Dis-Unity and Diversity
Feminist Approaches to Translation Studies

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Feminist work in translation studies is growing increasingly diverse. This may be ascribed to the focus on difference that has developed over the past fifteen years in feminist scholarship generally, but it is also a result of the cross-cultural work that translation studies entails. This article discusses a number of current examples of dis-unity within feminist work in translation, and locates them in the contextual and cultural differences that obtain between the participating scholars. It then discusses the extent to which factors such as 'identity politics', 'positionality' and 'historicity' have had an effect on insights and value judgements in these specific cases and in other areas of feminist work in translation studies. The focus is thus on dis-unity, diversity and complexity, factors which appear to be leading to highly productive work. Issues of unity, on the other hand, remain problematic.

Introduction[']

Feminist work in translation and translation studies is diversifying; it is not only extending the bounds once posed by gender difference and confronting assumptions that derived from them, it is beginning to explore what theorist Alice Parker (1993) has tentatively termed *polysexual* and *multigendered* approaches to translation. Parker writes about lesbian translation; my focus in this article is on the complexity and diversity, and on the dis-unity of the more conventional feminist work being done in the field. Nonetheless, Parker's insights are useful. Writing from the still marginal position of lesbian cultural criticism, she emphasizes the **appreciation** of diversity as a survival strategy:

> Survival depends on a nonreductive appreciation of diversity and complexity that cluster around two poles: responsibility (the ability to respond), and desirabilty (the ability to desire) (1993:330).

Her comment indicates that still more is needed than just an appreciation of diversity. Criticism cast as 'response-ability' and 'desire-ability'

is required for survival. Diversity and complexity develop, unfold, even mutate into some form of productive progress in response to responsive and desiring criticism. Given the current level of criticism which I will focus on in this article, it seems that mainstream feminist approaches to translation and translation studies have moved well beyond concerns about survival. If diversity and complexity in any academic discourse are measures of the interest it awakes, then the response that feminist work in translation is soliciting is encouraging. Lack of critical response is after all dead silence, whether it be deliberate as in the German term *totschweigen* (to silence to death), or simply due to lack of interest or apathy. But univocity and consensus also shut down development. Luckily, perhaps, critical responses in regard to feminist work are rarely neutral; factors of cultural or ideological conditioning, academic ambition, or institutional constraints are inevitably involved. Not much danger of consensus. My focus in this article will thus be on two aspects of feminist work in translation: its current diversity and dis-unity, and the factors underlying this state of affairs, and indeed much contemporary work in feminist criticism.

Broadly speaking, the diversity in feminist translation studies is one desirable result of changes that have taken place in feminist thought over the last twenty years. These changes moved essentialist feminist thinking that once viewed all women as sharing more or less similar forms of social, cultural, economic and political oppression to more differentiated approaches in which cultural, ethnic, economic, and many other differences between women are recognized and brought to bear in critical discourses. Given the cross-cultural work that translation entails, non-reductive differentiation is doubly present in feminist approaches to translation studies – between women and between cultures. This focus on difference is also strategic, as Linda Alcoff (1988/1994) has argued. She advocates that feminist thinkers acknowledge three factors in their work in order to avoid gross (essentialist) generalizations and the dissemination of culturally and politically questionable material about women or feminisms, and in order to thus negotiate the difficult ideological and cultural rifts that divide women. These factors are: identity politics (the writer/critic's identity has an effect on their perceptions and writing), positionality (the effect of this identity is relativized by institutional, economic, and other factors) and the historical dimension (perceptions/interests/topics change with the times as does identity). I will discuss a number of examples to show the role these factors play in the current diversity in feminist work in translation studies.

Disunity in feminist work: undermining consensus

Disunity in feminist approaches to translation and translation studies has recently become visible in a number of different publications. The issues I will discuss coalesce as: (shoddy) mainstream English translations of third world women's texts for anglophone consumption; elitist and inaccessible work which has little to do with the socio-political concerns often ascribed to Anglo-American feminisms; theoretical incoherence and hypocrisy in feminist translation and feminist critique of patriarchal theories.

