

A GENDERED VOICE IN TRANSLATION: TRANSLATING *LIKE* A FEMINIST

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This paper addresses some of the challenges inherent in finding and showing a gendered voice in translation. The starting point is my own experience as a feminist translator of both feminist and non-feminist texts. Textual practices like translating necessarily interact with current theoretical debates. In turn, theoretical writing on feminism enriches and informs one’s translating activity. This interplay between theoretical models and textual practices was particularly made evident to me as I rendered *Essentially speaking*, by Diana Fuss, into Catalan. In this article I intend to transcend anecdotes of translating individual texts and consider how translating equals rewriting oneself; it involves rethinking writing practices. I will specifically address the rethinking of (1) one’s identity when translating ‘like’ a feminist, (2) performativity in gender and in translation, and (3) agency and (In)visibility.

1. Translating like a feminist

In translating feminist texts, usually the starting point is working *as* a feminist, i .e. accepting one’s identity of being a feminist, an acceptance which is important for the personal, ideological and institutional implications it may bring about. In other words, personal, private identification, signalled by the phrase ‘*as* a feminist’ equals ideological, public adscription. But precisely Diana Fuss’ text, *Essentially Speaking*, explicitly focuses on the essentialist versus constructionist debate in feminism, and examines how one position inhabits the other in important feminist thinking, such as the writings of Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig.

On the one hand, there is the political, strategic need to *be* a feminist, —to accept one’s feminist identity and defend that in areas where such acceptance may bring discussion or just opposition. On the other hand, there is the realisation that one can never really *become* a feminist, if we assume our identity as contingent and socially constructed.

This is made evident in Chapter two of *Essentially Speaking*, entitled ‘Reading like a Feminist, where Fuss examines how essentialism is inherent in social constructionism. For that purpose, Fuss examines, among other texts, Robert Scholes’ ‘Reading like a Man’, especially his conclusion, where he claims

that he reads *like* a man (not as a man). For Fuss, this statement by Scholes avoids specifying whether he reads *like* or even *as* a feminist, therefore avoiding political identification. Diana Fuss then explicitates her own inscription: ‘I read this piece *like* a feminist; what it means to read as or even like a woman I still don’t know.’ (Fuss 1989: 26).

This has relevant theoretical and translational implications: it shows Fuss’ own adscription as a social constructionist, in a book where she analyses the benefits and pitfalls of both essentialism and constructionism. Therefore, this adscription must be shown in translation. This precludes brilliant textual solutions in Catalan, like the use of ‘com (a)’, in which the parenthesis makes us read as *both* ‘like’ and ‘as’, a solution defended by Pilar Godayol (2000: 71). The following translation solution was an attempt to show a preference for constructionism (*like*, in Catalan *com*), which explicitly places essentialism (*as*, in Catalan *com a*) under erasure: ‘Jo llegeixo [...] *com* ~~*a*~~ feminista; què significa llegir com a dona o, fins i tot, igual com una dona, encara no ho sé’ (Fuss 1999: 53). From my position as a constructionist translation translating Fuss’ constructionism, there is no other way out but translating like, not as, a feminist.

2. Gender as performativity/translation as performance

I would now like to relate this visible translation option with the well-known view of gender as performativity, as posited by Judith Butler, and attempt to establish connections with visible translation practices. From a radical constructionist view, Judith Butler has proposed considering gender inscription as performativity: one acquires gender by means of repetitive acts where gender is inscribed. Butler draws from speech act theory, according to which certain utterances (performative speech acts) become realized when they are verbalised, like ‘Let there be light’. Butler, following Derrida, realises that such utterances can only have such performative power when they are in a context which has established such meanings by repeated citation.

Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). (Butler 1999 [1993]: 241).

Gender as performativity has had profound impact in feminist research: for example, writing as performance or as masquerade, in order to hide one’s sexual identity by using a male pseudonym. However, the implications that one may *choose* performing one’s gender, as one may wear a specific garment, have found contestation from within feminist theory (Hawkesworth 1997: 663-669). But what I would like to address here is the view that translation is also a performative practice, which dresses the text with new garments.

Metaphors where translation is seen as dressing have been common ever since the Renaissance. And metaphors may be read as historical conceptualizations of translation (Karin Littau in Hermans 1999: 98). For example, we may consider the image of translation as a *perruque*, a periwig as a disguise. The philosopher Michel De Certeau created the concept for cultural studies, and defined *perruque* as the practice which enables the individual to distance him/herself from institutional hierarchic models, by pretending that rules are abided, when they are in fact subverted. Sirkku Aaltonen has applied this to stage translation, and considers that a translation may become *la perruque*, a play which is presented in disguise as if it were the ‘master’s’, but which in reality is subverted for one’s own purposes (Aaltonen 200: 80-81; 106-107).

