

From Text to Stage: Exploring Performance-Based Language Work with Student Translators

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Abstract

In response to the growing influence of artificial intelligence and post-editing on the translation market, the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Mons (FTI) has integrated digital tools into its curriculum. Yet, despite this significant reform, future language professionals remain inadequately equipped to navigate the complexities of real-world mediation, particularly the interactional and emotional dimensions of such practice. This article presents a case study from a second-year course in German as a second language (L2), taken during the second year of a five-year translation programme (comprising both bachelor's and master's levels). The students – who will later receive mandatory training in Public Service Interpreting at the beginning of their master's studies – participated in a theatre-based project staging Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Tschick*. This project explores how performative practices – particularly Meisner's repetition exercises – can support the development of pragmatic awareness, subjectivity, and emotional resilience at a formative stage in translator training. Drawing on an anthropological perspective as proposed by Henri Meschonnic, the study emphasises the dynamic interplay between discourse and life, positioning the translator as an “experiencer of language.” It builds on Meisner's principle that a truthful connection to emotion is essential for aspiring actors – an idea extended here to encompass future translators, cultural mediators, and dialogue interpreters. In doing so, the study demonstrates how artistic interaction can function as a form of in-language translation and offers new insights into bridging the gap between theoretical instruction and embodied practice in the training of professionals for both written and spoken language mediation.

Keywords

Performance-based language, cultural mediation, repetition exercises, Meisner-method

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1. Introduction

Access to reliable information is essential for individuals as they navigate educational and professional decision-making. Such access not only helps to prevent disillusionment but also supports a meaningful alignment between career outcomes and personal fulfilment. In this context, universities responsible for training future translators – such as the Faculty of Translation at the University of Mons – bear a threefold responsibility: to fulfil their general educational mandate, to provide specialised translational training, and, crucially, to inform prospective students prior to enrolment about the nature and ongoing transformation of the translation profession. This informational obligation is particularly significant in light of the dynamic and often opaque character of the language services market, which continues to be reshaped by digital innovation and evolving forms of human interaction. Awareness of both technological and interpersonal developments is essential for cultivating realistic expectations and effectively preparing students for a rapidly transforming professional landscape. Within this context, it is incumbent upon higher education institutions to delineate the competencies that are projected to gain prominence in the evolving translation market. Of particular note is the increasing centrality of skills that have historically been marginalized – most notably, interpersonal and interactional competencies. Traditionally, translator training has been heavily text-oriented, often overlooking the significance of human interaction. However, in today's multilingual and multimodal communication environments, attunement to interactional dynamics is emerging as a critical complement to linguistic accuracy. This shift highlights a growing need to reconsider how translation students are trained, particularly within curricula that may have become disproportionately focused on modern technologies.

The first part of this article addresses the broader question of how students of translation studies can be equipped with interactional competencies – an area that remains underdeveloped in many programmes where technological proficiency is prioritised. The second part outlines my approach to theatrical staging within the framework of language instruction for translation students, with a particular focus on how theatre can support the development of such competencies in the context of a German language class. The third section turns to the theoretical underpinnings of this approach. While the placement of theory after practice may seem unconventional in scholarly writing, this structure is intentional: the premise is that certain anthropological dimensions of language are best apprehended through embodied experience – specifically through theatrical engagement. The fourth part introduces the “Meisner exercises”, which align closely with Meschonnic's anthropology of language. In the final section, I return to the theme of emotional dynamics in translation practice, drawing together insights from the theoretical and practical components to offer an integrated perspective on the role of emotional awareness in translator education.

To address the challenges posed by the rise of artificial intelligence and to equip future translators for a labour market increasingly shaped by post-editing, the Faculty of Translation at the University of Mons has made substantial efforts to integrate translation and localisation technologies into its curriculum. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether students are sufficiently prepared for the evolving professional realities, as the translation industry has grown considerably more diverse and complex over the past two decades. Today's translators are not only engaged in post-editing machine-generated texts but are also increasingly required to take on roles as cultural mediators, navigating complex interactional challenges that extend beyond linguistic barriers to include the management of emotions. This shift underscores the intricacy of communication in diverse contexts. Cultural mediators today face these emotional challenges to an unprecedented degree, reflecting broader trends observed in other professions. Lawyers, for instance, are encountering greater demands related to emotional

regulation, a challenge that is also becoming increasingly relevant in dialogue interpreting, where emotional dynamics have become an integral part of professional practice. This growing emphasis on emotional regulation is evident in the work of researchers, such as Lisa Flower, who highlights emotions as a central focus of scholarly inquiry in her study on the relationship between law and emotions (2020, p. 9), where she posits:

My starting point is that emotion abound in all criminal trials [...], and that, consequently, the management of emotions is integral to a role of a defence lawyer: irritation when a client says something damaging in the court, surprise when a witness says something unexpected, disgust towards gruesome evidence, moral outrage at a crime, or even dislike towards an unpleasant client. I am thus interested in revealing how defence lawyers accomplish their professional role, a role which is rooted in the legal obligation of loyal representation and a role which plays a vital part in the accomplishment of justice [...].

