Feminism in Translation: the Canadian Factor

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Abstract

This article starts from a strangely bilingual Canadian sound poem, «Simultaneous Translation» by Penn Kemp (1984) and traces the specifically Canadian aspects of the work done in the area of «translation and gender» from the 1980s to 2000. The social and political circumstances supporting the intense focus both on gender and on translation in Canada in those decades are explored here, and are seen as the key to understanding why primarily Canadian writers and academics developed the field.

Key words: Canadian feminisms and translation, history of gender issues in translation.

Resum

Aquest article parteix d'un poema canadenc estranyament bilingüe «Traducció Simultània», escrit per Penn Kemp (1984) i traça els aspectes canadencs específics de la recerca feta en el camp de la «traducció i el gènere» des del 1980 fins al 2000. Les circumstàncies socials i polítiques que recolzen un enfocament intens vers el gènere i la traducció al Canadà en aquelles dècades s'examinen en aquest article, i es conceben com la clau per entendre per què foren primordialment els/les escriptor/es i acadèmic/ques canadencs els que varen desenvolupar aquest camp.

Paraules Clau: feminismes canadencs i traducció, història de temes de gènere en la traducció.

Summary

Canadian Beginnings

Let's begin with a poem, an odd, bilingual sound poem by a Canadian poet, Penn Kemp, a writer who has participated in the many Canadian manifestations of women's creativity over the past 30 years. Entitled «Simultaneous Translation», it was first published in 1984, on the inside cover of the conference proceedings

Women and Words, thus giving a specific direction to the anthology. The book is a compilation of texts from the first ever joint literary conference of English and French speaking Canadian women —held in Vancouver in 1983—, a conference that was instrumental in connecting these two very different sectors of Canadian society and culture, and launching numerous joint projects, many of which led to translations and bilingual publications.

The poem reflects and activates, mirrors and encourages a bilingual, translingual component in women's writing in Canada, a component that, in 1983, explicitly evokes the need to cooperate and communicate on a level that will transcend cultural differences and ancient animosities, and that later, over the course of the late 1980s and 1990s, will add a creatively hybrid tinge to the work of a number of women writers, both in French and in English. As a sound poem, read aloud on CD by its English-language author (2001), this particular piece comes across as even more hybrid: we hear French pronounced with an unabashed English accent, a strange, halting, ludic, sometimes also incomprehensible accent. One could argue that the poem enacts nothing more than what Roman Jakobson calls the «phatic function of language», opening the channels of communication between two of the major cultural groupings in Canada. The fact that it does so via translation, and in the name of translation, is useful for my project — which is, *first*, to discuss the origins of the work on gender and translation in Canada, which became the basis for much subsequent work elsewhere (Flotow 2005),[1] and, *second*, examine some of the limitations of this early material.

Here is the poem:

Simultaneous Translation (by Penn Kemp)

J'ai essayé et
J S A A A
J S A A A
J S A A

je ne suis pas capable / j'ai pensé tous les fois
je ne suis pas capable / j'ai pensé toutes les folles
jeune suivra capable jay pensé toutes les folles
gêne suivra cap pablum jay pensé toutes les folles
gêne sweep pa cap pablum jay pensy toutes les folles
june sweep pa cap pablum jay pensy toot les folles
june sweep pa cap pablum jay pensy toot lay falls

tant m'échappe mais j'embarque
taunt m'échappe mais j'embarque
taunt may chap may j'am barque
taunt may chap may jam bark

1. This forthcoming text is a compilation and analysis of the many different applications of ideas on gender and translation, published in the wake of early Canadian initiatives.

car nous sommes toutes traductrices
car nous sommes toutes traductrices
car new sommes toutes traductrices
car new some toutes traductrices
car new some toot traductrices
car new sum too trad duke trees
car new sum too trad ostrich

dans un silence qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin
dance un silence qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin
dance on silence qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin
dans on sill once qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin
dance on sill once key ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin
dance on sill once keen say pas s'exprimer en langage mask you lent
dance on sill once keen say pa s'exprimer au langage mask you lent
dance on sill once keen say pa sez primer au langage mask you lent
dance on sill once keen say pa sez primer oh langage mask you lent
dance on sill once keen say pa sez primer oh long age ask you lent
dance on sill once keen say pa sez preen eh oh long age mask you lent

essay on
essayons

The poem astounds and perplexes first of all by its juxtaposition and exploitation of both French and English — starting from relatively «straight» French and using fragmented English in ludic counterpoint. In a country of at least two major cultures, that had until the 1960s and later been marked by «two solitudes»[2] (the French vs the English), the bilingualism of the piece is first and foremost an appeal to Canadian women to communicate. But it also presents some of the major *topoi* of a certain type of feminist writing in Canada at the time, and displays some of its formal qualities as well.