Mainstream 'translatese' of third world material

In a text on the politics of translation, Gayatri Spivak discusses the translation into English and French of writing by third world women. Among the issues she raises is the problem of 'with-it translatese' (1992:180) which, she says, serves to construct a largely misrepresentative view of third world women's texts. The implementation of English or French 'translatese', she says, disregards the rhetoricity of the source text and focuses on making as much women's writing as possible available to the West/North. Ironically, the resulting misrepresentations are due to work by mainly Anglo-American women who, in gestures of feminist solidarity, want to make third world women's writing available in English. However, their 'translatese', the language of mainstream anglophone translation, obscures the differences between women of very different and differently empowered cultures, ostensibly in order to make the texts 'accessible'. Further, it deprives the texts of their individual styles, styles which are by no means homogeneous within one particular culture, let alone across third world writing. As Spivak puts it: 'the literature of a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan' (ibid). For Spivak, these gestures of apparent feminist goodwill are in effect applications of the 'law of the strongest', which, at this particular moment, endorses translation into English as the easiest way of being 'democratic with minorities'. Thus, what may have started out as feminist attempts to understand and make available third world women's experiences and writing turns out, in Spivak's estimation, to be appropriation, misrepresentation and the salving of guilty consciences.

Elitist translation

A recent text by Canadian Robyn Gillam (1995) criticizes feminist approaches to translation from a different angle, this time within the field of Canadian 'feminist iconography'. She compares a number of English translations of work by Quebec radical feminist Nicole Brossard, and suggests that translations produced from a deliberately feminist perspective (i.e. translations of *Amantes* or *L'Amèr* by Barbara Godard) make the already difficult source material even more obscure by producing English texts that privilege sound associations and extend already

complex wordplay. Further, in order to produce these effects in English, the translator has deliberately mistranslated. Gillam suggests that these translations are addressed to a small academic elite that is already bilingual and can at most marvel at the linguistic virtuosity of both author and translator. Her criticism is based on the view that French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians have inherently different political relationships to their respective languages. For the Quebecois, language has been and continues to be a political issue of daily life, while this tends not to be the case for most other Canadians. Thus, the distortion/deconstruction of language in itself *means* something different in a text in Quebec than in English-speaking Canada. It has a different political value, because of the different cultural history inscribed in it and by it. Brossard's deconstruction of patriarchal language takes this a step further, a step that 'works' for Quebecois readers since they are more sensitized to political use of language. For English-speaking Canadians her writing may be little more than exotic, however, and its reduction through translation to "an intellectual game where there exists nothing but words and their meanings" (1995:11) hardly propagates what Gillam views as the socio-political goals of feminist writing and work.

This critique has, of course, challenged the response-ability of Barbara Godard, whose translations are under attack. In her reply, she stresses the context of the early 1980s in which her translations were done: a time of burgeoning feminist activity, of film-making and journal-founding, a time that welcomed and celebrated feminist creativity, and thus authorized her version of feminist translation (Godard 1996). But she also responds to the 'separatism and classificatory demarcation' that she claims is a corollary to Gillam's text, where anglophone social activism is contrasted to francophone 'epistemological and cultural revolution' (1996: 40). Translation, for Godard, strives to traverse precisely these types of boundaries.