My own starting point is that emotions play a crucial role in all areas of cultural mediation and, to a lesser extent, in translation. Just as in criminal trials, where the management of emotions is essential for defence attorneys, the ability to navigate emotional dynamics is equally vital for interpreters and translators. Whether it involves the subtle nuances of a speaker's tone or the emotional weight of specific phrases, emotions are an integral part of effective communication. Even in the seemingly machine-driven domain of translation, the influence of emotions cannot be overlooked. From this perspective, I seek to explore how the management of emotions can be effectively taught to students and future translators, fostering not only their linguistic skills but also their emotional intelligence, which is essential for facilitating meaningful and empathetic interactions.

I firmly believe that the management of emotions should be integrated into translator training from the very beginning. While it is both reasonable and pedagogically sound – particularly in programmes such as that of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Mons – for the first year of study to focus exclusively on language acquisition, especially given that many students begin two foreign languages from scratch, this should not preclude early engagement with interaction-based activities that promote emotional awareness and self-regulation. Emotional awareness and regulation are not skills to be postponed until advanced stages of training; rather, they are intrinsically linked to language learning itself and can be fostered even before students engage directly with translation tasks. Beginners, when supported by appropriate interaction-based methods, are capable of engaging with emotional dynamics and recognising processes of subjectivation. Theatre, as a historically rich site of emotional expression, provides a particularly fertile ground for exploring these processes. What makes theatrical practice especially relevant for translator education is its ability to distil complex subjectivation into rudimentary yet meaningful linguistic forms. As I will demonstrate throughout this article, Meisner's "Repetition Exercises" offer students a structured and accessible way to experience the intricacies of interactional dynamics while simultaneously cultivating their emotional intelligence.

2. Staging *Tschick*

As previously mentioned, the students involved in this project were in their second year of study, having only begun learning German in their first year. During that initial phase, the curriculum appropriately prioritised the acquisition of grammatical foundations – an indispensable step in mastering a language as structurally complex as German. Consequently, students had little opportunity to develop interactional competencies in their first year, as the emphasis lay primarily on linguistic accuracy and structural command. In the second year

they began engaging in translation tasks, gradually shifting from a focus on formal language acquisition to a more communicative and context-sensitive use of language. From the outset, the guiding principle behind my collaboration with second-year bachelor's students in the course *Acquiring Oral Skills in German* was clear – and remains so to this day: I was convinced that these students held deeper insights into certain topics and life experiences than I did. I was keen to learn from the students' narratives, ideas, aspirations, and fears, and my objective was to provide them with tools to express their knowledge, experiences, and emotions on stage. I considered it essential that their voices be heard and their perspectives recognised as a valued part of the university community. This did not, however, imply that I embarked on the project with far-reaching educational aims. Rather, the theatre performance emerged organically from the questions I sought to explore with the students. In this sense, the approach was driven less by pedagogical intent than by artistic curiosity. The process was intentionally open-ended, avoiding reliance on established models or predetermined scenarios. As is often the case in both professional and student theatre, the director's role can be a solitary one, demanding a high degree of autonomy in navigating the students' experiences and contributions throughout the creative process.

Although generally classified as a young adult novel, *Tschick* has been widely disseminated through school reading programmes in Germany, rendering it accessible even to secondary schools students. The novel masterfully blends realism and imagination, constructing a world shaped by language, communication, and media. While our staging work ultimately drew on this world, it did not begin with a full reading of the novel. Instead, the project was initiated through intertextual engagement with a brief supplementary text: Bertolt Brecht's two-line story *Das Wiedersehen (On Meeting Again)*, from *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner (1971)*. This concise narrative introduced central themes and motifs that resonate throughout *Tschick*, and served as a point of departure for both the creative process and the language work. The performance development involved intralingual translation, as learners worked with excerpts and thematic elements drawn from the German source texts to develop the German they would ultimately speak in the production – thus integrating language acquisition with interpretive and performative exploration from the outset. The following is Brecht's well-known two-line story:

Ein Mann, der Herrn K. lange nicht gesehen hatte, begrüßte ihn mit den Worten: 'Sie haben sich gar nicht verändert.' 'Oh!' sagte Herr K. und erbleichte (Brecht, 1971 [1959], p. 26).

