

TRANSLATION THEORIES EXPLAINED

# Translation and Gender

Translating  
in the  
'Era of Feminism'



Luise von Flotow

ROUTLEDGE

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## Translation Theories Explained

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*Translation Theories Explained* is a series designed to respond to the profound plurality of contemporary translation studies. There are many problems to be solved, many possible approaches that can be drawn from neighbouring disciplines, and several strong language-bound traditions plagued by the paradoxical fact that some of the key theoretical texts have yet to be translated.

Recognizing this plurality as both a strength and a potential shortcoming, the series provides a format where different approaches can be compared, their virtues assessed, and mutual blind spots overcome. There will also be scope for introductions to specific areas of translation practice. Students and scholars may thus gain comprehensive awareness of the work being done beyond local or endemic frames.

Most volumes in the series place a general approach within its historical context, giving examples to illustrate the main ideas, summarizing the most significant debates and opening perspectives for future work. The authors have been selected not only because of their command of a particular approach but also in view of their openness to alternatives and their willingness to discuss criticisms. In every respect the emphasis is on explaining the essential points as clearly and as concisely as possible, using numerous examples and providing glossaries of the main technical terms.

The series should prove particularly useful to students dealing with translation theories for the first time, to teachers seeking to stimulate critical reflection, and to scholars looking for a succinct overview of the field's present and future.

Anthony Pym  
Series Editor

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# **Translation and Gender**

*Translating in the 'Era of Feminism'*

Luise von Flotow

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## Preface

This work on gender and translation has developed out of my interests in feminist explorations of gender as a cultural construct and in translation as cultural transfer. Over the past thirty years, and as a result of the women's movement, gender issues have become entangled with issues of language. Over the same period, translation studies has developed as a part of the more general turn toward cultural studies. The complexities of translational gender relations and the resulting critical work are the subject of this book.

Gender studies and translation studies are both interdisciplinary academic fields. When they are brought into relationship with one another, a number of issues intersect: cultural gender differences, the revelation and formulation of these differences in language, their transfer by means of translation into other cultural spaces where different gender conditions obtain. Questions arise about the importance of gender politics in institutions, and the gender affiliations of the translator and the critic become an issue. Language is, of course, highly pertinent to both areas of investigation; discussions of 'patriarchal language' have played an important role in feminist research on gender, and language transfer is the basic element under discussion in translation studies. Given the political weight that both feminist thinkers and the 'political correctness' reaction have assigned to language, it is clear that gender must become an issue in translation.

It is important to note that although gender studies and translation studies may be contemporaneous fields of scholarship, their development has not been parallel. Translation studies has seen rapid development in Europe over the past decade, a development doubtless fostered by a political and economic climate encouraging cultural and economic exchange between different language groups. This has also been the case in Canada, where official bilingualism has been an important catalyst triggering translation as well as academic work on translation. In the USA, translation studies still plays a somewhat minor role, though the visibility of the field has recently increased dramatically through the efforts of a number of active individuals. Gender studies has developed differently, achieving the greatest influence in North America; the 'era of feminism' that began in the late 1960s and affected academic and public life as well as 'high' and popular culture has been instrumental in shaping the historical and scholarly context of its generation. Feminist work has entered and had an impact upon almost every academic discipline. In many parts of Europe, on the other hand, there has been less academic interest in gender studies. While much academic work on gender is imported from North America (and translated), gender studies, women's

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studies programmes or the like – which might encourage research into specifically European situations – are rare.

My purpose is to bring these two disciplines together, making disparate information available to students of translation on both sides of the Atlantic. By describing some of the links and inter-connections between gender issues and translation studies, I hope to inform, stimulate discussion and encourage further research into the intersections of these two fields. This objective reflects a feminist activist agenda on my part, as I demonstrate to what extent gender awareness affects international discussion, research and communication. But it also reflects an academic interest in cultural studies – in the differences between cultures and the individuals within them – and the way translation both promotes and hampers understanding and interaction.

In writing this book, I have assembled diverse publications gleaned from primarily North American sources. I have also used a number of unpublished materials, most of which are of European origin. These materials were produced for the 1995 conference of the European Society for Translation Studies held in Prague, at which I organized and chaired a session on gender and translation. Since they will not be appearing in the conference proceedings, I have considered it important to cite them extensively.

My perspective has, of course, been defined by my own experience and my limitations: a North American bilingual, bicultural (immigrant) background, academic work in French, German and Québec literatures during the ‘era of feminism’, and literary translation. There is doubtless much material I have not been able to refer to, for instance work produced in Scandinavian countries. Still, the amount of contemporary material I did have access to has sufficed to provide an overview. The book is divided into seven chapters, starting with a historical introduction that summarizes the way the women’s movement has problematized language.

In chapter 2, I examine the influences that feminist thought and writing have had on contemporary translation practice. I look at a number of ‘technical’ questions such as translating ‘the body’ and translating feminist wordplay or cultural references. The question of translators as censors of politically questionable material is also raised here, since translators in an ‘era of feminism’ have developed forms of resistance to texts they consider dubious. This chapter is also concerned with the translation of ‘lost’ women writers and the ‘readability’ of these authors since there exists no tradition of reading them.

Theoretical developments are the subject of chapter 3, since the practical issues discussed in chapter 2 have had an effect on more abstract concerns in translation. Gender awareness coupled with translation has brought about

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a revision of the normally 'invisible' role a translator plays. Taking their cue from the feminist writers they translate, translators have begun asserting their identity and justifying the subjective aspects of their work. A concomitant revision of the discourse on translational relations has led theorists to rethink metaphors such as *les belles infidèles*, which are used to describe translation in terms of gender hierarchies, and to rewrite such fundamental 'translation myths' as that of Pandora's box.

Chapter 4 presents critical work on translation. Not unlike the feminist practice of rereading, revising and supplementing canonical texts, this critical work rereads and reconsiders translations – of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, of Louise Labé's sonnets, of Sappho's lyric poetry. It also looks at the efforts of translators who undertake retranslations of such 'key texts' as the Bible. In discussing the reasons for re-translations and criticism – for example, glaring mistranslations or deletions – such work points to the ideological aspects of language transfer. A related element in this chapter is the recovery of 'lost' women translators and the re-evaluation of their work from the perspective of the gender-conscious 1990s.

In chapter 5 I discuss some of the criticisms addressed to work that combines gender issues with translation studies. Given the clearly partisan approach of feminist work, criticisms 'from outside feminisms' are to be expected. It is interesting that they often take the form of silence, a condition this book seeks to counteract. Criticisms 'from within feminisms' are more productive, raising issues of cultural and political differences *between* women and confronting certain 'radical' positions with pertinent questions. One type of question addresses the problem of translations that remain 'inaccessible', for instance in the case of experimental texts. Does the problem lie in the translation? How translatable is feminist writing from other societies and cultures? How meaningful is it to the translating cultures, and how can it be rendered so, if it is not? Third world writers or less-advantaged women in multi-ethnic societies have also raised questions about the 'exploitation' and misrepresentation of their texts in the name of 'first world feminisms'. What exactly is the role of the translator in making the voices of third world women heard in the West? How should she translate? For whom is she translating? Is she merely contributing to these women's exploitation, or is her work a meaningful contribution to international feminist goals?

None of these questions have been fully explored or answered. This book raises them for a readership that may be interested in further pursuing the intersections of gender and translation, a vast area of research and development in the comparatist, intercultural and supranational approaches that translation studies fosters.

Finally, chapters 6 and 7 offer some remarks on future perspectives and

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a concluding statement, respectively.

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