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**Translation Problems of Foreign-Language Dramatic Texts Using Dialect:  
Translatorial-Dramaturgical Questions and Solutions**

Doctoral (PhD) theses

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## **1. Research Background and Problem Statement**

Theatre translation lies at the intersection of literary translation and theatre studies, where the text must meet not only literary but also performative requirements. At the centre of my research are the difficulties of staging dramas that use dialect, sociolect, or substandard language usage on Hungarian stages.

The starting point of the research was the synthesis of personal linguistic experiences and professional practice. My interest was sparked on the one hand by encounters with living dialects of the languages I have mastered best — English, Italian, and German—and on the other hand by my direct experience as a theatre dramaturg and literary translator.

I participated in the staging of numerous theatrical works where dialect use played an important role. I was often a theatrical consultant for new translations prepared for productions, and later worked as a translator of theatre texts myself. Through this experience, I witnessed how particularly challenging the translation of dialects is within the Hungarian target-language recreation of dramatic texts.

### **1.1. Addressing Research Gaps**

The methodological foundation and novel contribution of this dissertation are evidenced by four research gaps identified by Kinga Klaudy in her 2001 review of the dissertation by Zsuzsa Valló – a pioneer of Hungarian theatrical translation studies – on *realia* translation. Klaudy identified the following areas as deficiencies in the dissertation (and in Hungarian theatre translation research):

1. The lack of overview of Hungarian specialized literature, and the presentation and use of practitioner reflections and artistic commentaries by translators, directors, and actors during research.
2. Documentation of changes introduced during rehearsals. What changes do directors introduce to stage texts, and are there any among them that affect the

translation of the examined area (e.g., in the case of *realia*, changing a foreign geographical name because it is difficult to pronounce).

3. Detailed analysis of differences between plays translated for publication and for stage performance.

4. Longitudinal examination of audience expectations. It would be necessary to somehow research whether there are audience expectations regarding translation in contemporary Hungarian society, and whether these change over decades.

The present research addresses all four areas, thereby settling a quarter-century debt in the field of Hungarian theatre translation studies. Beyond mapping these gap areas, the research points to an important definitional question: I interpret the result of the translator's work not as the endpoint of the work process, but as one of the key stages of the staging process. Although resolving difficulties related to the translation of dialect-using plays and finding concrete stage text solutions during theatrical work belongs to the daily work of theatre dramaturgs, this problem is not a widely researched field at all. The translation of dialect-using poses challenges on two fronts: dialect translation and stage language adaptation, and is characteristically a Hungarian problem, since contemporary Hungarian literary translators can hardly rely on the general knowledge of individual Hungarian dialects. Consequently, my dissertation topic is located at the intersection of several fields: literary translation, more concretely theatre translation, as well as theatre studies/dramaturgy and reception studies.

## **1.2. Central Research Questions**

The dissertation seeks answers to three central research questions. First, it maps what translation strategies can be applied for the effective stage representation of dialects. Second, through longitudinal examination, it documents how Hungarian audiences'

linguistic tolerance and expectation system changed between 2009 and 2024. Third, it analyses what role the actors' own dialectal competencies play in character development and how they can become a natural part of theatrical practice.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is formed by the synthesis of translation studies, theatre semiotics, and reception aesthetics. This interdisciplinary approach enables a holistic examination of the complex issues inherent in dialect translation.

### **2.1. Theatrical Potential and Performability**

Drawing on the work of Brigitte Schultze and Sophia Totzeva, I analysed the scenic possibilities inherent in the texts, highlighting the significance of speakability (*Sprechbarkeit*) and breath-based rhythm (*Atembarkeit*). Rather than being merely a literary creation, the theatrical text functions as a performable score from which the definitive version emerges through the actor's body and voice in the moment of encounter with the audience.

### **2.2. The Translator's Invisibility**

I applied Lawrence Venuti's theory to the Hungarian theatrical context, examining strategies of domestication and foreignization. Dialect translation is a particularly exciting terrain in this regard, since the translator's decision about representing or eliminating linguistic otherness fundamentally influences the audience experience.

