

## The Wo(o)man in Translational Discourse: from 'Non-Text' to 'Text-Effect'

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### Abstract

*My earnest interest in this paper is to ponder upon feminist translational discourse and its role in disseminating inventive norms and a less prejudiced socio-cultural construal. Predictably, feminist writings have been 'in the collimator' from their inception on account of the names they publicize and the new era of social equity they herald. As a counter-reaction, there has been over the past few years a real 'linguistic revolution' against the gender-biased activity vis-à-vis female writers' intellectual thrive. Interestingly enough, even in the discourse about translation, feminists have always marked their stand by an epistemological shift from the pre-established passive role of the translator as a 'reproducer' to that of the author as an 'un-violable producer'. They rather position themselves as co-authors actively involved in the process of translation and its effect(s). To create a breach and permeate their authors' thought in a subtle way, feminist translators have made out of wordplay their favourite gateway. Accordingly, the proposed title makes use of this practice by associating the verb 'to woo' with the noun 'woman'. Women are to be wooed (in this case, solicited and not engaged) by men when giving free rein to their discursive savoir-faire. This and other techniques, which heal reflexivity with a complete 'face lift' in methods (supplementing, footnoting, prefacing, and appropriating), will be highlighted along with some salient names in the field of feminist translation (basically those of the Feminist Translation School of Canada). Eventually, I come to conclude, after a number of instances upholding the 'death' of 'non-texts' in feminist translators' versions, that translational discourse is among the sharp tools that have facilitated women literary catharsis and social empowerment.*

**Keywords:** translational discourse – feminist writings – 'non-texts' – texts' effect – social/linguistic equity.

### 1. Introduction

It is sheer truism that translational discourse bears an intimate relation with the concept of gender. In fact, women write in consonance with their concerns and even whims. Hindering these from blooming in disparate settings, via the translating activity, is a prejudiced action nourished by some socio-cultural and even political motives. For better or worse, male and female writers have engaged or, rather say, engaged themselves in a literary 'cold war' which does not know an end. Besides, two beings practicing the same literary activity and promoting singular words seem to me prerequisites for the 'celebration of difference' (May 1994, p.42). James Paul Gee (1996) rightly avers that:

None of us speaks a single, uniform language, nor is any one of us a single, uniform identity. The different social languages we use allow us to render multiple whos (we are) and (whats) we are doing socially visible.<sup>1</sup>

This social visibility may, in some cases, be achieved through wordplay. Note, in this vein, that the personal play on the word 'woman' encapsulates the verb 'to woo' and the noun 'woman'. Women are to be wooed by men from where the pun 'wo(o)man'. The original denotation of the verb is associated to a man giving a woman a lot of attention in an attempt to persuade her to marry him. Here, I take the verb 'to woo' to mean 'to

solicit' (as opposed to 'disregard') not only from a private life perspective, but from a professional one too. This is because when men editors, for instance, sweep away some original and/or translated excerpts from feminist writers/translators works, they are being 'discourteous' towards the intellectual/professional 'stand' these may adopt.

However, between the notion of translation and that of woman there is both distance and closeness. During the 70's, there was a whole reshuffling in both translation studies and gender studies agendas. While translation scholars were rethinking the age-old dichotomies of word-for-word vs. sense-for-sense equivalence, faithful vs. unfaithful renderings, etc., fervent feminists were also deconstructing the clear-cut distinctions between male/female, feminine/masculine, etc. Consequently, the fact that both 'schools of thought' were attempting to redefine previously established and well-rooted notions during the same decade marks their chronological or historical rapprochement. Moreover, among those famous expressions that threaded these two notions is that of "Les belles infidèles", an expression coined by Gilles Ménage in the early 17th century in France to describe the fact that translations, much like women, are doomed to unfaithfulness (infidélité) if they are beautiful (belles). This has made years later George Mounin's literary fame.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J.P. Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies, Ideology in Discourses*, RoutledgeFalmer, 1996, p.68.

<sup>2</sup> G. Mounin, *Les belles infidèles. Essai sur la traduction*. Cahiers du Sud, 1955; Presses universitaires de Lille, 1994.

Nevertheless, distance can be felt in some scholars definitions of the ‘agents’ running these two trends. If we believe Eugene Nida, translators are born not made. Nevertheless, following Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born but rather becomes a woman. This means that there is a lot to be done to reach womanhood. Grippingly enough, it is translation that has channeled women writers towards an empowered opus.

