

Gender Issues
in Translations

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We first came in contact with the gender translation issue in 1996 at the Second Colloquium for Literary Translation held at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. Gender and translation, lesbian and gay translations, seemed to be the most popular subjects with a surprisingly large number of readings grouped in three different sessions, with three or four readings in each session. There was also a plenary on translating women writers, and two or three readings of extended papers on women writers in translation. Being women translators, we felt a natural curiosity about this brand new world open before our eyes. On reading the titles of the papers we arrived at a very simplistic preconception: they seemed to be supporting the idea that women should translate women and men should translate men. As it turned out to be, some of these papers dealt with linguistic differences on translating women and men writers, while others entertained the idea that feminist translators found in the act of translating feminist writers a very powerful instrument to voice their views and ideological standpoints.

(Sh. Simon, p. 9) "The most compelling questions for both fields [Feminism and Translation remain: how are social, sexual, and historical differences expressed in language and how can these differences be transferred across languages? What kinds of fidelities are expected of women and translators – in relation to the more powerful terms of their respective hierarchies?"

In this short reading we will try to shed some light on what is meant by gender translation. Questions will be posed regarding the extent to which gender does or does not influence the act of translation, and regarding the question of whether we can speak of feminist translation as an instrument for the purpose of infiltrating a feminist ideology in another society/culture.

(Ibid p. 10) "Translators communicate, re-write, manipulate a text in order to make it available to a second language public. Thus they can use language as cultural intervention, as part of an effort to alter expressions of domination whether at the level of concepts, of syntax, or of terminology."

For the sake of clarity and succinctness we have divided this paper into two parts. In the first part an overview of feminist stylistics will be given. It will be quoted for this matter Sara Mills's *Feminist Stylistics* (Routledge 1995), David Hawkes' *Ideology and Richard Bradford's Stylistics* (published both in Routledge in 1996 and 1997 respectively). Gender translation will be introduced in the second part of our paper and the ideas presented there have been deeply enriched especially by the reading of – among other sources – Sherry Simon's *Gender Translation*. (Routledge 1996)

A brief introduction to Feminist Stylistics

In his book *Stylistics*, Richard Bradford divides the concept of stylistics into two basic categories—textualism and contextualism. Textualism refers to the conception of stylistics as seen from the point of view of Formalism and New Criticism. Therefore, Textualist Stylistics will be concerned with the analysis of texts as objects which are complete in themselves. Here, knowing who the narrator is becomes crucial, since the narrators are the creators of the atmosphere of the text, and give the critic the material for analysing the stylistic patterns used.

Contextualism, generates a much broader field for the analysis of the text. Contextualism considers a text the result of, or the element in relation with, a context or situation. This conception of stylistics follows from the Saussurean concept of the arbitrariness of signifier/signified, expanded in turn by Roland Barthes in his studies of different sign systems which create different levels of interaction between what there is and what is perceived. Finally, Foucault expanded this conception of arbitrariness to our perception of history and ideology. This has changed the way in which literary criticism and the stylistic analysis was conceived. It is in this second category—contextualism—that Feminist Stylistics finds its place. Bradford describes feminism attitude towards literary style saying that: (Bradford, p. 14) "Feminists regard literary style as a means of securing attitudes and hierarchies that, in the broader context, maintain the difference between male and female." Although Feminine Stylistics shares with New Historicism the view that discourse is something which transmits ideologies, prejudices, etc. it parts with New Historicism in that Feminism can actively express gender roles, by means of stylistic devices present at the level of text analysis (i.e. structure, grammar, vocabulary, etc.). (This view is questioned by Bradford in his book. He presents an example of a text in which the pronouns are changed, which makes the woman appear in the role of the man and vice versa. He argues that it is only after reading the original and then the changed version that the reader realizes the gender stereotypes, which goes on to imply that the reading of a male/female character has to do with social preconceptions and not with stylistic devices in the text itself.)

The feminist view claims that it is possible to find, in their analysis of language, structures which may help the reader realize that different language choices will serve the interests of some people, and will therefore privilege these interests over other people's. Over the past few years language has been studied as a strong source of power. Feminism has acknowledged this, and consequently it has moved away from the primary dichotomy, men vs women, to focus its attention on the principle that language is power and that there are texts which are oppressive and dominant over others—and that these other texts, as many feminists are now proposing, include discrimination such as racism, homophobia as "interacting and overlapping with sexism."

It may prove enlightening at this point to quote Sara Mills in her book *Feminist Stylistics*: "Feminist stylistics is a move—away from text—immanent criticism to a theorized concern with those factors outside the text which may determine,

or interact, with elements in the text. Used in this sense, the term 'context itself needs revision, since even though gender can be seen as extratextual, it can also be viewed as part of the text, as leaving a trace within the text in much the same way as any other constraint or determinant inevitably leaves a trace on the text."