This reminds us of the subversive uses of disguise, as translation and performance practices, in short as discursive strategies. This is close to Diana Fuss’ point in defending the strategic use of essentialism, from a point of view of essentialism as a constructed position, in feminism:

No puc evitar de pensar que el factor determinant a l’hora de decidir el valor polític o estratègic de l’essencialisme depèn de qui el practiqui: en les mans d’un grup hegemònic, l’essencialisme es pot utilitzar com una eina potent de domini ideològic; en les mans del subaltern, la utilització de l’humanisme per imitar –en el sentit d’Irigaray de *desfer a còpia d’estrafer*– l’humanisme pot representar una poderosa repetició desplaçadora. La qüestió de la permissibilitat –si ho voleu– d’adoptar l’essencialisme, en conseqüència, es troba emmarcada i determinada per la posició-subjecte des de la qual es parla. (Fuss 1999: 60, my italics).

It is in this performative imitative vein that I translated Luce Irigaray’s play-on-words, which was quoted in English by Fuss, and then translated into Catalan as ‘desfer a còpia d’estrafer’. Therefore, beyond the consideration of gender as performativity is its explicit consideration as performance. When both gender and translation are considered as performance, they can provide clues to gendered translation practices.

There is a rich history of visible –performative, we might say– translation practices in feminism, as explored, amongst others, by Louise Von Flotow (1997) and Pilar Godayol (2000). These practices involve the decision to translate –or not to translate– specific texts, the selection of material to translate and the many textual strategies to render that material, including typographical creativity. These typographical strategies are more common in creative writing than in theoretical writings, even if the boundary between both modes of writing is often blurred, especially in feminism. In the translation of Fuss’ *Essentially Speaking*, only two visible typographical strategies were used: one, already mentioned, the crossing out of ‘a’. The other blended the masculine and feminine in one word, following the suggestion made by Neus Carbonell, the first director of the feminist collection ‘Capsa de Pandora’ of Eumo Editorial: ‘the Other’ was rendered as ‘l’Àltea’, the sum of masculine ‘altre’ and feminine ‘altra’, which is nearly imperceptible in pronunciation, but is very visible in writing.

Other translation options were dictated by the textual slippages which Diana Fuss comments in *Essentially Speaking*, such as the following play with ‘body’ and ‘matter’:

Most anti-essentialists [...] are hesitant to discuss the body at all for fear of sounding essentializing. This caution leads [Monica] Wittig [...] to elide the material body almost completely, and she achieves this lacuna by effecting a nearly imperceptible slippage from the formulation ‘the body is not matter’ to the position ‘the body does not matter’: *it matters not*. What is lost in her work is precisely a materialist analysis of the body *as* matter. (Fuss 1989: 50; her italics, my underlining).

This could be easily translated into Catalan, following Fuss’ own periphrasis:

La major part d’antiessencialistes, però, mostren reticències per entrar a debatre la qüestió del cos per por de semblar essencialitzants. Aquesta precaució porta a Wittig, a la fi, a esborrar el cos material gairebé completament i aconseguir aquesta llacuna efectuant un canvi gairebé imperceptible de la formulació ‘el cos no és matèria’ a la posició ‘el cos no té matèria’: *no té importància material*. El que és perd a la seva obra és precisament una anàlisi materialista del cos *com a* matèria. (Fuss 1999: 81; her italics, my underlining).

Other, more invisible translation options can be explored to render a gendered voice, when the theoretical writings to translate do not play much emphasis on the creation of words, or when visible typographical strategies in translation may distract the reader from the main theoretical points in the texts.

Addressing a gendered reader always implies an interpretive choice in translation, by means of more or less visible translation strategies. Envisaging a specific gendered readership is challenging, especially in Romance languages where the subject is always gendered, both socially and grammatically. Gendered translations do not just amount to superficial textual choices for avoiding sexism. Rather, they lead to a constant rethinking of agency, of who does what both in and out of the text. For example, when an author is talking about ‘feminist writers’, one may safely, or unsafely, assume that they will be women, and translate it as ‘les escriptores feministes’. Or, if they are men, one may decide that they will not mind being addressed *like* feminist women.