### **2.3. The Pavis Continuum**

Following Patrice Pavis, I placed theatrical translation in the transitional zone between translation and adaptation, where the text changes medium: the written

literary work becomes a living stage performance. This medium change presents special challenges in the case of dialects.

### **3. Research Methodology**

During the research, I applied an interdisciplinary, mixed methodology that enabled a multilevel approach to the problem.

#### **3.1. Quantitative Research**

Within the framework of a longitudinal questionnaire survey (2009 baseline research and 2024 repetition, n=217), I measured the attitudes of audience and professional recipients over a 15-year span. The research brought statistically significant results about changes in the linguistic tolerance of Hungarian theatregoers.

#### **3.2. Qualitative Text Analysis**

Through four case studies, I examined different translation strategies in connection with plays showing different dialect usage situations: the use of dialect as disguise in Shakespeare's *King Lear*; the different language use of two groups as a projection of the conflicts running through John Arden's *Live Like Pigs*; the group-characterizing dialect use of Martin McDonagh's Irish trilogies; and the sociolect use in G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

#### **3.3. Professional Interviews**

Through interviews conducted with six actors and one speech coach, I documented the stage practice of 'audible dialect', that is accent work on stage. These interviews provided insight into how dialects become tools of character development in Hungarian theatre.

### **4. Hypotheses and Results**

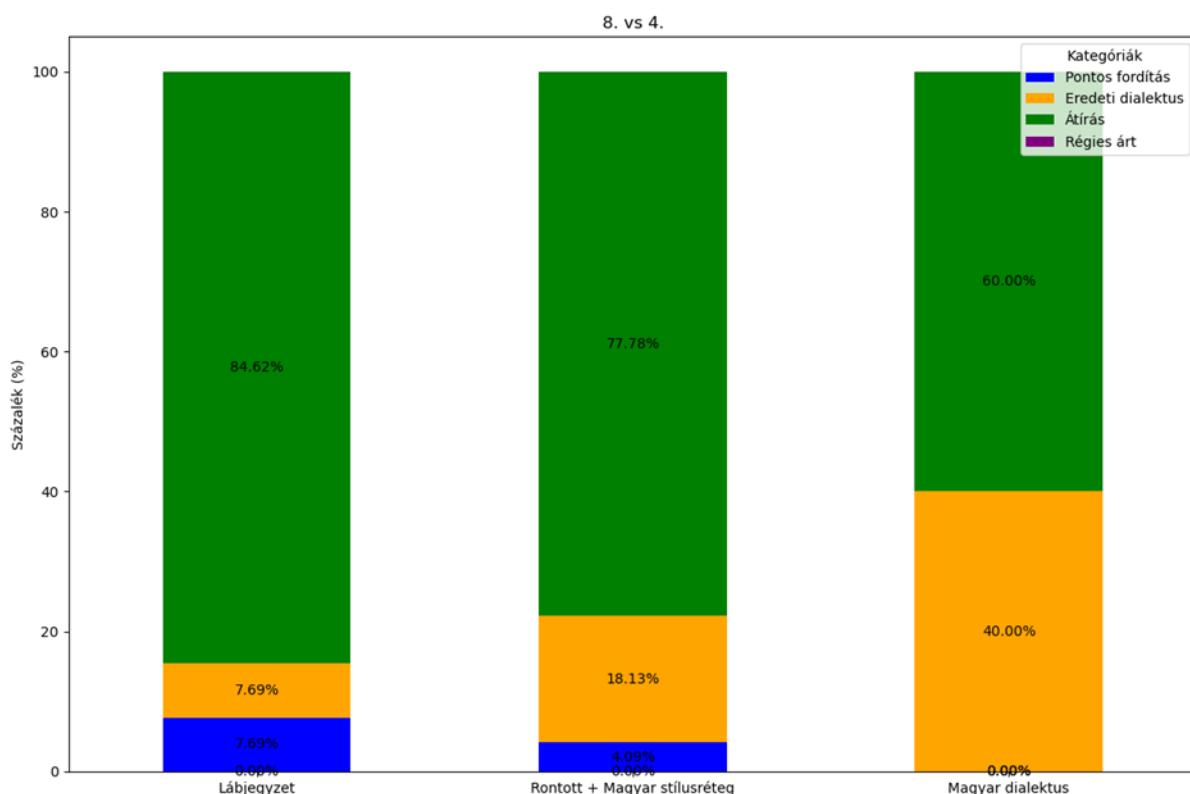
The research tested four main hypotheses, whose results shed new light on Hungarian dialect translation practice.

