

Interviewing Luise von Flotow¹: A New State of the Art

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The translator and translation researcher Luise von Flotow has been working on the topic of gender and translation for years. She was one of the first translation researchers who was not part of the original feminist translation movement to publish articles reflecting on the well-known feminist translation theories and practices which developed in Canada during the eighties. She has studied them, recognized their meaning and celebrated their success. But she has also revised them critically. Moreover, she has always kept herself updated, as she has followed the many branches that have since then developed still exploring the connections between gender and translation.

In her first and most well known study, *Translation and Gender*, published in 1997, she not only re-launched the topic of translation and feminism in line with other famous researchers —like Sherry Simon (1996)— and from what at the time was a much up-to-date perspective which included the idea of cultural differences with regard to gender and how this affected translation and vice versa —superseding in a way the Canadian dichotomy «nationalism + feminism» which had been the more extended formula for feminist translators there—, but she also contributed to stir things up a little bit by offering a collection of criticisms not only from without feminism, which was somehow expected, but also from within the movement. Some of the challenges had to do with the little influence feminist translations seemed to have in real women's lives, or with some researchers branding feminist translation theories opportunistic and incoherent.

To me, the most significant criticism she referred to was closely related to von Flotow's own chosen topic: cultural differences and gender, which had also been central to the North American feminist movement, so much so that, in fact, these internal debates —amongst others— pushed the resurgence of a new wave during the nineties. In as much as translation appears as a key instrument within the world globalization process, von Flotow was more than right to bring up that connection.

1. This paper is the result of an electronic interview carried out in 2008. Some months later, the interview was amplified with some questions. Professor Luise von Flotow not only kindly and enthusiastically agreed to answer all my questions when I first met her in Salamanca, but she has also continued to do so since then.

Moreover, important as cultural issues are for translators, it might even be suggested that cultural issues have somehow and unjustifiably shadowed feminist claims within Translation Studies, even though they are based on similar conceptualizations of the role translators and translations play in global power relations and ideological transfers.

Since her famous *Translation and Gender* (1997), von Flotow has edited and co-written four books, more than 20 book chapters and 25 articles on the topic. She has also given more than 20 conference presentations and directed Doctoral Dissertations. She has not allowed gender issues to be cast into oblivion within the academic field of Translation Studies. As a translator, she has translated 15 books of literature from French and German, as well as a number of shorter texts. So she knows what she is talking about when she reflects on translation theory and practice.

Dynamic as she is, professor von Flotow keeps thinking about those variable connections and about translation theories in general. She is also a convinced feminist —«many women in Canada are feminists. It is hardly a question it makes sense to ask, we take it almost for granted», she explains naturally when asked about it. And it is true. When you talk to her, you still find in her words the strength of that feminism, the one that stirred up departments, offices and institutions during the seventies and eighties. She wants to spell things out, to denounce, to talk, to make women visible and, most important of all, to challenge feminist translation to make the most of it.

Thanks to this permanent follow up of feminist translations, feminist translation researchers and translations of feminist texts, she has witnessed the many changes undergone not only by translation but also by feminism since her first studies. This new state of the art has led von Flotow to suggest that the time might have come to apply feminist translation theories but adapting them to the different contexts, in what she calls «highjacking into context» (von Flotow 2005: 46). What she suggested in 1997 with regard to cultural differences and gender has apparently been confirmed, also in new forms in the name of (cultural) identities.

In this interview, professor von Flotow shares not only her ideas about the strategies purported by feminist translators in Canada three decades ago, and its consequences, but also her views about translation, feminism and feminist translation theories today, in a globalized world where identity-politics seems to overshadow feminist-politics, also with regard to translation.

Your last articles focus on notions like *cultural diplomacy* and the role of translated literature as part of that soft power agenda. You use the example of Canadian women writers whose works have been exported to other cultures. However, you seem to pay more attention to the political dimension of this whole idea of using culture as part of diplomatic international relations than to the fact that women's texts were read abroad as a consequence of this policy. Why have you adopted this new perspective? Has feminism said all that could be said?

That is a really interesting question. I was not really aware of that slant on my part. But the fact that I focused on women's texts exclusively in that particular article should indicate where my interests still lie, and will always lie: with women's place in the world.

