctive patterns of speech and communication typically linked to different genders and shaped by cultural and social factors. A thorough understanding of genderlects can provide insights into how language, along with other semiotic modes in a play, serves to either reinforce or subvert gender norms and identities.

In examining gendered speech patterns, feminine language behaviour is often marked by a preference for prestigious vocabulary, euphemisms, and adjectives with positive connotations, as well as adverbs and comparatives that enhance descriptions. In contrast, masculine language behaviour is traditionally less emotionally expressive and features more stylistically reduced vocabulary, stigmatised forms, verbal aggression, and abstract language, along with intensifiers. Communicatively, feminine behaviour tends to include indirect speech acts, positive politeness, statements softened into questions, and a lack of dominance in conversations. It is characterised by frequent rhetorical questions, with less use of imperatives. Masculine behaviour, on the other hand, is marked by explicit confidence, negative politeness, frequent use of imperatives, negative forms, and short, clear sentences.

Similarly, non-verbal communication in plays often reflects gender-based stereotypes, with reactions such as female hysteria (e.g., tears, foot stomping, hiding the face) and male aggression (e.g., punching a table) representing societal expectations of feminine and



masculine behaviour. Kinesics, particularly pantomime, can also exhibit gender-specific traits, including movements that substitute verbal communication (such as greetings and denials), emphasise verbal context, and express emotions or attitudes toward a situation (like gestures of surprise or disgust). Emphatic and non-communicative movements are particularly expressive of a speaker's gender, with non-communicative movements - such as biting nails or fiddling with objects - indicating internal states and emotions rather than specific meanings. These gestures often follow gendered patterns in fiction, where women might soothe themselves by interacting with their clothing, while men engage in more object-focused actions.

Proxemics, or the use of personal space, also has gendered dimensions, with differences in the preferred distances during interactions: typically, women maintain closer distances with each other, mixed-gender pairs have intermediate distances, and men keep more space between themselves. This distancing is often reflected in their verbal communication, with women more frequently using language that promotes closeness. Furthermore, physiognomy and prosody in drama contribute

significantly to character development, as playwrights use these features to enhance or interpret characters' images. Additionally, artefacts - such as a woman wearing a crown - carry socio-cultural significance that helps the audience understand and interpret the character's role and status.



A comprehensive understanding of the conventions used by playwrights, which are readily recognised and interpreted by audiences, can significantly aid theatre translators. This awareness allows translators to make informed and deliberate decisions, rather than relying on spontaneous or intuitive judgments.

A deep understanding of the semiotic systems inherent to both the source and target cultures, coupled with a solid theoretical foundation in theatre translation, can significantly enhance the translation process. While semiotics is not the sole theoretical framework available for examining theatre translation, its well-established and comprehensive theoretical background offers a valuable starting point. By integrating semiotic principles into their practice, theatre translators can move beyond intuitive approaches, ensuring that their translations are both theoretically informed and culturally precise, thereby facilitating a more accurate and effective adaptation of theatrical works.



## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

In John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, the character of Jimmy represents the stereotypical communicative behaviour of a working-class man in mid-20th century England, embodying the "angry young man" archetype. His anger at societal injustice is expressed through a masculine communication style reflective of his lower social status, contrasting with the more polite and cooperative communication typical of women and higher social classes. The play highlights this disparity in communication behaviours as a function of both social class and gender.

The play's opening scene uses non-verbal behaviour to establish the social dynamics of the period, depicting Jimmy and Cliff engaged in a passive activity surrounded by smoke, while Alice is shown actively ironing a large pile of clothes. This silent tableau clearly conveys the social and gender roles of the 1950s UK. In the verbal dimension, the examination of Jimmy's genderlect may be conducted through various linguistic components that contribute to his masculine gender identity. These components include: a) *vocabulary*, characterised by stylistically reduced lexemes with negative connotations, stigmatised and taboo terms, and stigmatised intensifiers; and b) *communicative competence*, which encompasses the use of imperatives, menaces, and indirect quotations.



A comparison between the original text and its Ukrainian translation reveals that the original employs a more extensive range of intensifiers and expressive attributes. The play's text exhibits the use of multiple intensifiers simultaneously, a practice less common in Ukrainian. Specifically, the stigmatised intensifiers "damn" and "bloody" in Jimmy's dialogue contribute to his characterization as a coarse and angry individual. However, this linguistic trait is inconsistently preserved in the translation: some intensifiers are replaced with functional equivalents (e.g., "damned"), others are neutralised (e.g., "you know," "absolutely everything"), and some are substituted with alternative negative lexical items (e.g., "not free to such a shit"). Additionally, the translation does not incorporate other intensification methods typical in Ukrainian, such as additions, hyperbole, or adverbs with suffixes that signify a pronounced increase in intensity. Consequently, the translated language partially fails to convey the brutal persona crafted by the original author.