## **H1 (REFUTED): Lay respondents are more uncertain in stylistic decisions.**

Respondents without theatrical background also demonstrated clear and sophisticated decision-making. This contradicts the presumption that only industry professionals are capable of making nuanced judgments about translation strategies.

## **H2 (PARTIALLY CONFIRMED): Concrete textual experience overrides theoretical positions.**

In certain cases, audiences chose 'stage-ready' solutions over 'accurate' ones, supporting the primacy of performativity.

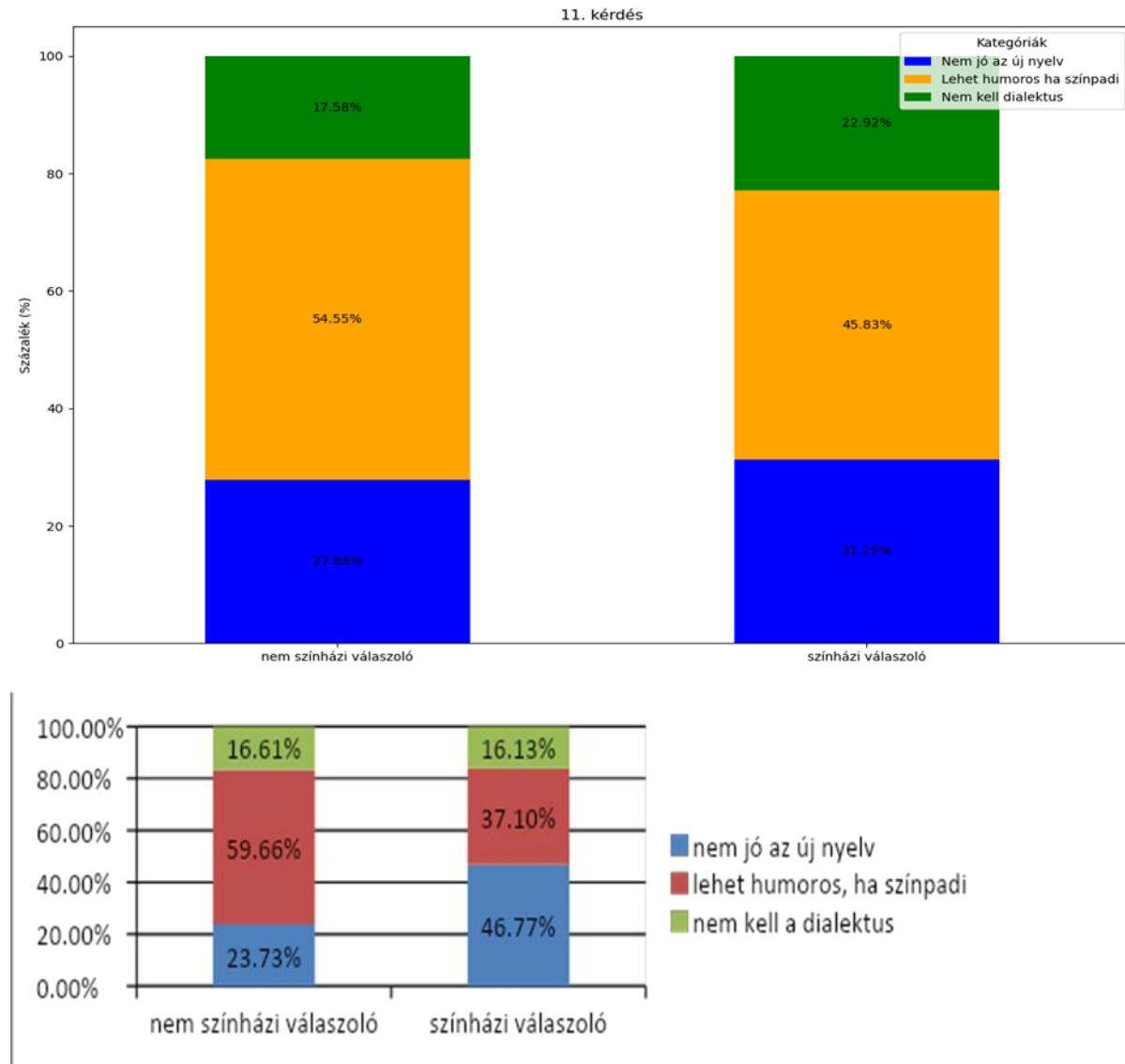


[Figure 1] Changes in the Assessment of Translation Strategies –Theory vs. Practice (2024)<sup>1</sup>

## **H3 (CONFIRMED): Audience tolerance toward creative translation solutions increased by 2024.**

<sup>1</sup> See dissertation, p. 78.

A statistically demonstrable growth in openness toward ‘corrupted language’ and authorial inventions is evident. The 2024 data show 23% higher acceptance of creative solutions.