## 2. The Canadian School of Feminist Translation

What is it to be/come a woman? Actually, this question may call for different answers. Some definitions portray women as very pleasant, active, and sensitive creatures. Unfortunately, a gendered vision associates them with the pejorative notions of submissiveness, compliance, and even weakness. It is basically this second representation that enticed a coterie of women writers/translators to denounce these gender-biased judgments through their writings and/or translations.

Barbara Godard (1942-2010) is indisputably a pioneer name in the Canadian feminist translators’ circle. She is among the few figures who succeeded to change heroes into she-roes in her writings, as Maya Angelou (1985) would say. Historically speaking, feminist translation seems to have evolved in the late 70’s and early 80’s on account of a growing ‘patriarchal mood’. A threatening ‘situated knowledge’ prevailed at that period, too, preventing male translators from being fully objective due to already held clichés. These approached feminist writers’ texts with a pre-established male-dominating idea which pushed them to polish the texts as they wished. In fact, the polishing included mainly the act of deleting undesired excerpts judged too mind defying or socially challenging.

The Canadian school proposed a reorientation in the task of the translator. Instead of looking after the product, one has rather to worry about the process which, indeed, determines the upshot. Susan Bassnett (1991) was among those who sustained this idea by stressing the idea of translational processes and putting at second level that of translational norms. Hence, Catford’s listed techniques and André Lefevre’s strategies might be of no use in the new direction taken by this school. After that, all the established notions of equivalence and invisibility came to crumble. There is nothing named invisibility. Carbon copies cannot possibly exist because when writing, authors know that their probable translators will have different interpretations of their own. Of course, these are the result of an expected synergy between the translator and his society. Besides, this activity is definitely part of the hermeneutics of translation. In gender studies, the hermeneutic notion was linked by Steiner (1973) to a masculine conception of translation consisting of 4 parts. These are initiative trust, aggression, incorporation, and compensation<sup>3</sup>.

The first presupposes that the translator believes in the quality of the original work and its meaningfulness before handling it. The second gives the translator the permission to bring the modifications that he sees necessary even at the expense of the original meaning. The third consists of embodying or domesticating the text. Finally, the fourth one allows the translator to make up for the ‘semantic damage’ and the ‘literary violence’ he applied on the source language text.

Under this spirit, feminist translators have exerted themselves on issues that – in addition to these steps – treated writing as a form of materializing reality or, say, giving it a face; a physical identity. In her preface, Timothy Donaldson (2008) draws our attention to the fact that:

Letters are highly specialized images, and we have always read words as images. Words are perceived as silhouette image-shapes..., and writing is a highly evolved and specialized form of drawing.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing has always been a form of ‘exorcising’ the soul’s frustrations, desires and worries. Much like music, drawing can be seen as a passive form of revolt. Words in the Canadian school have been taken as pencils whose mission is to draw a fairer and brighter image than that pictured out by men in order to wreck their power.

Furthermore, Sabourin (1985) sums it well when he underwrites: *Les femmes injectent un sang neuf...et le déplacement du propos s’effectue autant dans le trajet que dans le projet de leurs créations.*<sup>5</sup> In these ones, feminist translators excelled in inventing their own way of working which included a number of techniques such as supplementing, footnoting, prefacing, appropriating, etc. Explained briefly, supplementing deals with textual interventions aiming at reorienting the reader towards a non-biased comprehension. A case in point could be that of Howard Scott 1984’s English translation of Bersianik’s *Leuguelionne* (1976) as mentioned in Louise Flotow’s *Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories* (1991). The original reads as follows:

“Le ou la coupable doit etre punie.”<sup>6</sup> (Italics mine). Knowing that the sentence refers to abortion, the translated version aspires to social equity. This gives:

“The guilty one must be punished, whether she is a man or a woman.”<sup>7</sup>

Footnoting and prefacing, on the other hand, consist in explaining, sometimes in length, feminist translators’ different moves and intentions. Some critics even say that these techniques can be considered educational. They simultaneously inform the reader about what s/he might miss in the translation. De Lotbiniere-Harwood (1990) is another renowned feminist translator who made use of the prefacing technique. She plainly avers after having worked on Lise Gauvin’s work that:

My translation practice is a political activity aiming at making language speak for women. So, my signature on a translation means: this translation has used every possible translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world. Which is what feminism is all about.<sup>8</sup> De Lotbiniere-Harwood did not stop at prefacing, she went further through ‘adopting’ the text and ‘adapting’ it to her guise. She changed the order of appearance of ‘men and women’/‘his and her’ into ‘women and men’/‘her and his’. Likewise, in case a feat is exclusively associated to men, it automatically turns out to be a shared exploit.