In Osborne's notes, detailed indications about Jimmy's non-verbal behaviour provide essential insights for constructing his character, particularly in terms of kinesics. Jimmy's non-verbal actions reflect the same level of aggression as his verbal communication. His movements are often abrupt and directed towards causing harm to others, though they also sometimes manifest as expressions of anger without a specific communicative intent, accompanying verbal aggression. In the Ukrainian adaptation, which has been condensed for the stage, the depiction of Jimmy's non-verbal behaviour is frequently omitted. Many of the gestures conveying anger, aggression, and despair can be classified as non-verbal cultural universals or at least common symbols shared between Ukrainian and British cultures.





## **SOME PRACTICAL TIPS FOR BEGINNING TRANSLATORS<sup>3</sup>**

Every translation is an interpretation; it is just a matter of how far the interpretation goes to avoid too explicitly echoing and semi-explaining the original. Each translation is a transfer or translation from the original cultural and historical context to the context of the target language. Thus, in any translation, we have to decide whether we want to keep the text in its original cultural context or localise it, that is, transfer it to the target cultural context, or geographic or temporal locality.

Especially, for example, when we translate older texts – whether into contemporary or stylised, slightly archaised language – we are never really translating into the language of, say, the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The degree of lexical and cultural archaization is something we have to estimate.

At the same time, we have to decide whether to translate the title of the play, the names of the characters, and the local names into the target language or to keep them in their original form – thus anchoring the play's action to its original cultural, linguistic, social, and societal context. Most often, a mixed format is found: some names are translated, others are not. Even so, what remains untranslated situates the action of the play in its original context.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter was written by Anna Sergejevna Halas and is a summary of the findings from her dissertation, *A Socio-cultural Model of Theatre Translation Criticism*, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, 2023.



When translating a theatre text, we must take into account that each character has their own idiolect (a personal or poetic, linguistically stylised manner of expression) and sociolect (a manner of expression that reveals their membership in a certain social class and cultural or professional environment characterised by a certain lifestyle, expression, etc.). All characters in a play may speak the same idiolect and sociolect, or their language may be authoritatively distinct. Sometimes, all the characters speak with the same authorial idiolect, so that all the text of monologues and dialogues or other textual areas (e.g., in post-dramatic texts) is uniformly stylised and thus expresses - critically, descriptively or poetically - the authorial attitude towards the theme, the issue, the characters, and the action.

Translatological literature sees translation as a type of adaptation, where translation is perceived as an activity that cannot normally be done without adaptation procedures. Generally speaking, the translator is always endowed with a specific motivation, occasion, and context and it is impossible to deny the contribution of various forms of adaptation to their production - from the dramaturgical choice of the text, to the vision (anticipated ostension) with which the translator essentially rewrites the text, to the historical situatedness concerning awareness of the current social situation and the sense of particular generational themes as more important than others. In other words, the translation of a dramatic text, given the nature of theatre (i.e., communication through communication), is an even more complex matter than the translation of a literary text intended solely for reading. This makes the use of current models even more risky.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See P. Drábek, "Translating the Theatre Act", in *Theatralia* 25:1, 2022, pp. 166-171 or M. Morini, *Theatre Translation: Theory and Practice*, London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2022, p. 176.



## HOW TO BECOME A THEATRE TRANSLATOR?

Theatre translation is not a separate field of study, although it has its own clear specifics. Theatre translators have often studied translation studies, languages or art history, or are recruited from the ranks of theatre scholars or practical theatre makers, dramaturgs and directors. In addition to linguistic skills and the ability to translate literary works, knowledge of contemporary theatre and, in particular, practical theatre operations is an important prerequisite for this profession. If a theatre translator does not directly work in theatre, they should go to the theatre regularly and observe stylistic changes, and current trends, themes, staging practices, and aesthetic premises.



## WHAT DOES THE FIELD OF THEATRE TRANSLATION **INCLUDE**?

In the field of drama, language is one of the essential components of theatrical synthesis, alongside acting, directing, set design, music, and other components, such as lighting, video projections, etc. The basic job of a theatre translator is therefore to translate the text of a play from the source language into the target language. Sometimes, the dramaturg or the director who intends to stage the translated play is editorially involved in the creation of the translation, and the translation is created in a mutual dialogue or by the dramaturg or the director themselves. Another interesting process is the verification of the translation through the actor's speech, which often happens at the first reading rehearsal, where the translator may be present and thus get the chance to verify their translation through the actor's body.

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The verification of the translation through the actor's grasp of the text can be an interesting stimulus for the translator and lead to further modifications of the text, in terms of phraseology and/or syntax. On the other hand, it is also very enriching for the theatre production to involve the translator in the rehearsal process and to make use of their expertise. However, the translation can also be further modified during the rehearsal process without the translator's agreement at the initiation or approval of the director or dramaturg.