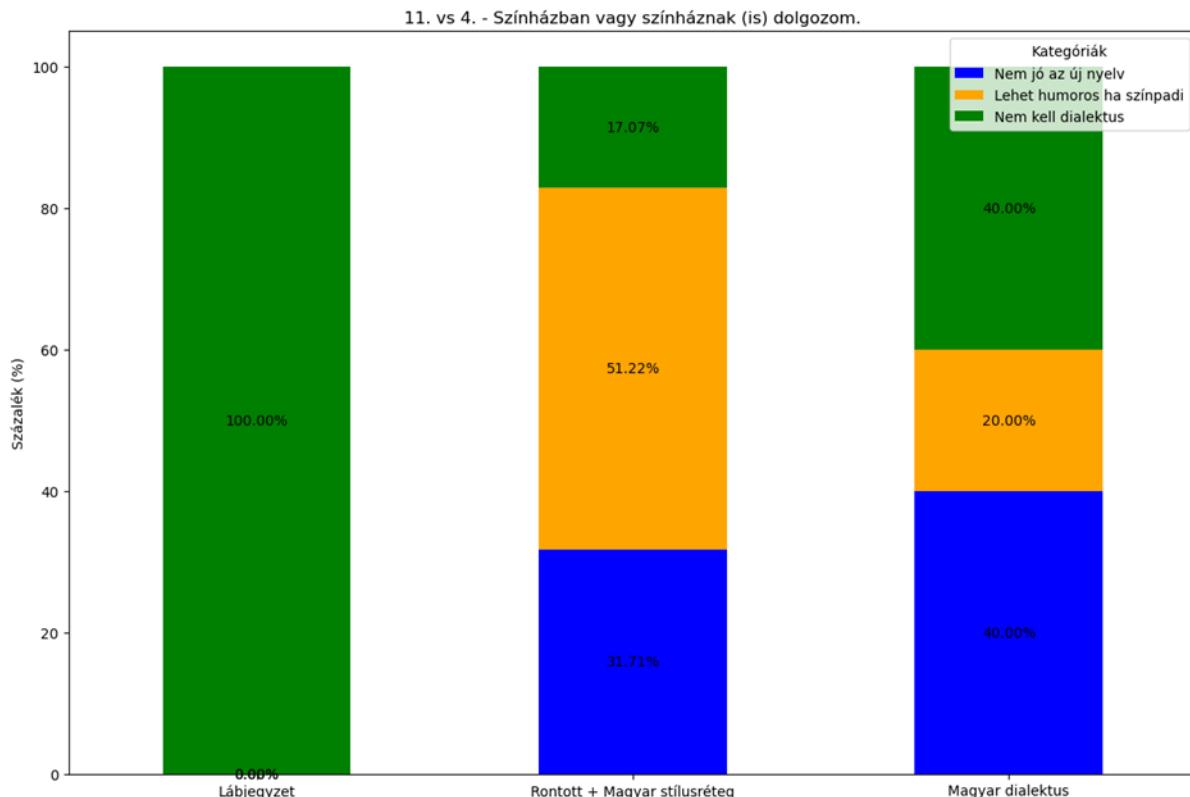


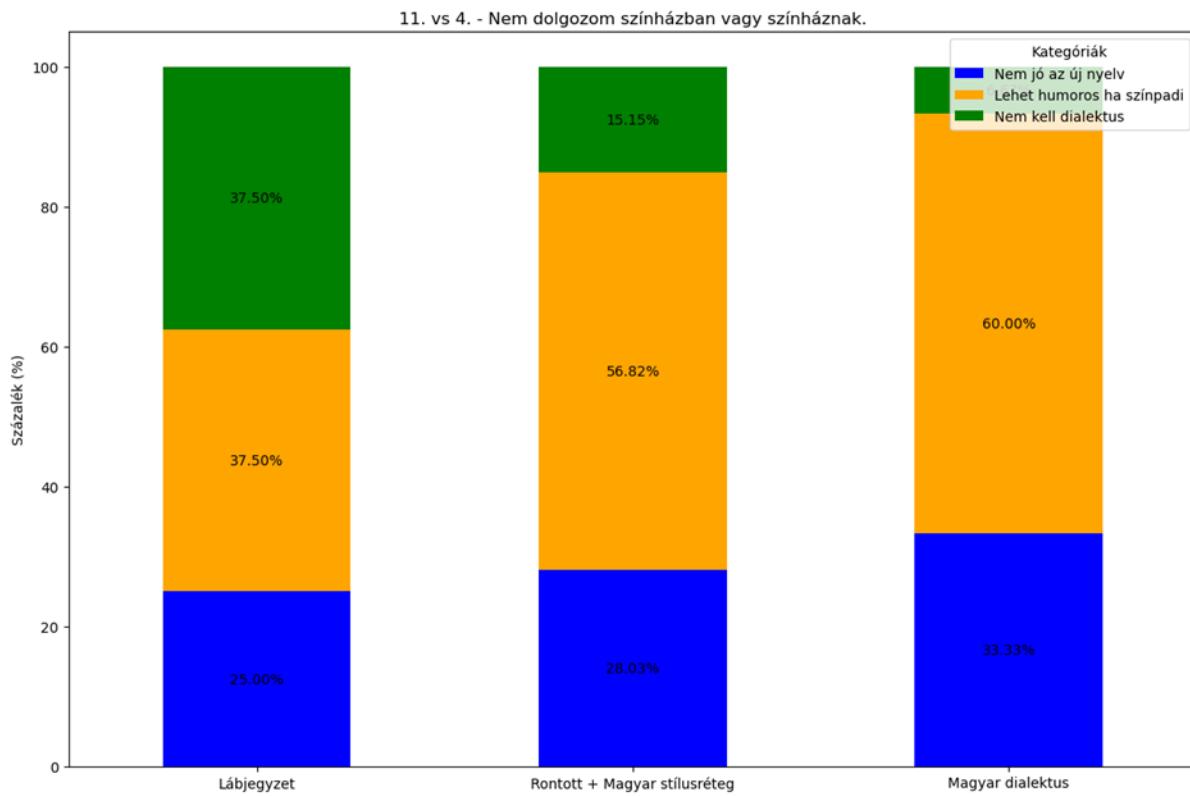
[Figures 2-3] Acceptance of Style Changes Resulting from Translation (2024 vs 2009)<sup>2</sup>

**H4 (CONFIRMED):** There is a significant difference between professional and lay expectations.

<sup>2</sup> See dissertation p. 87.