At the level of *topoi*, it opens with the expression of women's (inculcated) sense that they lack ability, «j'ai essayé, je ne suis pas capable, tant m'échappe» (I have tried, I am not able, so much escapes me); it associates madness with femaleness «je ne suis pas capable, j'ai pensé toutes les folles» (I am not able, I have thought all the mad women). At the same time, the first person voice reacts against this lack of ability, «tant m'échappe mais je m'embarque» (so much escapes me but I head out anyway), and names the problem «dans un silence qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculine» (in a silence that cannot express itself in masculine language], having come to the realization that this language is so foreign for women, that to use it means «nous sommes toutes traductrices» (we are all translators — feminine plural). And now that these issues are on the table: the poet ends with an exhortation «essay on», «essayons» (let us continue our efforts, let us try). To summarize, and doubtless simplify terribly, women's silence, their (perceived) lack of

2. Reference to Hugh MacLennan's novel *Two Solitudes* that addresses the gap between English and French culture and life in Canada.

ability, and their own sense of this are the result of the imposed use of a language that works against them, a masculine language that transcends the different individual languages, imposing silence upon women, and forcing them to translate in order to express themselves.

Formally, the poem plays with and bilingually deconstructs and reconstructs language, demonstrating first of all that it is possible to do so, also an important *topos* of this period, and that in so doing «jeune (je ne) suivra pas» (I will not follow). Demonstrating further that language is a curiously coincidental assortment of sound and sound progressions that move *between* languages as much as *within* a language, especially in a situation of bilingualism, and biculturalism, it implies that its *formalization* through conventions and traditions, into written form is a further aspect of «le langage masculin» — orality being another important feminist *topos*. How else can we understand the line «dance on sill once keen say pa s'exprimer au langage mask you lent» — except perhaps to pull out items such as «dance on sill» (an expression of crazily being on the edge?), the reference to «pa» (father?), or «langage mask you lent» to associate «language» with «mask», i.e. the cover-up behind which «pa» operates? This is all conjecture, of course, but knowing something about the Canadian scene of that time, it is probably not all wrong.

What is useful for my purpose — to identify some of the social and literary bases for ideas on gender and translation in Canada —, is Kemp's use of both French and English, the *métissage* of the two languages in her text, and the order in which she deploys them: French first, an indication of the strong influence of French writing at the time, and English second, playing the ludic, deconstructive game, perhaps taking some of the edge off the feminist agenda. The hybrid nature of the text, its focus on translation, and on avant-gardist, oral, sound-play are all elements that are significant elements in French Canadian women's writing at the time. But Kemp is one of the first English-Canadian poets/writers to work with the deconstruction of syntax and sense and sound that had started in the mid-1970s in Quebec, where the influence of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and French influences on feminisms had been felt much earlier than in the rest of North America.

This particular set of circumstances of feminist activism and deconstructive ludic writing and performance, enacted here by Penn Kemp, connected three important elements: bilingualism, translation, and women's agency as an integral part of Canadian feminisms of the 1980s, a situation that was nurtured and developed by a small interconnected web of women whose work provides a good example of what Bourdieu would call a «groupe scientifique» that suddenly takes a not disinterested «interest» in a new idea. He writes:

> Nous avons intérêt aux problèmes qui nous paraissent intéressants. Cela veut dire qu'à un certain moment un certain groupe scientifique, sans que personne ne le décide, constitue un problème comme intéressant: il y a un colloque, on fonde des revues, on écrit des articles, des livres, des compte-rendus. C'est dire que «ça paie» d'écrire sur ce thème, ça apporte des profits, moins sous forme de droits d'auteur […] que sous forme de prestige, de gratifications symboliques, etc. (1980, 79).