Similarly, wordplay is manifested in instances like:

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<sup>3</sup> In J. Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*. Routledge, 2001, pp.312-435.

<sup>4</sup> T. Donaldson, *Shapes for Sounds (cowhouse)*. Mark Batty Publisher. New York, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> “Women inject a new blood...and the displacement of the topic takes place much in the *process* than in the *project* of their creations.” My translation. Sabourin, p.129.

Ewomancipation for emancipation Languelait for l'anglais  
Her-i-zon (her eye zone) for horizon  
Herstory for history, etc.

### 3. Moving from 'Non-Text' to 'Text-Effect'

What Godard (1988) means by 'womanhandling the text' is basically a reference to the 'death' of the 'self-effacing' translator who 'feminizes' texts and tampers with usage. If we look back into history, we will discover that writing was exclusively male-made. Women were forbidden from entering this 'sophisticated' sphere. However, translation, being a reproductive activity, was to become a gateway for all those women writers/translators who decided to find a seat in the literary world. But note that only men, especially in the 18th century Britain, were allowed to translate from the prestigious classical languages. Even when partaking this activity with men, women had been allocated less important texts in modern languages.

Relegated and discredited, women authors decided to sign with a male name or to claim being translators instead of authors; an ingenious way to shun any authorial rebuff. The most striking example is that of Howard Parshley's translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* who removed 60 pages from the author's second volume. Unsurprisingly, this one covers housewives' sufferings, women's historical achievements, and so forth.

This kind of 'erasing' pushed some women translators to 'surrender' to the text. Yet, this is how feminist translators entered into the scene and changed the event. So, from 'textors' they moved to a different status to become 'contextors'. These attempts were motivated by a strong desire to move from an imposed inertia ('non-text') to a kind of literary activism (text-effect); or what Susan Bassnett prefers to call going "beyond death".

They refuted the fatality of being censured because of misjudgments and prejudices, and started triggering readers to engage in a humanistic cause, namely freedom of expression. Their 'non-texts' have become the force of feminist translators who used them as 'literary bombs' with a particular effect on their growing readership; a real form of resistance actually.

Note, en passant, that this practice of scoring through texts was applied to male authors who played with gendered issues, too. Such is the case of Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable* (1985) translated by Alan Sheridan into *The Sand Child* (2000) for an Anglo-American readership. "Tahar Ben Jelloun montre à sa façon que le genre n'a rien de naturel et qu'il est le résultat d'une construction sociale » (Sardin, 2009). The author plays with language to show the "selfish" decision of the father who talks to the mother about their baby:

Toi, bien entendu, tu seras le puits et la tombe de ce secret. Ton bonheur et même ta vie en dépendront. Cet enfant sera accueilli en homme qui va illuminer de sa présence cette maison terne, il sera élevé selon la tradition réservée aux mâles, et bien sûr il gouvernera et vous protègera après ma mort. (23)

To enhance the aspect of 'text-effect', the author did it on purpose to put the masculine pronoun before the feminine one (le/la – ton/ta) in an attempt to highlight the secondary/effaced role usually attributed to girls/women. Still, the English translation failed to render many of the feminine predicates present in the work. Here is an example:

Être tout simplement est un défi. Je suis las et lasse. (94) Simply to be is a challenge. I am tired. (70) (Sardin, *ibid.*)

### 4. Conclusion

Newton is well known for his saying: to each action an equal reaction. The literary actions undertaken by feminist translators echo the aforementioned reactions manifested in supplementing, footnoting, prefacing, and appropriating. The fact that some men writers/translators and/or editors turned a deaf ear to what women wrote enticed feminist translators to counter-react by giving themselves supremacy or at least an equal literary/social existence. Overall, the current gendered turn in translation studies underscores translation as a demystification of 'patriarchal' language. The present article's major concern was to shed light on the Canadian feminist translators as avant-gardiste, and the possibility of having "Female-As-Norm Principle" as opposed to the celebrated "Male-As-Norm Principle" (Braun 1997, p. 3). Admittedly, feminist translation has indeed played a major role in disseminating women's social standpoint and literary aspirations. It has widened readers' knowledge about some erstwhile prejudices against them. Finally, it is perhaps safe to claim that this move has maximized an 'academic justice' that cries out for an impartial translational discourse under the banner of 'literary coexistence'.

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