I don't think feminism has said all that could be said, but sometimes you (I) have to change gear and study other aspects of translation or writing. I do think that a feminist focus on writing, language, academia remains absolutely important. My new interest in this regard is Bracha Ettinger —check her out!

In your famous book *Translation and Gender* you talk about the «era of feminism» which began in the 1960's. According to the North American chronology of the feminist waves, this era would correspond to the Second Wave. Do you believe in the idea that we are now part of the Third Wave? And in that case, would feminist translation theories belong to the Second Wave?

Also a good question. Feminist translation theories developed pretty late within that so-called Second Wave, along with Translation Studies. I am not so up to date on this wave theory, but it makes sense to think of the next generation of women —and especially women from other parts of the world who were less exposed to Western/American feminisms in the 1960s and 1970s living in a kind of Third Wave now. So, perhaps, feminist approaches to translation— especially in terms of the focus on the translator changing language, and exercising this power to change language and adapt texts— lie somewhere between the two waves and maintain the contact between them.

It is also said that the Second Wave was based on an essentialist view of genders, do you agree? Also in this sense, do you think there is a female way of (re)writing and a male one?

I definitely agree that there are essentialist elements in Second Wave feminisms' notions about gender. Any generalization about «men» or «women» —the *foci* of these feminisms— is inevitably based on some kind of essentialism, I think. How else could assertions be made that refer to more than one individual at a time, and that reflect or describe certain aspects of social/group behaviour. I think far too much trouble has been caused by the fights around essentialism, fights that basically have to do with power struggles, though this is seldom addressed.

About there being a «male» or «female» way of (re)writing: NO, I don't think any argument in this regard could stand. An individual translator may demonstrate certain traits (word choices, usually) that are particularly «macho» or «effeminate/feminine» —but that is about all.

How would you describe then the «écriture féminine» which led to the idea of «translating as a woman» in the seventies and eighties in Canada? Wasn't it based on a theoretical «female way of writing/translating»? Wasn't this an

unwanted consequence of a «cultural adaptation» of the original French psychoanalytic conceptualization of «l'écriture des corps des femmes»?

I am not so sure that the notion of «écriture féminine» as expounded by Hélène Cixous, for example, led directly to the idea of «translating as a woman». That would be an interesting question to follow up. I think the first was a concept that was very «French», steeped in philosophical/psychoanalytical musings around and against «phallogocentrism» and expressed in an outrageous, provocative kind of way, especially when it came to ideas such as writing in menstrual blood or breast milk, and then claims that someone like Jean Genet produced «écriture féminine». Not always logical, but certainly attention-getting. The second term «translating as a woman» was derived much more from work like that done by Louky Bersianik (*L'Euguelionne*) or Madeleine Gagnon in Quebec and Marina Yaguello in France, that focused on issues of grammar and semantics and usage in the French language, and caused other women writers such as Nicole Brossard and France Théoret to take notice of these and try to adjust their writing accordingly. They wrote like women conscious of the fact that the language they used was basically stacked against them. The translators who worked on such material translating it into English —Susanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood comes to mind—acknowledged and dealt with this work done «on language» *per se*, and tried to translate into the same kind of innovative and creative and strong text. I think this approach to writing and translating was much more concrete and concerned with the materiality of language and the limits imposed by language on women's means to express their interests and concerns than many of the productions that might be labeled «écriture féminine».

I absolutely agree on that, Luise, as feminist translation in Canada was most influenced by North-American feminist linguistics at the time. Those theories, as you seem to affirm, were much more pragmatic.

I understand many of the feminist ideas in Translation Studies are linked to the ideas of identity and visibility, which are achieved by taking control of the texts. In line with the often used metaphor, feminist translators in the 1980's worked to highlight translated texts over original ones just as feminists in the 1970's fought to subvert the unequal dichotomy of (men's) culture vs. (women's) nature by focusing on the female body. They tried to unbury the hidden domination reflected in language by *womanhandling* texts.

We are now in the 21st century and it seems that, although there are still lots of things to be changed around the world, women are much more visible now than they were some decades ago. Do you think these translating strategies have had something to do with this change? Are they still useful?