Theatre professionals support neutral, annotated texts at a 20% higher rate, while audiences expect ready-made solutions. This has important implications for translation strategy selection.





[Figures 3 and 4] Comparative Analysis of Questions 4 and 11 (Theatre Professionals vs General Audience)<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Main Results and Innovations

### 5.1. Changes in Audience Attitudes

The longitudinal study demonstrates that Hungarian audiences' linguistic tolerance has increased significantly. Dialectal elements are now perceived more as archaic language use (temporal distance) than as territorial limitations. Among theatre professionals, a need for 'strategic neutrality' is observable.

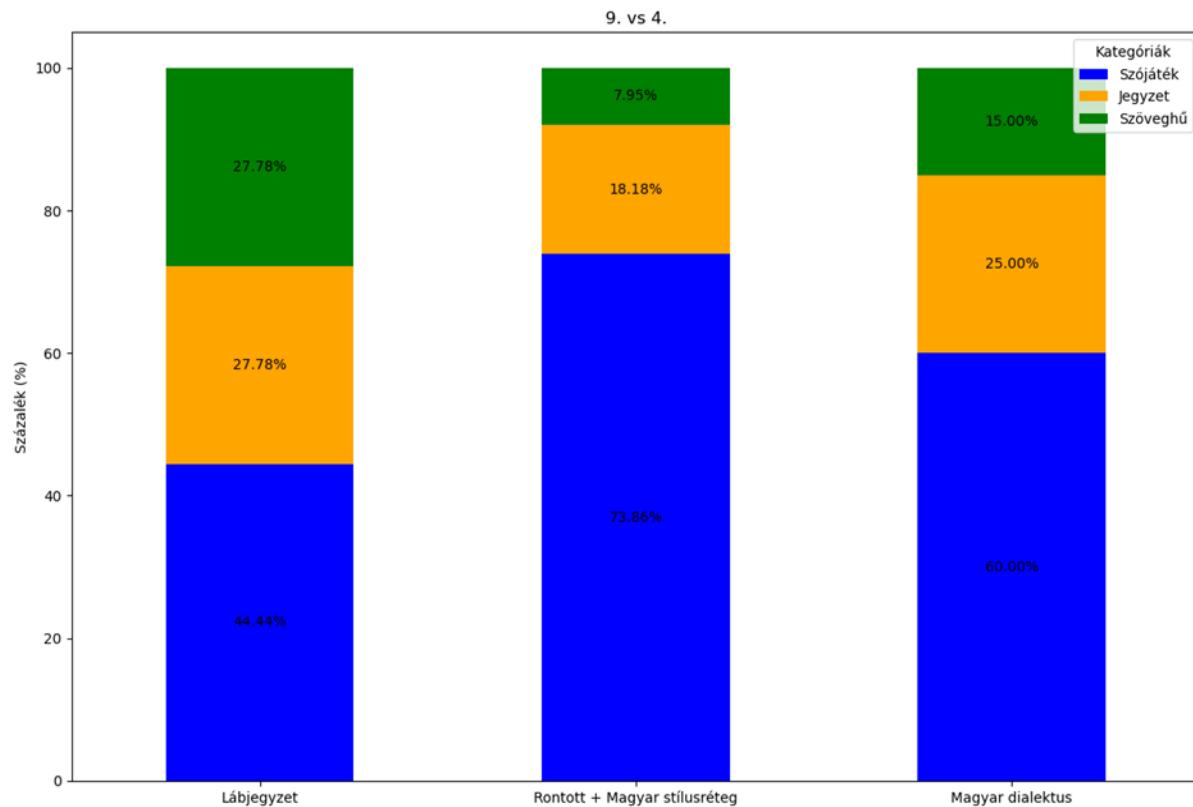
### 5.2. Typology for Dialect Translation

Based on my research, I have identified six main strategies for dialect translation:

1. Neutralization: Total omission of dialectal features (exemplified by Benedek Totth's method);

<sup>3</sup> See dissertation pp. 88–89.