But envisaging a gendered audience at every single word of a translation is indeed challenging in that it involves gendering every single subject in the text. To avoid using a male generic form, apart from double addresses, like, for example, ‘*les i els* construccionistes nord-americans’, one may attempt other solutions like, translating ‘constructionists’ by ‘constructionism’. This solution which might work in other contexts, but in a feminist text, replacing agent (constructionist) by institution or theoretical body (constructionism), can both invisibilize and essentialize feminist agency.

~~Constructionists take the refusal of essence as the inaugural moment of their own projects and proceed to demonstrate the way previously assumed self-evident kinds (like ‘man’ of ‘woman’) are in fact the effects of complicated discursive practices. Anti-essentialists are engaged in interrogating the intricate and interlacing processes which work together to produce all seemingly ‘natural’ or ‘given’ objects. (Fuss 1989: 2)~~

~~El construccionisme~~ Les i els construccionistes prenen el rebuig de l’essència com el moment inaugural dels seus propis projectes i procedeixen a demostrar de quina manera categories que s’assumeixen com a evidents (‘home’ o ‘dona’ per exemple) són de fet resultat de complexos pràctiques discursives. ~~L’antiessencialisme~~ Els i les antiessencialistes es proposen interrogar els processos intricats i entrelaçats que funcionen conjuntament per produir objectes aparentment ‘naturals’ o ‘donats’. (Fuss 1999: 25; provisional translation is shown as crossed out; final translation is underlined).

3. In/visibility and Agency

‘Agència’? This one word was added in pencil to my translation of the paragraph above, by Neus Carbonell, the first director of “Capsa de Pandora”. This one-word question nagged me, prompted me to subsequently look for specific translation options which were both gendered and sensitive to agency.

Agency has been a keyword in Feminist Studies, as related to women subjectivity in authorship and readership (see Miller 1993). As Nancy Miller has pointed out, the Death of the Author is unfair for women and it

prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had [...]. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, hence decentred, ‘disoriginated’, deinstitutionalised, etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, displays structurally important differences from that universal position. (Miller 1993: 23).

If the notion of ‘agency’ emphasises the subject’s actions, her power to act or, conversely, the hindrances she might find to act, it might be akin to the term ‘visibility’, which might put agency to the fore, in feminism and in Translation Studies.

The question of visibility has been always present in Translation Studies, but it especially emerged as a popular keyword after the publication of Lawrence Venuti’s (1995) *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Venuti denounces the social invisibility given to the translator throughout history, and advocates instead for visible, foreignising translations, which show the resistance of the source text, as opposed to fluent domesticizing translations, which hide the presence of the translator. Theo Hermans has also denounced the translator’s *social* invisibility (1996a). Besides, Hermans has questioned the *narrative* invisibility of the translator and has researched their narrative traces in the text, therefore postulating an ‘implied translator’, besides and ‘implied narrator’ (1996b).

The theoretical background related to agency and visibility necessarily interacts with one’s translating practices, especially when specific choices affect the textual visibility of the translation and the translator’s social visibility. We are presented with the following ultimate dilemma:

1. Should we opt, as feminist translators, for textually visible translation where the paratexts, like prefaces and notes, explicit one’s interaction with the text? Such writings are certainly useful for research into the history of feminist translation. However, from a professional perspective, do we need to justify everything we do? Does not the mere justification emphasize the fact that feminist translations are not ‘normal’, i. e. socially acceptable as they are, as is the case with other translated texts?

2. Can we not, as empowered agents, paradoxically opt for invisibility? the absence of explicit translation notes and preface may be a visible move,

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meaning that one’s task does not need special justification, like other activities as a translator or as academic.

However, textual invisibility equals social invisibility in very specific institutional terms: when publications are evaluated in an academic context, translation is not equated with other types of research, unless there are visible traces in the text of one’s intervention. More specifically, a translator’s preface and translator’s notes may change one’s authorial category –and agency– from ‘translator’ to ‘editor’. Paradoxically, to become a visible translator, one has to become something else. True, according to copyright laws one is the intellectual author of one’s translation, but one is *more of an author*, for publishing purposes and for research evaluation, if she imprints visible traces of authorship in the text, namely preface and notes.

Therefore, to conclude, this article might be seen as a kind of revenge on myself for having decided to remain visible in the past. In the future, I will either visibly edit my translations, or present my afterthoughts in academic arenas. Or both, and then I’ll become doubly visible.

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