I think these strategies are always useful! Whether they specifically aided in making women more visible would be pretty hard to prove, but they have been part of a general movement, at a very specific historical moment, in which it became important and possible to draw attention to women for reasons other than their

beauty or child-bearing capacities. Even more important than the translation strategies, however, is the work done by academics, writers, essayists, speakers to draw attention to translation, and to the assertive strategies used in feminist translation. Without the continuous work of translation criticism, readers, teachers, journalists and others would never know about the influence translators can exert on a text: who else has time or energy or the knowledge to sit down and compare two texts in such detail?

So, in a way, you're also claiming the contribution of feminism to Translation Studies, aren't you?

Yes, feminist translation scholars have contributed substantially to Translation Studies, working on issues of power and hierarchy, and on translation as a social practice long before the so-called sociological turn in the field that we are now witnessing. Basically, women's studies initiatives and topics developed in parallel with Translation Studies, over the course of the 1980s and so scholars who combined both fields were in at the beginning. Others, such as Susan Bassnett, have also written about this.

In my opinion, globalization has changed matters a lot. In some cases, for example, it might be more useful to show how forgotten women are in certain cultures by translating the original texts from those cultures without making women visible, i. e. not *womanhandling* the text. In the preface of *Translation and Gender* you advanced the connection between gender and culture. Do you agree? Do you think the time has come to reconsider feminist translation strategies?

I honestly think it is most important to write about translation. It is not enough to just translate, in a feminist way or in any other way. If you translate texts from societies where women still suffer enormous oppression in a way that leaves them as authentically oppressive as possible, readers may see what is going on, that is true. But I think it is important to spell things out, and make them as scandalous as possible to get attention. And inform readers of the translator's strategies and intentions, and show what the textual results are.

«Womanhandling» texts is only possible at certain times anyway. In Canada, it was a short period, and people quickly lost interest and moved on to other topics (du jour.) So, yes, feminist strategies and tactics have to be constantly reconsidered and adjusted.

One of the criticisms made to the combination of Gender and Translation Studies was that it seemed limited to literary texts. There is no doubt that literature transports discourses which can shape the ideas of societies across cultures, but it is also true that more pragmatic texts (like legal, medical, scientific texts, or news, advertisements, etc.) may imply a much greater performative power. The *transformance* coined by feminist translators could be

widely amplified if a gender perspective was also applied to the translation of these texts. Do you find this possible? Would feminist translators be able to «explain and justify their work» in this case?

Absolutely true! Almost all of the work done around gender and translation has been focused on literary texts. I am sure that medical and legal texts, science and news texts, etc. would be just as rich. There is no reason why this kind of writing cannot be examined. In fact, I am just now reading a book on the many versions that were made (and are still being made) of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the famous self-help medical book that dates from late 1960s USA. [*How Feminism Travels Across Borders. The Making of «Our Bodies, Ourselves»*, by Kathy Davis, Duke University Press, 2007]. It is not quite as focused on language details as I would like, and spends too much time on all the American feminists' in-fighting about essentialism and other such issues, but it shows here and there how translators and adapters of the book in Japan, or Bangladesh clearly engaged in *transformance*. The purposes were various: to avoid censorship, to allow the book to appear at all, to make it understandable and readable for women from completely different cultures, to make it function in systems that are different from the source culture in places with a high illiteracy rate, etc. Each version (like the source version) was highly collaborative and complex, and clearly involved the creative adaptive talents of many women.

On the literary issue: I think the reason most of us writing on gender and translation write about literary texts is because we are literary scholars first. That is/was our first interest, which does not mean that someone else cannot turn to legal or scientific texts.

Also in this sense, let me offer you a case study. In recent years, institutional (or State) feminism has gained much momentum in Spain. In this sense, it could be said that feminism is now (somehow) linked to the party currently in power, which has publicly adopted a feminist discourse. Under these circumstances, whenever feminist linguistic strategies are applied when writing a text, it seems to imply you're aligned with the party. Using feminist translation strategies as they are known today might lead to adding a different political tone (which might or might not be desired) in addition to the feminist ideology showed in the translated text. Is this good for feminism when texts are received with hostility precisely because of this extra political burden?