> We are interested in problems that appear interesting. At a certain moment a certain group of scholars will define a problem as interesting, without anyone in particular making that decision; they hold a conference, found journals, write articles, books, reviews. In other words, «it pays» to write on that topic, it brings in rewards, not necessarily royalties, but prestige, symbolic gratification… (my translation).

I don't think that this description of how academic and/or literary fields develop is particularly surprising or controversial anymore, though Bourdieu's analyses of such «strategies of distinction» (Fowler, 1997, 94) have been viewed as cynical, sarcastic, anti-intellectual, attacks that Bourdieu brushes off as deriving from the fact that his analyses «livre[ent] au premier venu les secrets réservés aux initiés» (1980, 67) (his analyses give away the secrets that were reserved for special initiates [my translation]).

In Canada of the 1980s, and in the sector of women's writing/feminist writing, this construction of «field» is clearly visible. Besides various public events such as the «Women and Words» conference, special women's publishing houses developed (The Women's Press in Toronto, Editions de la pleine lune, and Editions remue-ménage in Montréal are examples), magazines such as *La vie en rose*, and journals such as *Room of One's Own* quickly appeared. Women's writing and publishing was in full swing. And so were the academic commentaries: within four years, three anthologies of critical texts appeared, one entitled *Féminité, Subversion, Écriture* (1983), another *A Mazing Space* (1986), another *Gynocritics/La Gynocritique* (1987), all of which gave almost equal if not more space to articles about Quebec women's writing as they did to English-Canadian work, and were edited by people intimately connected with the earlier *Women and Words* anthology, people who also authored articles in the anthologies and/or wrote the bilingual forewords, did the editing and the translation.

At the same time as anthologies of creative and critical work were appearing, academic journals focused on women's writing were being established; of special interest is the journal *Tessera*, founded by four academics/writers, most of whom also participated in the anthologies. It focuses specifically on women and language, on translation and bilingualism in Canadian women's writing, on the politics of reading and writing. Finally, there was also translation: done by many of this same group, largely of selected avant-gardist writing from Quebec, translations that almost always included considerable translators' introductions, commentaries, or even short articles on the translations.[3] A Bourdieusian «field» had indeed been created, and was expanding.

Throughout, the personal connections between the group of English-French women writing and translating each other in Canada, the web of contacts and the knots of power, which Bourdieu sees as the sources of *social capital* were expanding, and with it the *cultural and symbolic capital* that comes with recognition for the authors, and publication for the academics /intellectuals. The fact that people

3. I discussed these particular Canadian tendencies in «Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices, Theories», *TTR*, 1991.

could be members of all groups (authors, translators and academics) simply strengthened the webbing. To summarize once more, bilingual, fragmented materials filled with unpredictable code-switching and ludic forms of translation as a liberatory gesture from «le langage masculin», working mainly from French to English, were the basis upon which the subsequent influential Canadian materials on «gender and translation» were constructed, by a core group of perhaps ten to fifteen women — professors, writers and translators over a period of about twenty years.

This was a very particular moment, in a very specific place and time, with results that are not necessarily transferable to other cultures or historical moments. The political climate in Canada, where government and university support was available for many of the publications and manifestations, and the social and cultural capital that this group developed and accumulated, led to considerable cultural power.

Those involved

There are at least four Canadians known outside Canada for their work on gender in translation, and they have in many ways defined the field. Yet, it is hard to judge how applicable these specifically Canadian ideas and materials have been for other cultures. Taking a «womanist», if not clearly «feminist» stance, that is sourced in a very particular North American situation, they can be seen to address the power politics of translation in general, though all the while maintaining a focus on women's issues in particular. Perhaps the most volubile and theoretical, and also the earliest writer on the topic is Barbara Godard, already a professor for Canadian literature at York University in Toronto when she began to take an interest in the feminist Quebec writing scene. Early on, in 1983 and 1986, she published English translations of two books by Nicole Brossard — the most successful avant-gardist feminist poet from Montreal — and participated in many public poetry events as well as the usual conferences and lectures connected with academia. She participated in many of the academic publications and anthologies on feminist writing, and women and language, and was a founding member of the journal *Tessera*. Godard's work from the 1980s connects ideas about women's post-structuralist and deconstructionist literary output, their critical force and capacity, to translation theory, and she was one of the first to announce that «the translator's engagement with a text is a profound one that changes one's ways of seeing the world» (1984, 15), clearly drawing on her own experience of interpreting and translating Brossard. Yet more frequently, she goes back to the Penn Kemp figure, «nous sommes toutes traductrices», making translation the trope for women's difficulty with standard language (1990, 89), and their creative, critical play with it (90-91). Her view of the feminist translator parallels that of the post-structuralist feminist writer: it is positivist, interventionist, political.