Theatre translators are usually also involved in other processes of linguistically mediating a theatre production. Since 2000, surtitling has become a commonplace part of productions open to international audiences. In addition, guest foreign productions or multilingual productions, which can work with several languages at once, are interpreted using surtitles. Surtitling is a



specific process that is based on a very individual approach to each production and the search for a balance between the pragmatic reinterpretation of the meaning of the language with a reduction of ornamental linguistic devices, while preserving the specific character of the language. The spectators should be able to move their eyes from the titles to the action on stage as much as possible, without being distracted by less familiar expressions or overwhelmed by the text.

The task of the theatre translator here is first to parse the production text into individual surtitles (translators refer to this as a surtitle matrix) that rhythmically corresponds to the action on stage (knowledge of the production or at least the option to view a recording is a prerequisite here), then translate them, and, using the selected software, create surtitles that are projected during the performance onto a surface that has ideally been determined in consultation with the director and stage designer. Synchronising the action on stage with the surtitles is a major challenge of the profession – the surtitler must literally “breathe with the production”, respect its aesthetic and visual aspects, and play the surtitles at the right moment, so that, for example, the punchline of a joke is not displayed before it is played out on stage.

It is important for the translator to have a good knowledge of the production (either from direct experience or from a recording, if other options are not possible). Only then can they make an informed decision on how to translate the production through the surtitles. It should be noted that surtitles are a translation of the performative experience into the literary form of surtitles and sometimes specific solutions must be found, as when actors improvise, for example.



## PRactical Example

In Germany, the software Spectitular by Panthea is becoming increasingly popular in the field of surtitling, as it allows for the creation of several language versions of the same production. Spectitular is professional software that can be used in the browser as SaaS (software as a service) or offline as a desktop application. In addition, Panthea is experimenting with new surtitling possibilities, i.e. not only by projecting them onto a selected location on stage, but also with the help of tablets, smartphones or smart glasses that allow the viewer to select the language version themselves.



For some productions, other types of reinterpretation are more suitable. In site-specific productions, audiences often receive a **synopsis** before the performance that orientates them in advance as to what to expect. Some forms of theatre require live interpretation on stage, especially in cases of improvised theatre, stand-up or theatre based on audience interaction. The interpreter is thus literally embedded in the production and moves on stage with the actors.

Rehearsal-based translation practices embrace the rehearsal room as a site of translation, with the translator taking part in the rehearsal process. In this way, the actors, director, and other members of the creative team become collaborators in the translation process. Where they also possess knowledge of the source language such collaboration may be enhanced, but even without this knowledge the continuous feedback loop of the rehearsal room can lead to a dynamic, highly playable translation. The physical presence of the translator and multilingual artists in the process can also present interesting staging opportunities, such as live translation, where the translator is onstage during the performance, or the inclusion of elements of the source language in the translation.

It is important to note, however, that this process often leads to a translation that is very specific to the production for which it was created, in a manner not dissimilar to the way each production of a Shakespeare play creates a version of the play specific to its needs. The specificity of such translations may make them harder to publish or more difficult for other companies to produce.





## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

In a production of Petr Kolečko's *Poker Face* (dir. Becka McFadden, King's Head Theatre, London, prem. 16 October 2016), by London-based LegalAliens Theatre, which focuses on rehearsal-based translation of new European plays, Eva Daníčková provided live, hand-written, subtitling of Arnošt Goldflam's pre-recorded performance, in Czech, of the role of Franta. In the same company's *The Return* (dir. Becka McFadden, St. James Theatre Studio, 14 June 2013), the English language world-premiere of Italian playwright Sergio Pieratini's *Il Ritorno*, featuring a cast of bilingual Italian actors, including the company's founder and artistic director Lara Parmiani, Italian is heard in off-stage arguments. Expletives were untranslated in both productions.



Translation into sign language or transcription for hearing-impaired viewers is another specialist area; in essence, this includes commentary created for blind viewers.

## **PRACTICAL EXAMPLE**

Hands Dance is a group of hearing and d/Deaf interpreters in the Czech Republic focusing on artistic interpretation into sign language.

The group emerged in 2014 and has been part of the OUKEJ Theatre Association (Divadelní spolek OUKEJ) since 2017. It has hundreds of translations of songs into sign language to its credit, along with dozens of instrumental compositions interpreted for the d/Deaf, and also offers artistic interpretations of theatre productions in collaboration with professional, student, and amateur theatre companies. Hands Dance's goal is to facilitate and mediate the experience of music and theatre for d/Deaf audiences. It uses a combination of sign language and theatrical, movement and visual elements in its artistic interpretations.



## **TRANSLATORS IN COLLABORATION WITH THEATRES AND THEATRE MAKERS**

Theatre translators are often part of the production process and work closely with theatre makers. As experts in their language culture, they inform dramaturgs about new plays and authors, offer their expertise in rehearsals, translate and interpret for international production teams, and produce subtitles taking into account the specifics of the production, but also generally promote and present playwrights or publish and disseminate information about new plays to introduce them to new audiences in the country of their target language.