It depends whether you are on the side of the current government, I suppose, though it's always painful to see government being too opportunist. Still, language purists can be pretty awful —if not misogynist, then plain old boring and scared conservatives. You can't really win against their bad faith. So, you write the way you need/want to write. I know a little about the new Spanish situation —the young minister of Igualdad, etc.— and I can see where feminisms can indeed get tangled up with local politics and pushed in the direction of a certain government. I think the only thing to do is to write about these things: insist on and explain the differ-

ences, the importance of watching for language abuses and misrepresentations, and the usefulness of assertive creativity.

There are not only ideological differences in the contexts where feminist translation strategies can be applied. Languages, for example, might make wordplays and other feminist linguistic alternatives much more aggressive than they are in English. Spanish, for instance, uses grammatical gender in nouns and many adjectives, which makes the changes much more visible, and thus, controversial, especially for those followers of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language guidance. You live in a country where French is one of the two official languages, how do you manage to apply feminist translation strategies in French? Do you find it more challenging?

One of the weaknesses of applying «our» Canadian feminisms to various other cultures is that languages and the cultures they carry are so different. You are really right about that. I have had Chinese scholars ask me how my work on gender and translation might apply in China! I have no idea! But I can always suggest some things to look at. So, yes, every culture has its own problems to address; and when there is a Royal Academy around to interfere (to comment on «miembro» vs. «miembra», for example) then things get more complicated.

In French here, translators and writers interested in making themselves and women visible in language did so in several ways: overusing the «silent ‘e’» which indicates the feminine, dropping the ‘e’ from words to indicate that women are excluded, refusing to write in linear (penile) ways, etc. All that dates from the 1970s and 1980s... and they created texts that were hard to read! That only other convinced feminists could read and understand — a serious drawback.

You are surely aware of the new notion of *intersectionality* developed within Gender Studies some years ago (Crenshaw 1989). It aims to include all the different particularities which conform the differences (of all kind: gender, race, sexual orientation, colour, religion, etc.) leading to unequal treatment in societies. To me, the idea that each person is the ground where these different categories interact solves both the problems of essentialism and relativism, and might be applicable to Translation Studies. Do you think Translation Studies, having dealt with this fact on many occasions, has a say in this sense? Does this idea reduce the power of feminism?

Yes, it reduces the power of feminism. What was once the common denominator of over 50% of the world’s population (*i.e.* being a woman and THEREFORE being discriminated against in different ways and different degrees, but in EVERY society) has now lost a lot of ground. I think intersectionality is useful if you want to describe an individual in a certain place and at a certain moment. Great! But that has not really been the purpose of feminisms. At least I don’t think so. Translation Studies is also being shredded by such approaches...

You have revised many translations of feminist texts to study and show how different translations (into different languages and, thus, different cultures) of the same books might end up holding different meanings. For example, you have worked on the English translation of Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*, or Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology*. This is not only interesting from the point of view of translation but for feminism itself as it proves that ideology is inevitably included in all translation processes and that the differences between feminisms around the world may have (at least) something to do with this. Do you see these enlightening research works as part of your feminist activism?

Yes, I do. For me it has been important to see how culture-bound and curiously arrogant (or helpless) people are when faced with difference, different texts from different places. Daly in German was a really good example. Feminisms cannot be transnational—they are very culture-bound, which is something you see all the time. Just now I have been looking at the noise around the upcoming and recently published «new» English translations of Beauvoir. As though THESE translations were going to be the «true» ones. I think it is important to point out how chauvinist translations (of certain texts) can become.

Do you mean that a cultural filter should be applied to global feminism for it to be (more) successful? Are cultural perspectives overvalued with regard to the translation of (key) feminist texts? Is there a chance for translators to embrace a common feminist perspective when translating?