Godard has access to an extensive canon of contemporary theory and creative materials which she marshals for her arguments. The «cultural capital» she has accumulated and which she demonstrates is considerable, and so is the demonstration of her «social capital». The footnotes regularly thank other academics or

translators for their input and discussion, and point to the importance of the small, tight, club within which she operates, and which supports her. This is brought out again in a later piece where she defends her idiosyncratic translations and her author Nicole Brossard as being part of a «vast web» of avant-garde feminisms — periodicals, publishing houses, journals, «from Turkey to Brazil» (1995, 40).

A second influential piece of writing is Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's *Rebelle et infidèle. La traduction comme ré-écriture au feminine/The Body Bilingual* (1991), a less academic collection of short texts in both French and English on her practice of translating *as a feminist* in a world ruled by «patriarchal language» and institutions. Personal, and deliberately subjective, emotional and emphatic, it is written from the perspective of a bilingual woman who earns much of her living as a translator, and who insists that translation is a political act. She argues for deliberately interventionist translation that «makes women's voices heard» and is a political strategy with which to correct some of the social ills due to the historical silencing of women. It is worth noting here that De Lotbinière-Harwood is also a translator of Nicole Brossard, and a university teacher, thus operating in the same circles as the writers and academics of the anthologies (including Godard), though in less high-powered, assertively academic ways. Her approach is subjective, based on her own praxis of translating local Canadian feminist writing, and is very much centred on this feminist group: «la traduction au féminin», she writes, «est un exercice de mémoire gynocentrique» (1991, 66) (translating in the feminine is an exercise in gynocentric memory, [my translation]), thus emphasizing the intertextual, «group» aspects of women's writing, and the need to recognize these intertexts. Her work has a private, personal, modest feel though she does not shrink from making more universalizing statements, for example, connecting feminist translation practices to the idea of women as «moral agents» (72), and «women's experience» (73) as the basis for all their decision-making. Like Bourdieu, she recognizes and addresses the conjuncture of praxis and context: «c'est le contexte, les aspects particuliers de chaque situation, qui détermineront nos choix» (72) (it is the context, the aspects specific to each situation that will determine our choices [my translation]); in De Lotbinière-Harwood this is doubtless also a recognition of the precarious position of the freelance translator.

My own short piece on «Feminist Translation» published in an issue of the Canadian translation studies journal *TTR* (1991) has also been widely read and cited, translated into other languages (Italian, Slovene, Turkish, and now, Persian), included in anthologies of translation studies, and attacked. At the time of writing, I was a doctoral student in the United States, labouring over a dissertation on — predictably — Quebec feminist writers Nicole Brossard and France Théoret. I had already translated some Brossard, and was translating Théoret's *L'Homme qui peignait Staline.* I knew all the people involved, at least from a distance, and was fully immersed in the bilingual, translation mindset that was dominating at least one section of Canadian academia and letters at the time. More importantly, I had received Canadian government funding for my doctoral work on Quebec authors as well as for the English translations of their texts. In other words, since academia and government recognized this work, validated it, and supported it, as they

did my subsequent book *Translation and Gender. Translation in the «Era of Feminism»* (1997), it obviously «paid» to be interested. The same applies to subsequent articles and conference papers on the topic; while it is fascinating to do research and follow the development of a powerful movement, observe its transcultural effects, and its weaknesses, it is just as gratifying to gain recognition for this. As Bourdieu puts it, «c'est dire que "ça paie" d'écrire sur ce thème, ça apporte des profits…».