Hypocritical translation

Another critique of the feminist approach to translation praxis and theory advocated by Godard and numerous others has appeared in recent work by Rosemary Arrojo (1994, 1995). Arrojo takes issue with what she has called the 'hypocritical' (1994:160), 'anxious' (ibid) and 'theoretically [not] coherent' (ibid:149) work by predominantly anglophone women and men who apply feminist activism to translation. To summarize very briefly, these translators (Suzanne Levine, Carol Maier, Barbara Godard, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, Howard Scott, among others) discuss and sometimes assume the right to intervene on a political level in the text they are translating. They do so in a number of places: for example, where they consider it necessary to mitigate 'offensive' forms of machismo or misogyny, where they consider it appropriate to make explicit

the feminist message or rhetoricity that may be implicit in the source text, where they want to implant feminist thought that does not necessarily exist in the source text. Arrojo bases her comments on three points: for one, she views some feminist translators' claims that their work is faithful to the tenor of the source text as not congruent with their openly feminist politics, and therefore theoretically incoherent as well as anxious: they cannot let go of the 'fidelity ethic', though they deliberately undermine it. For another, she views feminist criticism of 'male violence' in translation and translation theory as no less violent, and therefore hypocritical. Thirdly, she considers the generalized references to post-structuralist theories with which some textual interventions are justified travesties of these theories. What she perhaps does not see is the historical dimension of these approaches; feminist translation of the 1980s develops post-essentialist insights about women, opening up views of women as nurturing peace-lovers and, instead, exploring women's aggression, anger and agency. (**A** good example of the literary expression of this anger and violence are images evoked in Brossard's *L'Amèr:* "I have killed the womb and am writing it", or her notion of recycling the uterus as a bookbag). Feminist translators' 'violence' may well be an extension of this type of discourse. Arrojo may also have overestimated the limited and highly focused nature of feminist interventions in translation; their political rhetoric sometimes does outstrip the actual interventions carried out on translations. While Arrojo rightly sees that these feminist translators and academics are as politically invested and biased as the authors or the theorists they seek to undermine – a bias they do not conceal –, she does not acknowledge her own political investment, her own 'positionality'. What is one to make, for instance, of the following concluding statement:

> After all, if we cannot be really faithful to the texts we translate, if we cannot avoid being faithful to our own circumstances and perspective, we should simply make an effort to accept and be open about our 'infidelities' and try to forget the unnecessary guilt they bring (**1994**:160).

Apart from wondering about the irritation these rather sanctimonious sentiments might arouse, I am led to ask who 'we' are, and exactly how 'we' should go about 'simply' accepting our 'infidelities'. Should all translators in all cultures regardless of historical, cultural and economic inequalities or differences strive for this state of grace? Should all academics involved in translation studies do so? Or does this address only the women involved in some way with translation? If so, then given the differences between women and women's cultures that Gillam and Spivak have most recently addressed, and that Arrojo has amply demonstrated, this may be a vain exhortation.

To briefly comment on these examples of dis-unity: Gillam's criticism seems to be diametrically opposed to Spivak's; she wants the feminist text made meaningful and accessible for the translating culture and its feminist activists of all kinds, while Spivak calls for a translation practice that resists the homogenizing demands for 'easy-reading' of the target culture feminist reader. The gulf between these two positions may be understood as a difference in perspective, a combination of the three factors that Alcoff has delineated. Gillam is an anglophone Canadian academic concerned with two white middle-class approaches to writing in Canada, writing in languages and cultures that exist side by side within one political entity at the same historical moment. She expects feminist interaction on more than just an academic level, and wants it moved out of academia and popularized. Her critique is local, and motivated in part by an irritation with the 'consensual' aspects of certain feminist discourses in Canada which threaten to disable discussion (private correpondence). Spivak, on the other hand, is concerned with languages and cultures, whose relationship is marked by glaring economic inequalities and a history of colonization. In such a context, she sees translation that popularizes women's work by producing accessible texts as another form of imperialism, or worse as a way to salve the consciences of the more privileged Western feminists, while allowing them to further their careers. One wonders whether Spivak's own conscience at her privileged diasporic position is also salved by this critique of mainstream anglophone translation. Arrojo, on the other hand, objects to the confrontational approach adopted by some Anglo-American feminists and justified with reference to their readings of post-structuralist theories. It is debatable whether the contradictions and 'hypocrisy' Arrojo dwells on are due to *mis*-readings, as she claims and which she seeks to correct, or whether these are simply *other* 'strategic' readings. (Spivak has in the past advocated women's strategic use of what they find useful in the brew of post-structuralist theories).