[A man who had not seen Mr. K for a long time greeted him with the words: 'You haven't changed at all.' 'Oh!' said Mr. K. and turned pale (Brecht, 1961, p. 124)]

The exploration of whether change matters – and under what circumstances it becomes significant – served as the guiding thread of our theatre work. Over time, this exploration gave rise to a sequence of scenes, ultimately structured as "Scenes 1 to 8." In the final performance, two different groups each presented their own version of this sequence. This parallel structure allowed us to examine the concept of change not only thematically, but also as a performative and practical process – demonstrating how diverse interpretations and transformations can emerge from a shared textual starting point. The aim was to foreground the often incomprehensible, mysterious, and even absurd dimensions of change. As stated in the programme booklet for our staging, we sought to illustrate how experiences of change impact and shape individuals. *On Meeting Again* served as an effective point of departure, thanks to its concise narrative structure and minimal contextual framing. The story introduces a clearly defined main character, Mr. K., who engages in a brief yet loaded exchange with a secondary

figure. Their interaction ends with an ambiguous tension, raising more questions than it answers. Mr. K.'s reaction – turning pale when told that he has not changed – is particularly striking, as the remark is typically meant as a compliment. His discomfort, however, opens up a space for reflection on the deeper implications of change and self-perception.

During the rehearsals, the students were exclusively confronted with the direct speech phrases 'You haven't changed at all' and 'Oh!'. This deliberate choice was made to avoid any potential influence on interpretative options, thereby fostering authentic engagement with the material. Two distinct groups (Group I and Group II) were formed within the existing group, allowing participants to meander throughout the room and giving them the opportunity to let their thoughts flow without constraint. Upon receiving a specific signal, everyone was instructed to halt, at which point Group I would convey the phrase 'Sie haben sich gar nicht verändert' to the individual directly opposite them, while Group II was expected to respond with 'Oh!'. This interactive exercise was conducted repeatedly, providing all participants with an opportunity to explore the emotional responses elicited by the phrase 'Sie haben sich gar nicht verändert.' Interestingly, in contrast to Brecht's assertions, not all the emotional reactions were negative. Several students expressed a sense of comfort and satisfaction to realise that they had remained unchanged. "I do not wish to undergo constant change," it was stated; "I know that life changes me, but I do not want to lose complete control over it."

In class discussions, attention gradually shifted to the multifaceted theme of change. A critical distinction emerged between individual transformation – understood as personal development – and shifts triggered by the untenability of existing conditions. This conceptual differentiation proved particularly productive in analysing *Tschick*, a novel that explores both personal and societal forms of change. The narrative also gestures toward broader implications of digital transformation, illustrating how ongoing technological developments shape individual trajectories. Engaging with these interconnected dimensions of change offered insight into how personal experience is embedded within wider socio-technical dynamics. These reflections subsequently informed a theatrical investigation designed to render such dynamics both experientially accessible and analytically tangible – a process culminating in the performance staged at the Mons City Theatre.

The Performance took place on 10 May 2024, and I now aim to analyse the event through the lens of praxeological research. Unlike traditional methods, praxeological production analysis shifts the focus away from solely examining the performance or staging, or primarily considering the audience's reception (Klein, 2019, p. 14). Instead, it delves into the specific relational dynamics of the work process, which will be exemplified through Meisner's so-called 'First Exercise'. The approach I used integrated strategies for both translation and staging, drawing on both Henri Meschonnic's translation theory (1999, 2007) and Meisner's acting techniques (Moseley, 2014).



Figure 1. Theatre poster "Tchick"

The image below illustrates the ‘hospital scene’ between the protagonist, Tschick, and the doctor, which is featured in the first chapter of the novel. The positioning of the characters suggests that the scene was directly influenced by Meisner’s repetition exercises. While a comprehensive exploration of how one can achieve full staging through Meisner’s techniques would exceed the scope of this contribution, I will instead focus on the essential principles of the Meisner acting method.



Figure 2. The hospital scene (with the kind permission of the students)

3. Meschonic or the anthropologic perspective

The staging project, conducted during the 2023-2024 academic year, incorporated all second-year students enrolled in German language courses within the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI) at the University of Mons. At the beginning of their second year of study, these students were prepared to the translation market through the addition of translation courses to their language curriculum. Since then, they have experienced a steady increase in course intensity, which now also includes training in translation software. Additionally, the second year is strategically designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to confidently navigate their Erasmus stay, which is typically undertaken in the first semester of their third year. However, a true test of this preparation will emerge in a world where global political developments and new waves of migration present unprecedented challenges to language mediators in both written and spoken forms.