Finally, Sherry Simon's work in this field seems to have begun in 1988, when she co-edited the proceedings of the American Literary Translators' Association conference held in Montreal in 1986. Both De Lotbinière-Harwood and Godard had spoken at that meeting, to a raucous, quite hostile reception — the literary translators still largely believed that translation is an apolitical event, and the translator an innocent conduit. Similarly, Simon wrote the introductory material for the publication, calling the combination of feminist writing and translation the basis «for a new and exciting poetics» (1988, 43). As a professor for French literature at Concordia University in Montreal and member of the Literary Translators Association of Canada, Simon had considerable clout and experience; further, she knew and worked with all those involved in the Canadian literature and translation field. Yet, unlike De Lotbinière-Harwood's work, her subsequent book, *Gender in Translation. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (1996) quickly moves out of the Canadian realm into a more international area and more universal concerns — using gender issues in translation that are largely feminist as an approach to the politics of cultural studies and the role of ideology in cultural transfer. Again, like all of the foregoing writers, her focus is literary — on the importation of so-called French feminisms into North America, on Bible translation, on the lives and times of several important women translators.

And now for the limitations

There are several important limitations to the work produced in Canada, some of which have not yet been addressed in any other of the currently flourishing translation studies cultures. The first is the conflation of «gender» with feminism, with women's writing and largely, women's politics. While in the 1980s, gender as a term and concept had developed from within the women's movement to differentiate biological sex from socially acquired norms of being, i.e. gendered behaviour, it has now come to apply, logically, to both sexes, and more importantly, to «queer» culture as well. It is interesting to note, that while there have been several publications and studies examining gender politics in gay writing (Harvey 2004, Kayahara 2004, Keenaghan 1998), and thus somewhat expanding «gender» boundaries in Translation Studies, texts dealing with women's writing or focused on women's gender simply appropriate lesbian texts for general feminist/womanist purposes. Though many Canadian lesbian texts have served as material for theoretical work on gender, there has been little development of anything that might be called lesbian, or even queer translation theories/studies. Perhaps the time is not yet ripe, or the moment has passed, and so the «field» does not pay.

A further important limitation has been the almost exclusive focus on literary texts as the source of all theoretical work, and almost all analyses. In Canada, for instance, there exists no scholarly work that I know of that discusses issues of gender in the translation of court documents relating to women prisoners, say, or to the translations of Parliamentary debates on such topics as same-sex marriage — and such documents are all subject to translation in Canada. Indeed, only very few texts exist that link translation and gender in non-literary discourse — one excellent exception is a recent PhD thesis completed at the University of Ottawa which deserves mention here for that reason. In her work, Michele Healy focused on English women translators of scientific texts between 1650 and 1850, placing them in their relatively difficult social environments, showing the different roles they played in disseminating knowledge, sometimes repatriating texts originally considered too wild and woolly to be acceptable (some of Newton's work was repatriated through translation from French by Aphra Behn, for instance), and demonstrating how their roles changed and their recognition waned due, largely, to the institutionalization of science in the early 19tn century when scientific societies and universities began to take control (Healy, PhD dissertation, 2003).

Interestingly, work on gay writing and translation has been subject to this same literary limitation, although one could imagine opportunities enough to examine other topics: there were heated debates, for example, at a recent conference on gay and lesbian writing, on the imperialist, or perhaps colonialist «threat» of North American style gay activism being imported and superimposed on local gay traditions in Sri Lanka and Namibia. A potentially rich field for studies on the role translation plays in the construction of gendered identities in other societies and places, at other times.

Indeed, there is much room for development in the discussion of genders and translation in non-literary, everyday environments of international exchanges, where gender identities are constantly in play — under construction, at issue, under discussion — in socio-political, journalistic, or institutional texts such as those of the UN or other international bodies, in religious and secular discourses, in propaganda or advertising, or in business — and not in primarily literary texts —, and where gender identities are «negotiated across cultures» on a broader, more encompassing, or more popular level than in so-called high literature.

I suggest that these are equally rich fields to be mined by, perhaps, another generation. *Essay on/Essayons*, as Penn Kemp says.

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