

# Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Translation and Gender Studies



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in Translation and Gender Studies

Edited by

Eleonora Federici and Vanessa Leonardi

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work is to share information on two very interesting, yet debatable issues within the field of Translation Studies, namely gender and translation in an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Given the important relationship between translation and gender since the beginning of the theoretical debate in Feminist Translation Studies, the aim of this edited volume is to determine and analyse how this relationship has been approached in different countries, not only in Europe but also worldwide. Feminist translation is undoubtedly a very interesting and widespread phenomenon, which includes and combines questions of language, culture, gender, identity and sexual equality. Feminist Translation Studies have established themselves as a solid field of research and practice in many countries and their purpose is to reverse the subordinate role of both women and translators in society by challenging and fighting against what is perceived as patriarchal language. Although Feminist Translation Studies were born in Québec in the 1980s, as a direct consequence of women writers' experimental writing wishing to re-inscribe femininity in language and to deconstruct the dominant patriarchal discourse through conscious manipulation of language, Canada and Spain seem to be two of the most important countries where the problems inherent to translation and the category of gender have been most fruitfully discussed by eminent scholars such as Barbara Godard, Sherry Simon, Luise von Flotow and José Santaemilia, among others. These theorists have given prominence to the translator, whether woman or man, to their choices and to the strategies outlined in order to unveil the gender-related aspects in translation. In Italy, however, the situation is different and a gap seems to exist between theory and practice. Aware of these differences in our country, it was our intention to explore what is the current situation of feminist translation practices also in other countries, to investigate what are the positions of translators who have dealt with gender issues and to determine whether there are translators who deliberately and openly proclaim themselves as feminist translators.

Many are still the issues that can be taken into account focusing on translation and gender and this volume intends to be part of a wider discussion on Translation Studies. The discussion on translation and correlated wider issues is very important in this moment of transformation and transition in TS. The major scholars in TS are underlining the necessity to take into account the ethics of translation and the competence of translators in an era of globalisation and massive movements of people around the world. Today, translation means intercultural exchange with a profound awareness of cultural difference and linguistic boundaries. Translation requires skills that go beyond the linguistic aspect because we know, as also acknowledged by feminist scholars, that it determines national and social identities. Translation is a discursive practice that forms and transforms gender identities and helps reconsider the notion of sexual difference. The concept of self-translation, the use of the term translation as a metaphor for writing and the widening of theoretical perspectives outside the Western world also make us reconsider the debate on gender and translation. Translation theory and practice need an interdisciplinary approach involving various areas of research: sociolinguistics, pragmatics, literary studies, media studies, semiotics and cultural studies among others.

This work is a collection of papers, some of which presented at an international conference held at the University of Calabria in September 2011 and are aimed at addressing the issue of the gap between theory and practice through several different approaches including topics such as: feminist translation and translators through time, women translators as feminist translators, diachronical perspectives of the same text in different translations by men and/or women, the existence of different practices of translation (with a focus on gender), the translation of gender related topics, the translation of grammatical gender and the translation in different genres and gender related issues. After a theoretical insight, the essays follow a diachronical perspective from early modern translators, Aphra Behn, translations of Virginia Woolf's works, translations of contemporary British, Africa-American, Aboriginal and New Zealand authors and audiovisual translation. The essays follow some of the main areas of research in translation and gender: theoretical approaches, historical studies, the revision of the canon, the recovering of translators' works, the analysis of linguistic markers of gender, the representation of femininity/masculinity. The contributors show how grammatical, semantic and social gender are entangled in the creation of stereotypes and how gender bias can be retraced in literary genres but also visual texts such as movies.



The volume intends to outline how scholars in various contexts have approached the question of gender and translation, the use/misuse of the term feminist translation, the problematic issue of bridging the gap between theory and practice and to open a new discussion on this field of research, which we believe is still a very interesting one to exploit.

Eleonora Federici

Vanessa Leonardi

## CHAPTER ONE

# GENDER AND TRANSLATION: A NEW EUROPEAN TRADITION?

JOSÉ SANTAEMILIA

### **Gender and Translation: An Overview**

#### **A Question of Names**

*Gender and translation* is a very active, increasingly diverse field. It is expanding its theoretical tenets as well as the range of its applications into a diversity of fields and disciplines, and prompting a significant redefinition of the concepts and areas involved. If we compare seminal papers like Maier (1995) or Chamberlain (1988) with more recent publications in Palusci (2010, 2011), Flotow (2011), Federici (2011) or Santaemilia & Flotow (2011), we become aware of a change in perspective or, rather, of a widening of perspectives. A few questions quickly spring to mind: Are we dealing today with the same issues as three or four decades ago? Does the *gender and translation* field have the same academic (or popular) presence as four decades ago? And the same geographical boundaries?