Oral forms of communication, particularly corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2011) and mediation (Winslade & Monk, 2000), have become prominent and pose unique challenges for individuals with second-language knowledge that cannot be adequately addressed using conventional teaching methods or translation apps, which fall short of capturing the nuances and intricacies of dialogue that need to be learned. Although students at the FTI are introduced

to theories of politeness¹ during the first year of their Master's programme, they are expected to apply these concepts directly in interactive exam settings. However, many are insufficiently prepared to do so, particularly if their language instruction has not adequately addressed the interactional implications of these theories. This gap becomes evident in the face-threatening acts observed during assessments, suggesting a disconnect between theoretical instruction and practical communicative competence. One form of communication that has emerged in response to waves of migration is dialogue interpreting, which is commonly defined as participating in an interaction (Wadensjö, 1998). Surprisingly little attention has been paid to how future translators can be equipped for the interactive demands of their profession through language instruction alone, independently of their formal training in translation.²

Further action is essential, and it seems that the educational focus should shift away from the predominant reliance on translation apps and artificial intelligence, and instead prioritise the multifaceted anthropological dimensions essential for aspiring translators. Whatever one's perception or conception of the translation process, it must also be examined anthropologically. The objective of an anthropological perspective on translation involves comprehending the translator's anthropological attributes and simultaneously determining the methodologies and systematics necessary.

The development of an explicit anthropology of translation commenced in the 20th century, with Henri Meschonnic (1932-2009), a prominent French linguistic scholar, being the primary driving force. In his seminal works, *Poétique du traduire* (1999) and *Éthique et politique du traduire* (2007), Meschonnic brought together his insights on translation to form a comprehensive theoretical framework.³ While the principal objective of translation studies typically lies in elucidating the manner in which "empirical" translations operate, Meschonnic's scientific endeavour, much like that of Saussure, is positioned within the extensive theoretical framework of a theory of language. A passage from the *Éthique* is emblematic in this respect:

The most ancient point of view on language is the empirical and empiricist point of view of the translator, whose patron, emblematically, is Saint Jerome, translator of the Bible. From Cicero to Valéry Larbaud, it is a point of view organized according to the effect to be produced, within the limits of a language system. Translation is conceived of as the passage from one language system to another. It is analyzed [*sic*] in terms of contrastive grammar ("differential grammar") and individual style. This point of view presently underlines the teaching of translation in interpreting and translation schools. It seems to have in its favour experience and common sense. Its major precepts are the translator's loyalty and effacement with respect for the text. Its transparency must lead the reader to forget that it is a translation, and aim to be natural. [...] Its weakness comes from its being a mere concept of langue not a concept of literature. And since it cannot grasp the

¹ We refer to politeness theories, which have gained prominence in the academic literature following the publication of Brown and Levinson (1990) and have been widely accepted across various languages.

² The interactional principle aligns seamlessly with the premises of anthropological linguistics, a field that has experienced significant growth since the 1980s. During this period, anthropological researchers began to examine language as utilised in specific speech communities, subcultural groups, professional circles, business contexts, and other domains, with the aim of investigating the ways in which members of these groups and institutions interact in their daily encounters (Schiffelin & Ochs, 1986; Besnier & Moerman, 1990; Maynard, 1989; Hanks, 1990). The objective was to elucidate how social relations and reality are collaboratively constructed through discourse.

³ In contrast to the *Poétique du traduire*, which has so far not been released in languages other than French, the *Éthique et politique du traduire* has been rendered into both English (Meschonnic, 2011, Trans. Boulanger), and German (Meschonnic, 2021, Trans. Costa).

specificity of literature, this point of view could not possibly be communicated by the practice it produces (Meschonnic, 2011, Trans. Boulanger, p. 59).

Henri Meschonnic's conceptualisation of the poetic act of speaking, particularly 'la parole', as a distinctive element of discourse renders the anthropological perspective particularly pertinent for contemporary translation students. For him, the subject as an 'experiencer of language' holds paramount significance, considering that the poem emerges from the dynamic interaction between a 'form of discourse' and a 'form of life' (2001, p. 123; 2007, p. 26). At this point, the concept of rhythm, central to his poetic theory, becomes relevant, as rhythm serves to actualise the subject and its temporality. A writing subject is deeply embedded in history to the extent that the historical constraints influencing him are transcended by the unique rhythmic symbols generated within the discourse of the poem.⁴

