

Trans Lata
Latus

EVELYNE VOLDENG

TRANSLATED BY FRANCES MORGAN

OVER THE PAST DECADE, feminist critics have focused their attention on showing how natural gender, and its linguistic transcription, grammatical gender, can influence the reading and writing of a text. Since interlingual translation consists of rewriting in the target language a text that has been read in the source language, it would appear to provide the ideal conditions for a study of gender influence.

The first difficulty encountered by such a study is the selection of a corpus. To a certain extent, women's writing has always been a double-voiced discourse, embodying the social, literary and cultural heritage of the dominant masculine and the silenced feminine traditions.¹ It is therefore essential to consider source texts in which the question of gender has not been more or less consciously obscured. Consequently, I have chosen feminist texts or texts inspired by feminist concerns, in order to compare them to their translations by feminists as well as by male translators. As in a previous study,² I have used a number of poems by Cécile Cloutier translated by Barbara Godard and Alexandre Amprimoz,³ a text by Nicole Brossard translated by Linda Gaboriau and David Ellis,⁴ and passages from Sylvia Plath's poem, *Three Women*, translated by Laure Vernière and Sinclair Robinson.⁵

Before any partial conclusions can be drawn concerning the influence of gender on these various translations, a few preliminary remarks are in order. The translation of a text is contingent, varying according to—

linguistic colorations (the presence of other words in context) or paralinguistic colorations at the perceptual level (the connotations that each individual attributes to a given word). Paralinguistic colorations include clichés, irony, allusions, humour, customs, rhetoric, levels of language or the use of words in a certain social or geographical context, slang or affected speech for example.⁶

The translation of a text will depend on all the possible variables influencing the reading of that text, and on the particular way in which any one group (social, cultural, sexual, etc.) interprets gender. In the case of the translation of a love poem, for example, in which the gender of the loved one is ambiguous, a lesbian translator would conceivably choose the feminine.

The problem of gender is in itself extremely complex. Along with “natural gender, which corresponds to the division of beings into males, forming the masculine grammatical category, and females, forming the feminine grammatical category. . . there also exists grammatical (formal) gender, which is expressed grammatically in the same way, but which does not correspond to any natural distinction”⁷ (“chair” is feminine in French, “la chaise”, but masculine in German, “der Stuhl”). This classification by gender can also be influenced, in turn, by a sort of metaphorical trap. A woman reading Baudelaire’s poem “Les Chats” would probably not agree with the conclusions of Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss⁸ regarding the sexuality of rhymes, or their opposition of grammatical gender (masculine-feminine) and rhyme gender (feminine nouns with masculine rhymes). In certain cases, gender, whether symbolic or metaphorical, can be determined by the male or female reader’s point of view. Thus, a gender problem can influence the translation of a play on words or affect the ironic or parodic tone of a poem. In the case of a feminist translator, she is also conditioned by her theoretical approach, by the theories on women’s writing which in effect use four

distinct models to explain gender difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. To return to the definitions given by Elaine Showalter in her article “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,”⁹ biological criticism stresses gender difference by showing that a text is indelibly marked by our body: anatomy is textuality. Linguistic theories of writing, for their part, ask whether men and women use language differently, whether sex differences in language use can be explained in terms of biology, socialization or culture. They question whether women can create new languages of their own and whether speaking, reading and writing are all gender marked. In the case of psychoanalytic criticism, the difference evident in women’s writing is to be found in the author’s psyche and in the relation of gender to the creative process. Finally, the cultural model incorporates the biological, linguistic and psychological models but interprets them according to the social context in which they occur. The female translator is also influenced by her ideological position. The fact of being a radical lesbian, for example, can have a direct bearing on her translations.

Having established these general principles concerning gender, we can now examine specific translations done by women. It becomes immediately apparent, first of all, that they seem to favour concrete imagery, particularly in the area of biophysiology. In her translation of Sylvia Plath’s text, Laure Vernière describes the moonlight “qui trace des écailles sur les vitres,”¹⁰ thus evoking a concrete lunar animal. In his translation of the same text, Sinclair Robinson merely refers to a light “qui incruste les vitres.” To translate “that O-mouth,” the female translator uses “cette bouche ronde,” emphasizing the concrete feminine symbol of the circle, while her male counterpart opts for “cette bouche béante.”

In her translations of Cécile Cloutier’s poems, Barbara Godard stresses the concrete—touch, smell, colours. Thus, if we compare the following poem with its two translations, we find, for example:

<p>D’inédites pâleurs Dans la cage de ton sourire</p>	<p>The original paleness Caged by your smile</p>	<p>Unpublished pallors In the cage of your smile</p>
---	---	--

Expliquent tes mains Explains your hands Your hands explain

Cécile Cloutier Alexandre Amprimoz Barbara Godard

Barbara Godard's translation, much more concrete, is more faithful to the original poem than the too abstract translation by Alexandre Amprimoz. In his version, "inédites" becomes "original," "pâleurs" (feminine plural) becomes "paleness" and "la cage" loses most of its concrete connotations in the past participle "caged." The female translator further highlights the poem's concrete imagery by her inversion, in the last line, of "your hands explain."