It is inevitable that a cultural filter is applied to feminist works that travel globally. A wonderful example of this is discussed in the book I have already mentioned on the many different translations of the feminist text on women's health *Our Bodies, Ourselves (The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels Across Borders)*, by Kathy Davis). This study which compares the various different versions of the text shows clearly that every translating culture has different needs, different limitations, and different ways of understanding texts. It would make a lot of sense if feminist politicians, or those promoting «global feminism» recognized this and adapted policies, texts, and behaviours to account for such differences. So, I would say that cultural perspectives cannot be overvalued with regard to translating key feminist texts. They are very important if the texts are to «pass» and be meaningful and useful for local readers. In this light, I suppose a common feminist perspective when translating would be a perspective that mobilizes feminist politics in the target text which are appropriate to the target culture and at the same time reflect important aspects of the source text, especially if this is a feminist text. If it is not, an (activist, interventionist) feminist perspective in translating would **add** feminist elements to the target text that speak to its potential readers. (I realize this may cost the translator a contract... again depending on time and place.)

Your articles are always perfectly structured and very easy to follow, despite their theoretical complexity. Do you usually draw diagrams of your ideas

before you start writing? What would be your top piece of advice for amateur researchers? And for young feminists?

My advice is always to write the kind of text you would like to read. So much academic writing is turgid and thick. (Some of mine too, when I haven't been completely clear on what I wanted to say.) I think the thing is to keep working on something, to keep writing until, through the process of writing, it comes clear. And yes, structure is totally important: you have to figure out what the roadmap is. How do you get from the beginning to the end? What do you want to show and say? And how can you do that? With grad students beginning to write a thesis, I always ask for a structure, or help them devise one. Every time they hand in a «chapter» I ask them to hand in the new structure. It changes constantly.

Young feminists: same thing —structure, clear ideas, planning— and have kids. That gives you a good balance, and keeps you feminist!

You travel quite a lot and seem to enjoy meeting colleagues from other countries and cultures. Do you see many differences in how they approach the interconnection between translation and gender depending on their countries of origin, their culture or the language they use?

I love travelling, and have always been attracted (rather than scared) by difference. And I am really interested by differences between feminisms. But I am not sure I have seen many differences in approaches to gender and translation. Like the Chinese scholar, many people seem to want to use what we found in Canada, almost like a pattern to impose on their own cultures. I think that does not necessarily work.

How has the connection between gender and translation influenced Translation Studies as a whole?

Good question: I think coming into the game early on —when Translation Studies was getting going helped people working with gender issues. Now, I feel the interest in gender has died down somewhat, maybe because of that «intersectionality» that is next to impossible to apply to any particular text... But did the «gender» aspect influence Translation Studies? I think maybe yes: it helped make the politics of translation obvious, the ideological component, the cultural factors.

You are one of the feminist translators and scholars most admired by feminists because of your brave ideas on the subject. Do you see yourself as a symbol in this sense?

No, I don't see myself as a symbol at all. I have always thought there are other people who do better work than I do. And I have never thought of myself as a very devoted scholar. I do too many other things and don't sit around in libraries much (I am afraid of library rats.) But I am pleased and flattered if you want to see me as a symbol. Great! Very nice.

It is said that you are working on a new book. Could you tell us about it? Why now?

Yes, I am putting together a book of essays on «Women and Translation». Various essays by North American and European authors —not all women. They are just beginning to come in, and I will be interested to see what people are working on. I felt it was time to have another piece of work on this topic: things have been a little quiet and need to be heated up again. One reason was my own recent experience of translating Ulrike Meinhof (1970s urban guerilla in Germany), and I realized my translation would strongly affect the one-dimensional image of Meinhof (= terrorist) that exists in English. That book is *Everybody talks about the weather...We don't*, Seven Stories, NYC 2008. So, my piece will have to do with translation as a way to re-member women writers and thinkers (with all the difficulties that memory work raises), women who have been dismembered in the largely unappreciative if not strongly misogynist societies we live in.

Thank you.

In this interview, professor von Flotow states that she does not believe in the idea of a «feminine» way of writing or translating, she admits that feminist translation theories appeared in a very particular context, in a time and place that required or accepted strategies which might not work elsewhere or now. Von Flotow invites us all to explore the connection between gender and translation in our own contexts, applying what Martín Ruano has called «a flexible ethics of location» for feminism (Martín Ruano 2005: 37). However, she seems quite skeptical about new approaches to feminist translation such as that of «intersectionality» (Brufau Alvira 2009), closely bound up with the notion of flexible identity and which, to me, might be applicable to translation. As shown here, the debate is still open. There are lots of things to be done, thought and said about gender and translation. Let's hope that we will hear of them soon.

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