These theoretical premises formed the foundation of my work with students who had been learning German for a year, when I assumed responsibility for the group in September 2023. The *Poetics of Translation's* emphasis on defining the act of translation from the perspective of the emergent subject⁵ led me to incorporate an underlying anthropological perspective into my staging work. The primary goal was to highlight the subjective nature of the theatrical experience, which mirrors the translation process and makes students aware that the concept of the 'subject' is not simply a clear-cut linguistic category or a fixed individual, but rather an ongoing process of subjectivation that occurs through language. We were not interested in creating a theatre role distanced from the performer's personality. Instead, we aimed to present a stage presence engaged in a game that required reinvention with each iteration. The presence on stage was beholden to certain rules that dictated the performers' behaviour, forcing them to constantly improvise or employ cunning to circumvent the rules. However, these rules were unique to each scene, resulting in distinct conditions being established in each case. Or to speak with Meschonnic, it was less about adhering to a predetermined and immutable notion of the 'subject' or 'person' and more about clarifying the dynamic process through which the 'subject' is formed and evolves within the discourse.

Throughout our rehearsals, traditional theatrical elements like "plot" and "roles" were not the primary focus, although they functioned as a frame of reference. While we drew inspiration from Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Tschick* – which narrates the story of two young Berliners who, feeling alienated, set off on an adventure in an old Lada – the emphasis was not on replicating this plot. Rather, we were concerned with how the digital revolution has transformed the ways in which people interact with others. The students were encouraged to craft their own narratives and develop discourses that were connected to, yet distinct from the original text. "Discourse" came to symbolise the convergence of individuality and diversity, emerging as the central element in our stage exercises. As will be shown in the following sections, students' speech patterns exhibited strong performative quality. The question of whether these patterns corresponded to the generally expected intermediate level of the Common European Framework of Reference (2023) was not the focus of our staging work; rather, it was a matter of motivating the students to investigate their gestures, bodily practices, and everyday rhythms.

⁴ It is accurate to assert that most of the fundamental concepts put forth by Meschonnic are rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique Générale* (1983 [1916]). More specifically, the concept of "discourse" has played a pivotal role in shaping the anthropology of language developed by the French thinker.

⁵ The two volumes of *Poetics* and *Ethics* are characterised by a unique translational methodology that is both highly specialised and philosophical. This involves examining broader translational concepts to delve into the nature of language, its significance in all human activities, and the influence of human subjectivity on language use. It is not a systematic system of speculation but rather a contemplative exploration of the philosophical ramifications of language and its role in human existence.

The impetus for the staging project stemmed from the inherent parallel between theatrical production and the practice of translation, which I consider a crucial element of both linguistic and artistic pursuits. Theatrical production, particularly in a second language, represents an ongoing and intricate translation process. This process involves constant negotiation between various elements such as speech and movement, written text and performance, different languages and cultures, and various media and materials. Our staging exemplified a practical theory of translation, illustrating how artistic production in a second language inherently entails translation, and shifts the focus from mere content to the deeper significance of meaning, as articulated by Meschonnic in an interview:

How [sic] implies that meaning, contrary to its usual privileged position, is one of the least important things in language—at least in the way meaning is generally understood. Intonation and situation, as everybody knows, can alter the meaning radically. Literature and poetry are the invention of constraints that inscribe the physics of language (its orality) into writing (Bedetti & Meschonnic, 1988, p. 99).

Meschonnic's translation theory, which posits the subject as a dynamic process rather than a fixed entity, offers the possibility that the subject embodies a value that enables every individual to continually reexamine their life as something that has not yet transpired as a symbol of liberation. Even among the most common acts of communication, articulation is always a process of innovation. Conversely, a poem is a singular creation that reinterprets the ordinary. Thus, our primary concern was the investigation of contextualised acts of expression, particularly in relation to their role in subjectivation. Instead of concentrating on subjectively intended meaning, it aims to explore the process of constructing meanings and objects. Meisner's acting techniques were the means to realise these premises.

4. Meisner's First exercise

Sanford Meisner (1905-1997) formulated a structured and sequential method for developing highly creative actors through a comprehensive training system. This system begins with foundational techniques and progressively builds the necessary skills for actors to excel in their craft. Meisner placed considerable importance on voice, speech, and movement as key external elements of acting; however, he was convinced that these aspects should not overshadow an actor's inner life and emotional profundity. An actor lacking a solid emotional foundation is less capable of authentically conveying the complex nuances of the human experience. This understanding highlights the necessity for a holistic approach to acting training that integrates both external techniques and internal emotional exploration, thereby fostering a more versatile and effective performer (Esper & Dimarco, 2008, p. 7).