A theatre translator's portfolio is often very diverse. Taking advantage of the synergies of different theatre professions, they may work as dramaturgs, directors, festival curators, book editors, journalists and theatre critics, but many translators are also playwrights and write, translate or adapt other works for the theatre.

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In any case, inviting a translator into the process of creating a production is enriching. Moreover, translating the text with knowledge of a specific creative team's vision for their production helps to create a translation that also corresponds to the director's or dramaturg's intention and can be further developed during the rehearsal process in a mutual dialogue between the translator and the production team. Such a translation is thus verified in practice, which is an essential component in theatre.

Theatre agencies or professional organisations are also part of this process and can initiate or promote new translations.



## **I HAVE A GREAT TEXT! HOW DO I TRANSLATE IT LEGALLY?**

A play and its translation, like other literary works and translations, is a work of authorship covered by copyright law. Specifics vary from country to country, but, in essence, copyright law always regulates the use of the text and its translation. In most cases, a text and its translation are provided to a theatre under a licensing agreement that addresses the manner in which the work will be used and the royalties its authors will receive for the production.

If you discover a play that you want to translate, it is helpful to write a synopsis and translate an excerpt to give potential interested parties an insight into the work. There are often longer collaborations with certain authors who are regularly translated by a specific translator, who has developed a certain expertise in the author's work and can build on their previous translations. The material for the play can then be sent to the target country's theatre agencies or to specific theatre makers, dramaturgs or directors, etc. in a process known as cold calling. It is important to verify whether or not someone else is already working on the translation. The best contact here would be the agency representing the author's rights or the author themselves.



Copyright clearance is a condition for starting work on any translation. Permission to translate is needed and the author or their agency will often assess the translator's CV and decide whether or not to grant permission to translate a particular play. It is also a good idea to find out in advance where the copyright for the play you intend to translate is held and under what conditions it can be obtained (here again, one would contact agencies or the authors themselves). In all cases, it is important to make a contractual arrangement concerning the translation assignment to avoid complications and misunderstandings about royalties at a later date. The translator either signs the contract with the agency, which then represents them, or with the theatre that intends to stage the play.

Theatre translators can represent themselves or work through a theatre agency.<sup>5</sup> Based on the contract with the theatre staging the translation, the amount of the royalties, i.e. a percentage of the profit from ticket sales, is then determined. Sometimes, a theatre may pay the translator a fee, but then contractually exclude a share of the profits from ticket sales. In some countries, it is also possible to obtain an advance payment of royalties from the theatre agency. This is the amount of money that the translator receives for the creation of the work and then deducts from the royalties when the work is performed at the theatre.

<sup>5</sup> The structure of theatre agencies is different in each country. Please consult country-specific information for Armenia, Croatia, Czechia, Georgia, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine.



## PRactical EXAMPLE

A common model in many countries is a translation royalty of 20 % of all royalties received by the agency or publisher from all contractual rights to use the work and its translation. The contract specifies how much of the income from the commissioning party will be transferred to the translator on a pro rata basis; in practice, this often means that the author receives 60 % and the translator and the agency or publisher each receive 20 %. Royalties vary, of course, according to the type and size of the theatre where the work is staged.





## WHAT ARE THE FINANCIAL CONDITIONS FOR THEATRE TRANSLATION?

Theatre translators are primarily freelance and must often combine their translation work with other jobs or professions. Their working environment corresponds to the status of an artist and should also be viewed as such from a social security perspective.

Artistic translation fees vary from country to country. In some places, price lists are established by professional organisations. If you are unsure about the usual fee, you can contact country-specific organisations or associations that represent translators.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Conditions vary significantly from country to country. Please consult country-specific information for Armenia, Croatia, Czechia, Georgia, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine [VIA THIS LINK](#).



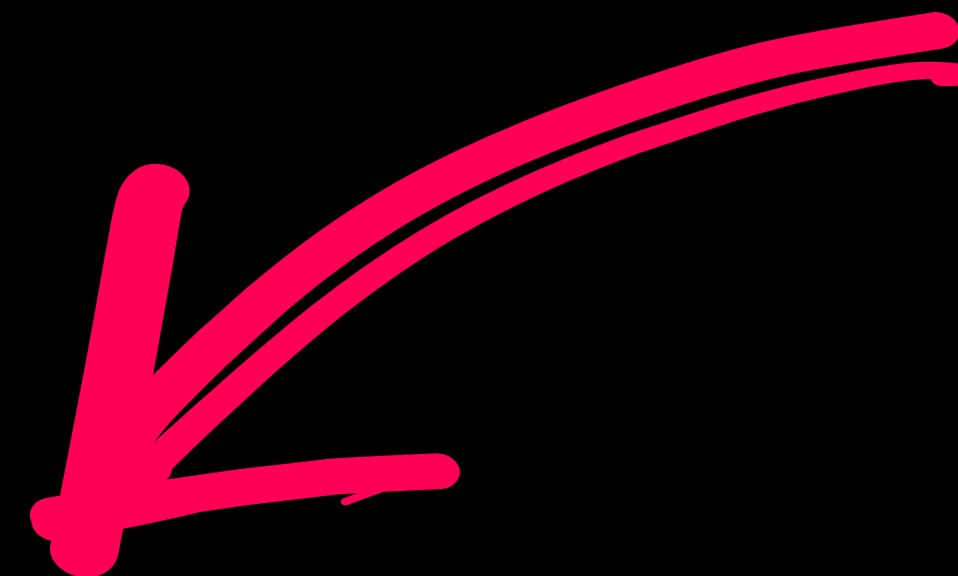
## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