To conclude this dis-unity section: the diversification of feminist discourses on the subject of translation is a noticeable recent development, visible not only in these critical writings but also in numerous papers and publications, which will hopefully lead to further dis-unity. One rather unfortunate unifying aspect does seem to exist in all the diversity. however: feminist work is largely produced by anglophones or in response to translations into English. This is as much the case for recent comparative studies on new Sappho and Louise Lab6 translations (Batchelor 1995; Prins 1996) as it is for theories of lesbian translation (Parker 1993; Marlatt 1989) or feminist rewritings of the Bible (Haugerud 1977; *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* 1983).[2] Similarly, recent work on women translators of the Renaissance and the nineteenth century which scrutinizes their writing strategies and 'positionality' is in English and focused on English materials (Robinson 1995; Krontiris 1992; Zwarg 1990). The same applies to a text that examines 'marginal' Irish women's writing in translation (O'Connell 1995), an article that presents the multiplicity of the Pandora figure as a feminist response to the search for linguistic Babelian unity (Littau 1995) and my own work on translations of experimental feminist writing (von Flotow 1991; 1995; 1997). This predominance of anglophone work in feminist approaches to translation studies brings me to the three factors delineated earlier that affect feminist research, making it possible and highly productive on the one hand, and dis-unifying it on the other.

Factors motivating 'responsible and desirable' disunity

Contemporary feminist scholarship in English purposely stresses the relative nature of its approach. A recent introductory statement by Nicole Jouve Ward (1991:vii) is not untypical:

> No one who writes today can or should forget their race and their gender. The 'I' who has written this **book** is white: privileged, yes; middle class, yes; and everything it has to say is limited and coloured by unconscious western European assumptions.

Ward's 'autobiographical' approach to criticism is carried through large sections of her work, demonstrating the extent to which a critic's subjectivity and position as well as the contingent nature of her particular historical context constitute her perceptions and her approach. Like Ward, writers such as Spivak, Parker, and de Lotbinière-Harwood are aware of the relative nature of their insights, and of the relative value of these, coming **as** they do from specific individuals at specific historical moments. For translation studies, such applications of 'identity politics', 'positionality' and the references to 'historical context' are important instruments with which to get at and explore differences lodged in cultural knowledge and conditioning as well as in the various institutional factors that hamper or enhance women's participation in academic and translation **work.** They also play some role in the dis-unity of feminist work in translation studies and in the reasons for its largely anglophone bias. In the balance of this article I will discuss these terms, and give examples of their effect in the field.

'Identity politics' acknowledges the academic's personal interests and

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[2] Some work is being done in German and Dutch: **cf.** an unpublished paper by Dr. H. Wegener, 'Frauengerechte Sprache in der Bibel in Blick auf die Revision der Guten Nachricht' cited in Ellingworth (1992) and **A.** de Vriess 'Sexism in Modern Bible Translation' (paper given at EST Congress, Prague, 1995).

needs, and as Alcoff explains, is based on

> the initial premise that all persons, including the theorist, have a fleshy, material identity that will influence and pass judgement on all political claims ... [It] ... introduces identity as a factor in any political analysis (1988/1994: 116).

In feminist approaches to translation studies, identity politics thus incorporates the academic's identity as a specific individual, with certain consciously identifiable cultural/political characteristics that will determine her or his insights, opinions and prejudices. Texts by Gayatri Spivak (1988; 1992) are marked by such identifications: she writes in the first person singular – there is no assumed consensual 'we' –; she describes how her thinking has developed from conversations, from her own translations of Bengali and French material, from her experience of Western feminisms and 'Indian' women's issues, as well as from the experience of the Indian caste system and the American academic environment. All these factors affect how she translates, and how she thinks about translation, and although her political stance is not always clearly delineated, it is placed into context. Writing on translation by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (1995) takes a very similar approach.