Meisner's contribution to acting pedagogy fundamentally focuses on the interactions between actors. While numerous acting teachers have adapted their techniques in various ways, the core principle of delivering a genuine, personalised response that depends on the partner's input remains the foundation of any Meisner-inspired approach. The emphasis on authentic connections not only fosters emotional truthfulness in performance, but also highlights the necessity for actors to actively engage with one another, thus creating a dynamic and responsive environment. Meisner's contribution to acting pedagogy fundamentally focuses on interactions between actors. This foundational principle not only emphasises the importance of authentic connections, but also fosters emotional truthfulness in performance, underscoring the necessity for actors to actively engage with one another and create a dynamic and responsive environment (Gonsalves & Irish, 2021, p. 1).

Meisner's exercises aim to assist actors in performing truthfully, with the most well-known being the repetition technique. Named for the way actors openly articulate observations made by one performer about the other (e.g., "You are wearing blue socks"), the partner then echoes those remarks from their own perspective until a circumstance arises that prompts one of the actors to alter their words. This seemingly straightforward activity eliminates the need for either actor to consciously devise a performance by improvising their speech and behaviour based on their character's traits at that moment. Instead, they respond instinctively. Repetition requires the actor to state a simple phrase, removing the pressure to search for words that are clever, insightful, or character driven.

That repetition is a well-established principle of second language education is a truism.⁶ However, the type of repetition Meisner refers to is completely different from a cognitive learning strategy. His repetition exercises were intended to concentrate on the actors' respective scene partners and to respond directly to their reactions. Interactive repetition is based, as the former Meisner student Aileen Gonsalves writes, on the fact that

an actor must agree to put their performance into the hands of another actor; your Lady Macbeth is dependent on their Macbeth; your Falstaff is dependent on their Prince Hal; your Helena is dependent on their Demetrius. This results in the maxim that *acting is reacting [sic]* (Gonsalves & Irish, 2021, p. 3).

This maxim, which has become established not only in many drama schools but also increasingly in a branch of linguistics known as anthropological linguistics (Wiltschko, 2021), has found little resonance in foreign language teaching. The students are unfamiliar with Meisner's principle. Therefore, we started with his "First exercise", a mechanical version of repetitive exercises. In this exercise, two students, S1 and S2, sit on chairs facing each other at a distance that allows them to see not just the face of their partner, but their entire body. After some time, S1 makes a simple statement about what they noticed about the other; this is a physical, irrefutable fact, such as "blue socks." S2 repeats the sentence in the first person. S1 then repeats what they think they have heard and continues until the teacher stops exercising. The underlying principle involves entering a state of heightened awareness wherein one observes the impact of another individual's statement on oneself. Here is the way in which the S1 and S2-utterances relate to each other:

S1: Du trägst blaue Socken.

↘

S2 [responds to what they perceive as having heard of from S1.]: Ich trage blaue Socken.

↘

S1 [responds to what they perceive as having heard of from S2.]: Du trägst blaue Socken.

↘

S2 [responds to what they perceive as having heard of from S1.]: Ich trage blaue Socken.

This "First Exercise" provides significant insight into Meisner's system, which fundamentally asserts the primacy of the sentence as the unit of analysis. The theatre theorist and practitioner was convinced that the processes of subjectivation occur within the sequence of sentences and

⁶ The Latin phrase "repetitio est mater studiorum" (repetition is the mother of learning) accurately reflects the notion that sustained learning can be achieved only through repetition. Even recent scholarly literature has consistently emphasised the significance of having learners reproduce the forms they have encountered to facilitate their recognition of discrepancies between their own production and that of others (Duff, 2000).

can only be comprehended through the examination of these sentence sequences. Through repetition exercises, students can ascertain that information pertaining to interlocutors (speaker and addressee) is syntactically encoded within an interaction. The relative insignificance of words shifts the focus to the sequence of moments within the relationship. Provided that S1 and S2 are responsive to one another, consistently receptive to being influenced by the other's voice and physical presence, the exchange of the sentence "Ich trage blaue Socken" / "Du trägst blaue Socken" can become an external manifestation of the internal journey, not through the words, which remain constant, but through subtle variations in pitch, tone, volume, and stress. The exercise was initially conducted without classroom observation. Subsequently, in the second phase, each pair was instructed to demonstrate the reciprocal exchange of utterances before the entire group, which was directed to observe attentively, recording every reaction, pause, and breath suppression while noting any instances of fidgeting, postural adjustments, or avoidance behaviour.