2. Compensation: Employment of footnotes and paratextual devices (as in Ádám Nádasdy's work);
3. Substitution: Utilization of existing Hungarian regional varieties or registers (demonstrated by Dezső Mészöly);
4. Creation: Innovation of fictional linguistic constructs (practiced by Lajos Parti Nagy, Dániel Varró);
5. Instruction: Orthographically-assisted accent marking (illustrated by György Baráthy's work);
6. Hybrid methodology: Strategic combination of multiple approaches for stage impact (employed by András Kozma).



[Figure 5] Cross-comparative Acceptance of Various Translation Strategies (2024)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See dissertation p. 82.

### **5.3. Auditory Disguise and Acting Practice**

The professional interviews confirmed that accent use (e.g., István Fazekas's Palóc influenced Hungarian accent or István Znamenák's Somogy pronunciation) serves as an effective identity-marking tool that can significantly enhance the efficacy of the written text. Comparison with German practice revealed that while this remains an individual actor's invention in Hungary, it constitutes an institutionalized pedagogical method there. This indicates potential for development in Hungarian actor training.

### **5.4. Statistical Results**

Key quantitative findings of the research: 23% increase in acceptance of creative translation solutions; 20% difference between professional and lay expectations; statistically significant change ( $p<0.05$ ) in the reception of dialectal elements; 65% agreement on the primacy of 'stage-readiness' over 'accuracy.'

## **6. Practical Applications and Implications**

The dissertation provides concrete methodological guidance for translators and dramaturgs in addressing dialect translation challenges.

### **6.1. Guidelines for Translators and Dramaturgs**

The six translation strategy typologies help theatre translators in choosing the appropriate method for the given context. They can easier make a more informed decision according to the given target audience, genre, and production conditions.

### **6.2. Actor Training Perspectives**

The research results can be utilized in actor training to enrich speech culture and enable more conscious character formation. Through adaptation of the German

model, programs aimed at developing dialectal competencies can be implemented on an institutional level.

### **6.3. Theatre Translation as Interface Theory**

The theory of ‘theatre translation as interface’ proves that the theatre translator does not create a finished work, but rather an intermediary communicative surface between the source text and the theatrical creative team. This represents a new approach in Hungarian-language translation theory discourse, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the process.

## **7. International Context and Comparison**

The German–Hungarian comparison conducted during the research highlighted different practices in handling dialect in various theatrical cultures. While in Germany dialect use receives institutional support during training, in Hungary this still relies on individual competencies. The early results of the research were also presented at an international conference (University of Salford, 2013), where they received positive reception. This confirms the universal relevance of the topic in theatrical translation research.

## **8. Publications Related to the Topic**

### Scientific Publications:

“Kvittek vagyunk...” in Kékesi, Kun Árpád and Jákfalvi, Magdolna, eds. „*Hát újra itt...*” *Operettkánon és –műfaj* [“*Well, Here Again...*” *Operetta Canon and Genre.*]  
Budapest: Rózsavölgyi, Theatron Workshop Foundation (2021), 27–40.

“Similarities and Differences, or Institutional versus Production, Prose Theatre versus Opera Dramaturg – Experiences Gained in the Dramaturgy Department of the Hungarian State Opera House between 2014 and 2019.” in Cseicsner, Otilia; Orbán, Eszter and Török, Tamara, eds. *A dramaturg változó helye a 21. században:*

*Esszék, tanulmányok [The Changing Place of the Dramaturg in the 21st Century: Essays, Studies].* Budapest: Színházi Dramaturgok Céhe (2022), 62–71.