> 'Positionality', according to Alcoff, further relativizes the situation by making identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on (ibid: 116).

This concept not only allows researchers/academics to acknowledge and account for constantly shifting personal and intellectual settings and the effects of such shifts on scholarly 'knowledge' and analyses, but it can also be used as a fluid location from which to construct meaning, a perspective from which values are interpreted and constructed – differently at different times. Examples of how this has affected translation studies can be found in the burgeoning feminist work during the 1980s, as women translators and academics began to apply to translation what they were learning and experiencing as a result of the women's movement and feminist enquiry in the universities. Texts by Suzanne Levine, Carol Maier and Marlene Wildemann have clearly developed out of the changing focus that comes with a change in positionality. At least in the anglophone countries of North America and Europe, networks, economic conditions and cultural institutions have been such that values could be reinterpreted and newly constructed under feminist 'pressure'. The 'positionality' factor may also aid in understanding the apparent dearth of feminist

scholarship in translation studies outside the English-speaking community; (I am aware that the term 'dearth' implies a value judgement that stems from my own positionality). An interesting question in this regard might focus on the institutional and economic factors that are involved when hundreds of works of both mainstream and experimental feminist writing are translated from English into various European languages, yet virtually no theoretical or analytical work has been stimulated by this massive influx of translations.

The third factor – 'the historical dimension' of scholarly discourse – is used by Alcoff to articulate a concept of gendered subjectivity "without pinning it down one way or the other for all time" (ibid:114), construing it instead "in relation to concrete habits, practices and discourses, while at the same time recognizing the fluidity of these" (ibid:115). For Alcoff the 'historical dimension' is the factor that makes gendered subjectivity change with the times and with the political and institutional constellations that determine concrete options, real possibilities, or real obstacles. It is a powerful factor in both identity politics and positionality.

This factor has been seen at work in Gillam's critique of Godard, and in Godard's response, as well as in Spivak's post-colonial criticisms of mainstream translation. It is also at work in recent material on metaphors of translation. In one of the first books to suggest that translation is a form of 'manipulation', Theo Hermans (1985) discusses the changing metaphors used to describe translation in the Renaissance. On two occasions Hermans refers to the Earl of Roscommon's *Essay on Translated Verse,* and the much-cited admonition that the translator

> ... chuse an Author as you chuse a Friend:
> United by this Sympathetick Bond,
> You grow familiar, intimate and fond

For Hermans, this advice by Roscommon is a sign of the Renaissance translator's developing sense of a personal relationship and affinity with the author which leads to a new approach to translation. Only three years later an essay by American scholar Lori Chamberlain (1988/1992) uses the same passage by the Earl of Roscommon for a rather different purpose. Chamberlain's focus is feminist, a 'positionality' that may be due to her location within 1980s North American academia, and she 'sees' that Roscommon's exhortation to the translator stems from patriarchal ideology. For her, the language used by Roscommon's author/translator "echoes that of conduct books and reflects attitudes about the proper differences in educating males and females" (ibid:59); and the 'Sympathetick Bond' between author and translator is a specific form of *male* bonding in the "struggles for the right of paternity" (ibid:58). Doubtless, Chamberlain's feminist slant on the Earl of Roscommon is as much an effect of

the 'historical dimension' of scholarship as is Hermans' failure to address feminist issues in 1985.

In brief conclusion, it would seem that feminist work in translation continues to expand and develop in the 1990s, fuelled on the one hand by institutionally sanctioned interests in gender difference in some parts of the world, and on the other by conflicts between scholars that may stem from cultural, ethnic, ideological and institutional affiliations. The complexities and dis-unities resulting from the interplay of these factors are more productive, however, than consensus on the sometimes sensitive issues they address.

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