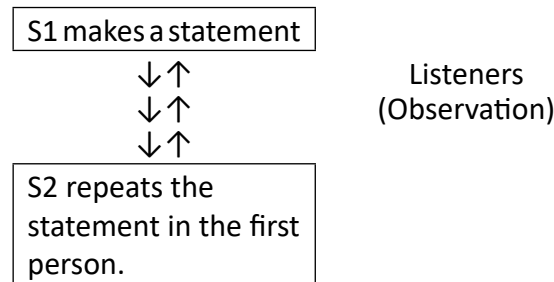


Figure 3. First exercise

One student's comment in this context was particularly enlightening: "I never realised how much energy a few sentences can convey." This statement holds significance as it references a paragraph from the *Poétique du traduire*, which, while focusing on literary interactions, is applicable to all forms of interactions:

Ce n'est pas le langage seulement qui est, comme le postulait Humboldt, non tant un produit, *ergon*, qu'une *energeia*, une activité. C'est aussi chaque acte de langage. Aussi tout texte, qui répond à sa définition littéraire, c'est-à-dire qui agit et qui dure, tout texte est en mouvement. Un texte, étant une suite indéfinie de réénonciations possibles, continue de transformer la lecture et d'être transformé par elle (1999, p. 213).

[It is not only language that is, as Humboldt postulated, not so much a product, *ergon*, than *energeia*, an activity. But also, every act of language. Therefore, every text that meets its literary definition, that is, that acts and lasts, is in motion. As an indefinite series of possible re-enunciations, a text continues to transform reading and is transformed by it (translation carried out by the author of this article).]

The concept of "energeia" referenced here became increasingly palpable as exercise progressed. Following the initial adaptation phase, student pairs began to engage in more fluid interactions, demonstrating a concerted effort to maintain the momentum of their interpersonal dynamics, which was in a state of constant flux. The Meisner Technique is predicated on the principle of the reality of doing; thus, rather than merely simulating an action, students executed it authentically. They discovered that engaging in genuine action involves not only observing changes in one's partner but also responding appropriately to those changes. As they immersed themselves in this process, they were able to alleviate the anxiety of being observed and the sensation of performing it by concentrating on the task at

hand and the imperative to complete it. Consequently, Meisner's "First Exercise" can be seen as a form of 'point zero', where one becomes tacitly aware of how one engages with a subject and how one's practices relate to their underlying concepts. According to Meisner, this point marks the inception of the interactive learning experience.

In the course of our deliberations, we established that Meisner's initial exercise represents a realisation of the fundamental essence of language. Through repetition of the phrases 'Ich trage blaue Socken' and 'Du trägst blaue Socken', we inadvertently approached a metaphysical understanding of language more closely than we were initially prepared to acknowledge. These phrases underscored the primordial nature of language, its original vocation that transcends and illuminates all the functions it performs within the human environment. As Meschonnic would undoubtedly agree, the function of language is not confined to mere communication (2002, p. 95); rather, it ensures the coherence of what is articulated and experienced, thereby establishing continuous transformation relationships. Thus, our deliberations revealed that language inherently conveys meaning, serving as a medium through which humans ascribe significance to the world. Meisner's preliminary exercise exemplifies this by illustrating language as a fundamental signifying process embodying the essence of significance. As noted by Meisner scholars Aileen Gonsalves and Tracy Irish, 'this ostensibly straightforward activity alleviates the necessity for either performer to act.'

With Repetition, the actor has a simple phrase to say and does not need to 'go into their heads' to search for other words that are clever or witty or 'in character'. Instead, they focus on their partner and respond to how their partner makes them feel through their voice and behaviour as they open and close their mouths around whatever phrase it is they are repeating. The words in Repetition are unimportant – you may, for example, still be repeating 'You are smiling', when the smile has fallen away. Rather than having their attention on the words, Meisner wanted his actors to develop awareness of the emotional response expressed through those words and the close connection that this creates (Gonsalves & Irish, 2021, p. 2).

What the quotation makes clear is that meaning in Meisner's exercise arises not from the words themselves, but from the relational dynamics they mediate – highlighting the inherently interactive and affective nature of linguistic expression. It is precisely these relational dynamics that establish the bridge to emotional experience, since emotions are not produced by instruction or internal decision, but emerge through the presence and response of the other.