The EU Creative Europe program does not specify the relevant translation fees. Nevertheless, the program promotes and preserves the profession of literary translator, including the principles of good working conditions and fair remuneration as part of the Circulation of European Literary Works open call. In this respect, publishers should ensure that the translators are visibly credited in the published book, preferably on the cover, and that the source language is clearly mentioned. Fair remuneration stems from the conclusions of *Translators on the Cover - Multilingualism & Translation* (2022), a report from the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) working group of EU Member State experts.

The pay gap that exists in Europe is also reflected in European funding programs, which assume that many translators live in the conditions of the country into whose language they translate. Of course, this is often not the case and the policy of varying fees according to the language, which the EU application forms generate, is a gesture that divides, rather than unites, Europe.



In Germany, model contracts and lower fee limits are drawn up by trade union associations, such as the Association of Literary Translators (VdÜ - Verband deutschsprachiger Übersetzer/innen literarischer und wissenschaftlicher Werke). These define what is considered appropriate and fair. Such model contracts and fee proposals are often a prerequisite for the approval of an application for translation funding. If translators are paid appropriately and commissioned by the publisher or theatre on fair terms, this is an argument for the funding institution to approve an application and thus for a project to come to fruition.



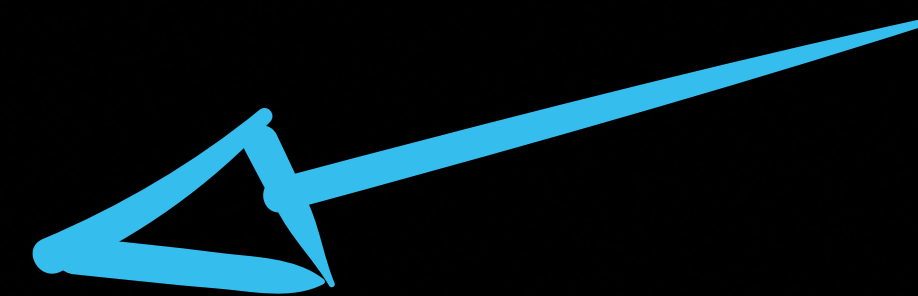


## THE **FUNDING** OF THEATRE TRANSLATIONS

Theatre translation is rarely produced in a commercial context and is therefore dependent on support from various project funds. Theatre translators cross the boundaries between many artistic disciplines, which often makes it difficult for funding institutions to include them in their funding programs.

A theatre translation is usually not published as a literary text, as it is primarily intended to be performed on stage. Therefore, it is sometimes impossible to include theatre translations in literary grant processes (where, for example, book publication may be a requirement). At the same time, it is not yet full-fledged theatre, as the text is yet to be staged by theatre makers and therefore cannot be considered for support from theatre grants. Thus, theatre translation often disappears from the radar of grant agencies and funding bodies. Literary and other artistic residencies or stipend programs where theatre translation is an eligible activity could also be significant sources of funding for theatre translators.<sup>7</sup>

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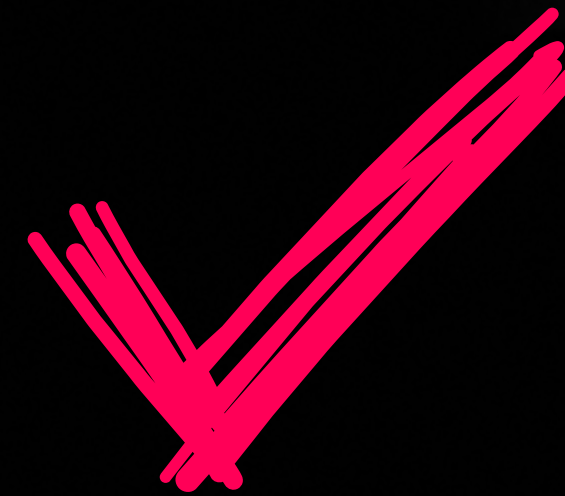
<sup>7</sup> Please consult country-specific information for Armenia, Croatia, Czechia, Georgia, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine [VIA THIS LINK](#).



## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

In Germany, as part of a change in the funding landscape to better meet the needs of theatre translators, the promise of a performance, instead of a publication, is accepted by many grants.

Translations of Norwegian contemporary drama are subsidised by the Norwegian Dramatists' Association. Funding is contingent on a staged production, but they also support translation as part of a staged reading.





## THEATRE TRANSLATION AS A PRODUCTION COST AND THE PITFALLS OF AI

Theatres or festivals preparing or presenting an international production must include the cost of translation in the budget from the very beginning. Since theatre translators are the co-authors of the text, they should also be named in the program booklet alongside the author and receive the same visibility as the other artists collaborating on a work of art. This practice is very often neglected, so it is necessary to point this out.

With the advent of AI, there are many cases of translators being confronted with an AI-generated text and asked to simply "edit" it for a low fee. Nevertheless, a theatre translation is a complex artistic process involving humans, who carefully interpret the linguistic code and stylistic devices of the work, even down to analysing the extra-linguistic situations and relational components of the characters. Thus, their work cannot be replaced by AI.

The theatre is one of the last bastions of truly live art in the here and now. It is, in the words of Czech scholar Ivo Osolsobě, "communication through communication about communication", which takes place before the audience's eyes in the unique atmosphere of a theatre performance, of which language is an important component.<sup>8</sup> The involvement of theatre translators in the process of creating a production is thus certainly an advantage, as they can speak to the translational processes that are an important component of theatrical synthesis and contribute their expertise and experience.

<sup>8</sup> I. Osolsobě, "Dramatické dílo jako komunikace komunikací o komunikaci: variace na téma Zichovy definice dramatického díla", in: *Otázky divadla a filmu* (1st ed.), ed. I. Závodský. Brno: Jan Evangelista Purkyně University, 1970, pp. 11-46.



## USEFUL LINKS

### EURODRAM

Eurodram is a European network for drama in translation, comprising approximately 300 members organised as roughly 30 committees. Its main objective is to promote new drama in translation from Europe, Central Asia and the Mediterranean, making it available both to theatre professionals and audiences in the region, in a spirit of independence, equity and linguistic diversity.

[LINK HERE >>](#)

### Creative Europe - Circulation of European Literary Works

The European Commission's funding scheme supports on average 40 projects per year, leading to the translation and promotion of 500 European literary works from and into at least 40 languages. An important aspect of the scheme is how it supports works written in less widely spoken languages to develop their distribution in larger markets in Europe and beyond. The program aims to raise the profile of literary translators and to strengthen the competitiveness of the book sector by expanding cooperation within the book value chain. All the projects financed under this program must also take into consideration inclusion, diversity, gender equality and the environmental transition in their design and implementation.

[LINK HERE >>](#)



## Fabula Mundi (a European project)

A catalogue of contemporary authors and plays from 16 countries including a database of translations.

[LINK HERE >>](#)

## AFAC

The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) was founded in 2007 at the initiative of Arab cultural activists as an independent foundation to support individual artists, writers, researchers and intellectuals, as well as organisations from the Arab region working in the field of arts and culture.

[LINK HERE >>](#)





## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Barbora Schnelle**

is a Czech theatre scholar, translator of plays, critic and cultural manager living in Berlin, where she founded the association Drama Panorama: Forum für Übersetzung und Theater e. V. Through Drama Panorama, she curates and produces Ein Stück: Tschechien, a festival of contemporary Czech theatre in Berlin, as well as many other productions. Barbora has published an extensive anthology of Czech plays in German, *Von Masochisten und Mamma-Guerillas* (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, edice Drama Panorama, 2018).



## **Anna Sergeyevna Halas**

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studied theatre and film studies at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague and the Institute for Theatre, Film and Media Studies at the University of Vienna. She went on to lecture at both universities. She has also worked at the Department of Theory and Criticism at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU) and the Department of German and Slavic Studies at the Faculty of Arts at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. She is a member of the Team for the Research of Modern Czech Theatre at the Czech Academy of Science's Institute for Czech Literature and a member of the international team of the Elfriede Jelinek Research Platform at the University of Vienna. She specialises in theatre and playwriting in the German-language area, as well as Czech theatre and playwriting.



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is a cultural manager and editor. Since 2005, he has worked at the Arts and Theatre Institute (literature, Culturenet.cz, Creative Europe Desk). He took part in various cultural policy projects (Concept of More Effective Support of the Arts, Mapping of Cultural and Creative Industries in the Czech Republic, Post Covid Adaptation Models in Culture) and co-authored successful application for Prague – UNESCO City of Literature. In recent years, he has served as a member of several juries and grant committees (Ministry of Culture, Czech Literature Centre, Czech Centres). Since 2003, he has collaborated with the samizdat and exile literature library Libri prohibiti in Prague.