“Condemned to Renewal: The Katona József Theatre.” in Fábri, Péter ed. *A Shabby Paradise - Contemporary Hungarian Theatre*. London, United Kingdom: International Theatre Institute Hungarian Centre (2004), 97–103.

### Conference Presentations:

“Translating Dialect in a Vacuum” – presentation at the PhD conference in honour of Science Day (ELTE, Budapest, November 10, 2008)

“Dialect as Disguise” – presentation at the SZFE Doctoral School “Overture” conference (SZFE, Budapest, June 7, 2010)

“The Hungarian Paradox: Trends in dialect translation” – presentation at the “Drama Translation in the Age of Globalisation” symposium organized by the University of Salford (University of Salford, Manchester, March 3, 2013).

### Stage Translations

As a practicing theatre translator, I have completed the Hungarian translation of numerous stage works, including plays by Michael Frayn, Andrew Bovell, J. B. Priestley, April de Angelis, and Hanoch Levin, librettos for operas by Richard Wagner, Giuseppe Verdi, and Giacomo Puccini, and dialogues for the Kander-Ebb musical *Cabaret*. These translations not only provided practical experience but also served as research terrain, enabling practical testing of theoretical findings. (Unfortunately, due to the peculiarities of Hungarian book publishing, these translations have not appeared in a form accessible to the public.) As a dramaturg, I worked on two pieces from Martin McDonagh’s *Leenane* trilogy and Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge*, in which dialect use plays an important role.

## 9. Summary and Outlook

The dissertation mapped one of the least researched areas of Hungarian theatrical translation, the theory and practice of dialect translation, thereby settling a quarter-century research debt. The results prove that the stage representation of dialect is not merely a linguistic-technical challenge, but a complex process of performativity and cultural transfer, in which the translator functions as an interface between the source text and the creative team.

Main results of the research:

- Typologization of six translation strategies: I successfully distinguished the methods of *neutralization*, *compensation*, *substitution*, *creation*, *instruction*, and *hybrid approach*, which provide guidance for future translatorial and dramaturgical decisions.
- Longitudinal attitude change: The study spanning 15 years confirmed that Hungarian audiences' linguistic tolerance has significantly increased, and today they perceive temporal distance (archaic character) rather than territorial limitation in dialectal elements.
- The theory of 'strategic neutrality': During methodological reflection, it became evident that professional audiences' preference for more neutral translations often reflects the need for text malleability: they view translation as an open score that gains its final form during the rehearsal process.

## Future Research Directions:

One of the most promising directions for further development of the research is extending the methodology to other language areas; a long-term goal could be examining dialect handling in audiovisual media. Regarding Italian dialects, translation of the works of Carlo Goldoni and Eduardo De Filippo, or analysis of Italian film adaptations of De Filippo's dramas (such as *Matrimonio all'italiana*

starring Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren) presents significant opportunities. While extensive research has been conducted on dialect use and Hungarian translation in Italian prose – notably Dóra Bodrogai’s work on Andrea Camilleri’s Montalbano stories – dialect translation for the theatre remains comparatively unexplored. By examining the tools of intralingual translation from Neapolitan to more comprehensible Italian, we could gain even deeper understanding of the transfer process and find answers to whether these can be paralleled with the practice of theatrical ‘audible accent.’

Finally, the research results could provide a foundation for methodological renewal of Hungarian actor training. Based on the experience of the German model, it would be well worth examining the possibilities of institutionalized teaching of accent use so that dialect could become not merely the individual actor’s invention, but a consciously applied professional tool that enriches character formation and theatrical linguistic diversity.

I hope the dissertation contributes to viewing theatrical translation not as a closed literary end product, but as continuously evolving, living material that interacts with audience expectations and stage realization.

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**NOTE:** The complete bibliography can be found in the dissertation. This thesis booklet contains the most important sources.