5. Truthful connection to emotions

The two key 'muscles' that Meisner's technique cultivates are: observing clearly and responding authentically from one's perspective. One of Meisner's fundamental principles states: 'What you do does not depend on you; it depends on the other fellow' (1987, p. 34). This implies the necessity to accurately perceive how the other individual is behaving – not how one assumes the other individual as a character should behave, but one's personal perception of how that fellow human is actually behaving at that moment. In relation to the staging of Herrndorf's novel, an excessive reverence for the text can lead actors and directors to adopt approaches that seek a 'correct method' to voice his characters, while pursuing the appropriate interpretation of actions and behaviours. Meisner's technique is fundamentally incompatible with any approach that conceives acting as setting aside the actor's personal experiences to seek some form of abstract ideal of what a playwright intended a character to be, or to animate a marionette manipulated according to the director's dictates (Gonsalves & Irish, 2021, p. 3).

Concurrently, the assertion of authenticity is accompanied by an anthropological constant: the linguistic nature of humanity. In discussions with my students, it became evident that authenticity is negotiated in various contexts between an ‘I’ and a ‘You.’ One particularly insightful observation from a student was, “I have just realised how deeply interconnected ‘I’ and ‘You’ are, and that the existence of an ‘I’ is only possible because there is a ‘You.’” The student was unaware that the reasoning leading to this conclusion originated from Émile Benveniste, a French linguist born in Aleppo, nor that Meschonnic frequently referenced his essay *De la subjectivité dans le langage* (1958) and his analysis of linguistic subjectivity.⁷ In his famous writing, Benveniste begins with the question of what enables language to facilitate human communication. He rejected the apparent answer that language is a means of communication and is therefore used for this purpose as a circular argument, proceeding to challenge the notion of language as a mere communicative tool. This understanding is misleading as it fundamentally misinterprets the relationship between humans and language. What applies to an instrument or tool does not apply to language; one cannot set it aside. We do not use language as we would a tool; rather, we embody our language.⁸

The discussion with my students clearly demonstrated that the relationship between “I” and “You” is not merely grammatical but is deeply rooted in the interdependence of human subjectivity, thereby revealing the extent to which linguistic expression is entwined with personal identity. This interrelation reinforces the notion that language is more than a communicative tool – it is an embodied practice that both shapes and reflects our relational existence. By engaging with Benveniste’s theories, the students came to understand that every utterance of “I” is not only a unique reflection of the speaker’s experience but also inseparable from the presence of “You.” In other words, the relational dynamic between these pronouns forms the basis of discourse, where every exchange gives rise to a new identity and a new understanding.

6. Conclusion

This exploration of subjectivity through Meisner’s repetition exercises provided a crucial pedagogical moment for translation students, making them aware that language is never disembodied or neutral. The act of repeating and responding in dialogue parallels the intersubjective processes at the core of translation and intercultural communication. Just as actors are required to respond authentically to their scene partners, translators, cultural mediators, and dialogue interpreters need to cultivate an attuned sensitivity to the emotional and relational undercurrents embedded in every linguistic exchange. As demonstrated through the students’ performances, such awareness cannot be taught solely through abstract theory or technical training but must be cultivated through embodied experience and sustained practice.

In light of these insights, this article argues for the integration of actor training techniques – particularly those centred on emotional truthfulness – into translator education. These approaches not only deepen students’ linguistic reflexivity but also foster the emotional intelligence and relational awareness essential for navigating the complex human terrain of multilingual encounters. Moreover, against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving translation market – in which professional boundaries are shifting and automatisations are advancing – language

⁷ Meschonnic conceptualises rhythm in language as the movement of “signifiante”, a continuous process that reveals the subject. His theory of rhythm began to take shape through his experience as a writer and translator, particularly during his study of the Bible in Hebrew.

⁸ For further insights, see Hans Lösener’s discussion in his book chapter *Auch eine Frage der Stimme. Sprache und Ethik bei Henri Meschonnic* (2021).

and translation educators must recognise the need for a robust conceptual foundation that justifies and secures the academic presence of their disciplines. Within this endeavour, the anthropology of language offers critical arguments for understanding theatre not merely as a performative tool, but as a pedagogical method that engages with the broader question of what it means to communicate as human beings.

The contribution thus positions itself within the expanding field of Arts Education in higher education by highlighting the potential of performative methodologies across disciplines such as translation, language education, and anthropology. While arts-based approaches have gained increasing recognition in school-level pedagogy, their role within universities remains comparatively underexplored. By demonstrating how performance-based methods can address diverse disciplinary aims, the study advocates for a rethinking of translator education and positions the arts as a powerful means of fostering embodied, practice-oriented inquiry in the humanities.

Framing theatre not only as an artistic but also as a linguistic and anthropological practice, it underscores the need for academic institutions to embrace pedagogies that foreground embodiment, subjectivity, and relational awareness. In doing so, it calls for a broader understanding of education – one in which the arts are not peripheral but central to how we teach, learn, and communicate across languages and cultures.

7. References

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