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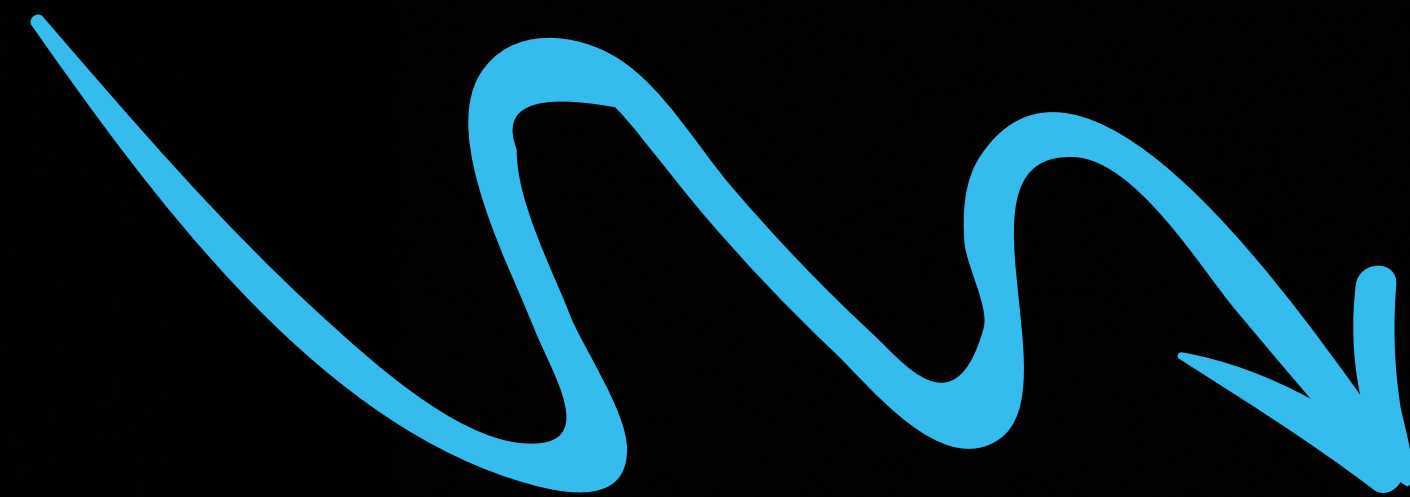
## **Becka McFadden**

is a translator from Czech, specialising in the arts, culture and architecture and collaborating with the Arts and Theatre Institute and many festivals and cultural organisations on a range of translation projects from plays, to scholarly publications and festival catalogues. Away from her computer, she is a dance and theatre artist and the founder and artistic director of Beautiful Confusion Collective. She is the recipient of the 2023 Thalia Award in Alternative Theatre and holds a PhD in Theatre and Performance from Goldsmiths, University of London.



## Ivan Lacko

is a graduate of the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava where he majored in English and German language and culture in translation and interpreting. Currently, he is an associate professor at the Department of British and American Studies, where he conducts research and teaches courses in American literature and culture, which focus on popular culture and the relationship between theatre and society. As an author, actor and director, he has been active in various student and professional groups (BELTS, Stoka Theatre, ActofKAA, Spare Parts Theatre). He has translated monographs in the field of drama and theatre theory (the most recent include Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Art without Borders*, Corpus Association, 2023 and Linda Nagyová's *Contrasts of Dance Stories*, Devín Publishing House, 2023), plays from and into English (e.g. Wole Soyinka's *Play of Giants*), scholarly texts and articles (e.g. for the magazine *kød - konkrétne o divadle*). He also conducts his own research in the field of theatre and drama, and occasionally reviews productions of plays from the English-speaking world for the portal *Monitoring Theatres in Slovakia*.





# PERFORMCZECH

PerformCzech provides a range of activities related to the internationalisation of the current Czech performing arts scene: theatre, dance, contemporary circus and interdisciplinary projects.

PerformCzech supports the professional growth and internationalisation of the contemporary Czech performing arts scene.

PerformCzech is an information portal in English for performing arts professionals that provides information about the current Czech performing arts scene and mediates information, contacts and propositions for international collaboration.

PerformCzech initiates projects, platforms and activities that link the current Czech performing arts scene with artists, organisations, networks and organisations abroad.

PerformCzech activities are coordinated by the International Cooperation Department of the Arts and Theatre Institute (ATI) as a state-funded organisation founded by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic. Its mission is to provide the Czech and international public with a comprehensive range of services in the field of theatre, dance, music, literature and visual arts.

**LINK HERE >>**



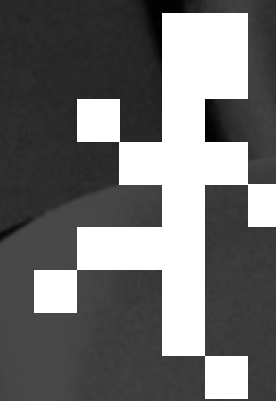


## PACE.V4

PACE.V4 / Performing Arts Central Europe - Visegrad Countries Focus is a project of ongoing cooperation between cultural organisations in the Visegrad countries that aims to stimulate the exchange of ideas and networking within and among the regions of Central and Eastern Europe.