It is time now to turn to the ideological and political influence of this theory in translation. Can a text be translated into a stylistically feminist code? Is it correct for a translator to embark on a translation project knowing it may result in a political move? Is it correct to "use" translation to spread ideological propaganda? What happens when a feminist translator – or, for the purpose, gay, lesbian, black, Latinamerican translator – re-writes the text to match their ideological conceptions? Sherry Simon's subtitle of her *Gender in Translation* reads: *Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. It explores the way in which translations may work as cultural identity and therefore be used as lines of transmission of these cultural identities.

Gender translation

At first sight gender is –at least for us, Spanish speakers – a concept almost immediately linked to grammar, since in the case of Spanish, words are formally marked as feminine, masculine, or neutral. In English though, gender does not have a formal marker, which does not necessarily imply that words are not separated into feminine or masculine concepts. In her book *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1992, New York, St Martin's Press) Deborah Cameron describes what she calls a "thought experiment" in which she presents a number of people with the following pairs of words: knife/fork; Ford/Chevrolet; salt/pepper; vanilla/chocolate. Participants were asked which word in each pair was feminine and which one was masculine. "Strangely enough" says Cameron "people were able to perform this bizarre act without difficulty. Even more strangely, there was near total agreement on the 'right' classification. Knife, Ford, pepper and chocolate were masculine, while fork, Chevrolet, salt and vanilla were feminine. This phenomenon is called 'metaphorical gender' "(Cameron 1992:82) It is precisely the idea of a concept being either masculine or feminine –unconscious as it may be– that leads us to argue that a translator's choice might be also introducing some ideological ideas – when gender difference at surface level is available apart from providing an equivalent meaning in the TL –. Sherry Simon states that "(Cameron's) experiment seems to indicate that the concepts of masculine and feminine are infinitely detachable from anything having to do with a 'real' sexual difference". These words are associated with corresponding contrasts such as strong/weak, active/passive. It also shows that gender is relational, and is in fact an extension of the binary, oppositional structure that pervades all our thinking. "This concept goes back to Freud's idea of "the double", where –among other things– he argues that all our psychological constructs are binary. Gender in translation not only exploits biological differences in order to obtain certain poetic effects, it also reveals a political position.

However, is it not the case that translators will generally take gender for granted, associating it only to a grammar category? Are we really aware of gender issues when reading or when translating? Before a tentative answer to these questions, we would like to present the following riddle:

"In a motorway accident a man is killed and his son severely injured. The boy is rushed to a casualty ward and the unit's most eminent specialist in the treatment of physical trauma is summoned. The surgeon arrives with a retinue of assistants, hesitates and explains, 'I can't operate on him. He is my son'."

Surely, prior to her statement the surgeon is ungendered but many people admit having ascribed the image of the surgeon to a male figure. Probably the ideas of "specialist in physical trauma" and "eminent" are socially expected to be describing a male character.

Literary style and the representation of gender are interrelated at different levels, some of which are not overtly present in the text. However, gender does not always play an outstanding role in translation, nor does it present itself as a drawback for the translator. In general, there are many strategies to which a translator may resort in order to overcome gender problems. On the other hand, gender issues become crucial when translators, as it has already been said, seek to meet a political or ideological need of expressing themselves in their translation. In doing so, they will be faithful to the translation project they had preceeding the translation task. Sherry Simon describes the concept of translation project in this context "To see a translation as a project is to understand the emotional and intellectual commitment which translators make, and the esthetic they imprint in their work. It is to be able to trace the networks of solidarity which bring translation into existence." (Simon, p. 162)

Considering translation as a project seems to be the departing point when approaching the concept of gender translation. But it should be made clear that although the feminist translation is committed to extending and developing the intentions of the feminist author's own political ideas, this possibility should not be taken too far. Gender translation is not concerned with the deforming of texts to convey an idea. Its sole intention as a translation project should be that of helping spread the word of the author the translator subscribes to. As Sherry Simon says, "Feminist interventions into translation have served to highlight the fact that cultural transmission is undertaken from partial (and not universal) perspectives, from constantly evolving cultural positions." (Simon-166)

Conclusion

As a conclusion we would like to quote Gadda's definition of system which, we believe, will make a rich contribution to put together the ideas we have touched upon in this paper. Gadda's definition of system reads: "We (...) think of every system as an entwining, an inextricable knot or mesh of relations: the summit can be seen

from many altitudes; and every system is referable to infinite coordinated axes: it presents itself in infinite ways."

Translation can be said to be a complex system which allows an infinite mesh of relations. Translation implies "bringing the cultural other as the same" and this "other" does not refer only to language. Otherness in the act of translation includes every aspect of cultural and social values that are present in both the source and target texts.

Gender issues in translation are but another tool we translators have, and are part of the ideology behind texts. Being aware of the ideology of the text will result in better, richer translations. Moreover, the choice of certain texts as translation project does help to make the translator's role more visible.

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