Another example is provided by the following synaesthetic image:

Je sentis	I felt	I smelled
Le dièse des oranges	The sharps of oranges	Sharps of oranges
Aux catalogues des odeurs	In the catalogue of scents	In the catalogues of scents

Cécile Cloutier Alexandre Amprimoz Barbara Godard

By using "I smelled," the female translator evokes a more concrete sense, the sense of smell, and furthermore, by respecting the plural form of "catalogues," she highlights the profusion and luxuriousness of scents evoked by Cécile Cloutier.

A third example:

Les ferventes paroles	The ardent words of	Your hand's fervent words
de ta main	your hand	words
Font des phrases	Write sentences	Form sentences
Dans l'escalier du corsage	On the stairway of the body	On the staircase of the breast

Cécile Cloutier Alexandre Amprimoz Barbara Godard

as well as others taken from the various texts being considered,¹¹ demonstrates that the sexual body is more explicit in those translations done by women. To the concrete and explicit translation by Laure Vernière of a passage from *Three Women*:

C'est elle qui, mois après mois, entraîne avec elles ces marées de sang noir qui annoncent l'échec

is juxtaposed the male translator's much more ambiguous version:

C'est la lune qui traîne péniblement mois après mois cette
mer noir sang aux voix échouées.

In David Ellis' translation of "L'Ecrivain" by Nicole Brossard, the translator seems to ignore, on several occasions, the biophysiological reality of women. "Elle dessine des ventres plats" becomes "but bellies down she sketches out;" "j'ai des goûts de femme enceinte," "j'étais grosse" is translated as "with those pregnant urges to eat," "I was terrible." Linda Gaboriau, on the other hand, translates those same lines as "I have pregnant women's cravings," "I was so big."

Generally speaking, the feminist translator stresses the importance of the body as the source of numerous sexual metaphors. Her concrete translations, at times brutal and marked by the violence of certain sexual body metaphors—consider how Linda Gaboriau translated the line from Nicole Brossard's text "L'Ecrivain," "Ce soir j'entre dans l'histoire sans relever ma jupe," as "Tonight I shall step into history without opening my legs,"¹² while her male counterpart settled for "Tonight I'm getting into the picture without pulling up my skirt"—are the direct result of a strategy put in the service of feminist ideology.

A male or female translator's ignorance of the feminist context of a given text can, in certain instances, completely falsify the meaning of a poem through gender misinterpretation. For example, a lesbian poem written in English and using epicene past participles, among others, could conceivably become, in the course of a translation, a hymn to heterosexual love. If the male or female translator is unaware of

the major themes of feminist writing, i.e. sexuality and its polymorphism, the reproductive functions, childbirth, rape, blood; if he/she does not realize that women are experimenting with a new form of writing in which a woman's body will be able to speak itself, write itself, explore its own imagery, identify its struggles with matter and with others, then his/her translation runs the risk of losing all its paralinguistic coloration.¹³

If he had been aware of the feminist context, David Ellis would not

have translated the line by Nicole Brossard “Les yeux verraient-ils la différence si l’encre était blanche?” by “Would the eye notice if the ink blanched?” Linda Gaboriau, for her part, chose to translate the same line as “Could we see the difference if the ink was white?” Similarly, with the women’s liberation movement in mind, Linda Gaboriau translated “La folie des bergères va sortir du manteau du mouton” by “The shepherdesses are throwing off their sheep’s clothing,” while David Ellis settled for the cliché “The wolf will soon be stepping out of the sheep’s clothing.”¹⁴

Comparing the various translations of the texts under consideration reveals how they differ considerably according to the sex of the translator. And yet it would be difficult to establish gender difference in the area of sentence syntax. However, it is indisputable that expressions pertaining to physiology, and particularly to excretions and the female sex organs, are at times subject to misinterpretation, if not totally false translations, on the part of a male translator. The translation of the expression, “I, too, create corpses” in Sylvia Plath’s text is translated by the male translator as “Moi aussi je fais des cadavres,” an ambiguous translation that, in contrast to Laure Vernière’s version, “Moi aussi, j’enfante des cadavres,” does not sufficiently stress the fact that the unfertilized egg disintegrates every month in the menstrual flow.¹⁵

At the present time, it is difficult to conceive of a quantitative statistical analysis of the influence of gender on the reading/writing of a text. However, through works such as Roland Barthes’ *Le plaisir du texte* and numerous recent critical articles comparing the act of reading to a sexual act, the influence of natural, metaphoric and symbolic gender on any reading/writing is firmly established.

Notes

See notes to French text, pp. 88-90.