[LINK HERE >>](#)

The PACE.V4 website is a virtual crossroads offering an information service for Central and Eastern European performing arts, outputs from PACE.V4 activities such as podcasts, essays, videos and discussion recordings and interviews or texts about outstanding performing arts professionals or works from the Central and Eastern European regions in English translation.



P|ERFORMING  
A|RTS  
C|ENTRAL  
E|UROPE



# Theatre Translation Handbook

## A Brief Insight into a Central Discipline of International Theatre

Author: Barbora Schnelle

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Translation: Becka McFadden

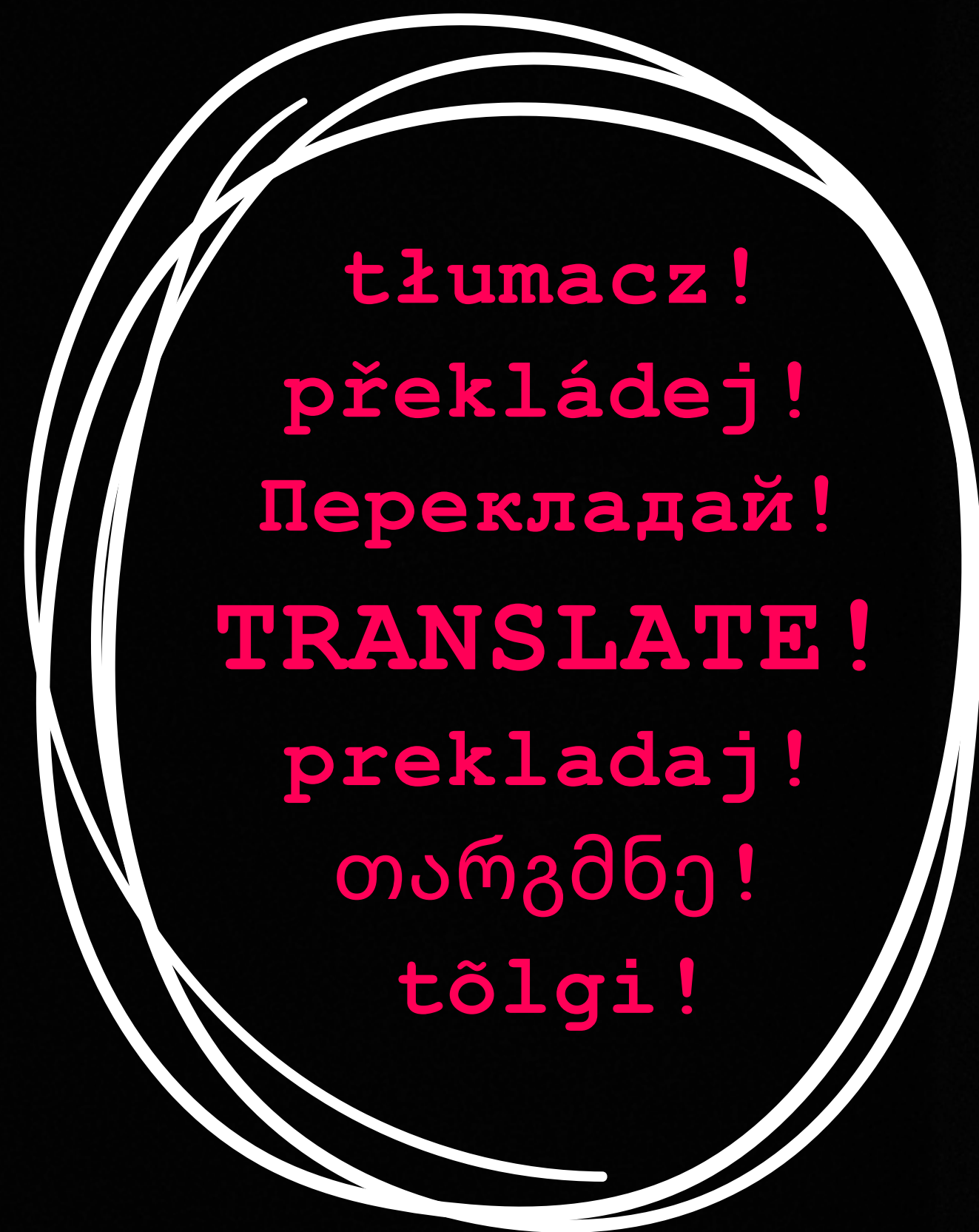
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ECO NOTE: Consider the environment before printing.





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překládej!

Перекладай!

**TRANSLATE!**

prekladaј!

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