We are still in an ambiguous territory, difficult to define or delimit, yet at the same time full of possibilities and dangers too. Both gender and translation have proved to be flexible, courageous fields going far beyond their disciplinary boundaries and searching hard for new horizons and affinities. Although it may seem that *gender and translation* is an apt label for the field, the reality turns out to be more complex and the name of the discipline is still an unresolved question. There is not a single concept –to the exclusion of all others– that is accepted by all researchers. This can be an index of – among other things – academic instability or lack of agreement, and even of a growing field that has not found its definite shape or direction. Yet, at the same time, we can affirm that it has acquired some sort of institutionalisation, as conferences, research projects or edited

volumes proliferate. Without a doubt, the field is growing, acquiring new overtones and developing specific strands. Little by little it is becoming recognisable – in its origins, in its main objectives, in its truly cross-disciplinary character, in its recognition of woman's central role, in its commitment to justice and sexual equality, and even in its language and rhetoric, in its idiom. A cursory look at the different labels used to name the field reveals a variety of interests and the growing popularity of a discipline which, though sometimes pulling in different directions, seems to offer ways towards the elimination of subordination and prejudices. A tentative 'word cloud' elaborated statistically from a small number of published papers will graphically show us the relative importance of a series of phrases that are becoming increasingly lexicalized:

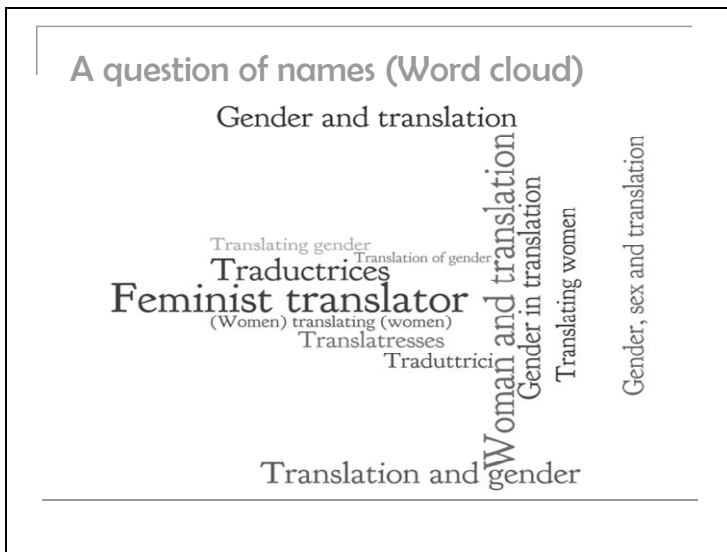


Fig. 1. The 'gender and translation' field (word cloud)

### Main theoretical concepts

Though incomplete, Fig. 1 is interesting in that it shows the important lexical density of certain catch phrases. A number of conclusions can be put in place. Firstly, the growing presence of women in translation studies, to the point that some phrases ('Woman and translation', 'Translating women') sometimes stand for the whole area of study. Secondly, the

importance of feminism as an essential driving force (e.g. ‘Feminist translator’) which brings about a (re)feminisation of the translation profession (‘Traductrices’, ‘Traduttrici’ or ‘Translatress’). Thirdly, the unstable relationship between ‘gender’ and ‘translation’, with the existence of several phrases that have some currency (‘Gender and translation’ ‘Translation and gender’, ‘Gender in translation’, ‘Translating gender’, ‘Translation of gender’), perhaps indicative that the grammatical and/or conceptual relationships between both are far from clear-cut. And fourthly, the appearance of ‘sex’ as complementary to ‘gender’ as part of the contemporary feminist theorizing of identities. I know that this analysis is rather limited, as it is based on a small number of papers in the field, but I believe that in a rapidly expanding field, it would be worth analyzing what we mean when we say i.e. *gender and translation*, as well as what future developments are likely to be. A more rigorous analysis would be more than welcome.

A more inclusive list of widely used terms can help us reveal the origin of a series of terms of art which are progressively being identified as the (common) idiom of gender-and-translation publications. As it is recognized today, the field – though perhaps lying dormant for centuries – was initiated in Quebec, in Canada, more than three decades ago, with a group of feminist, experimental writers (Louise Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Denise Boucher, and many others) who attempted to subvert the dominant patriarchal language, and with a group of feminist translators (Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, Barbara Godard, Luise von Flotow and others) who worked closely with the authors they translated. This phenomenon – which we now know as *feminist translation* – was a fortunate result of a crossroads which brought together the Canadian *écriture au féminin*, the second wave of feminism (Anglo-Saxon feminism coupled with French feminism which centred on *écriture féminine*), the cultural or ideological turn in translation studies, post-structuralism and deconstruction. These origins have left traces in the main theoretical concepts dealt with in most gender and translation publications, making the field a complex interdisciplinary bringing together a number of heterogeneous traditions and terms of art, thus giving the impression – sometimes – of a variegated and inarticulate language.

Second-wave feminism is, then, one of the main sources of inspiration for gender and translation scholars, and this is clearly felt in terms like *écriture féminine*, *difference*, *identity* or *woman* (as a singular and unified concept). Feminist translation, in the same vein, added absolute terms like *womanhandling*, *transformance*, *hijacking* or *manipulation*. Gender studies has been contributing many concepts and dichotomies, among

which we can mention *domination*, *sex/gender*, *gender/sexual identities*, *nature/culture*, among others. Some of these terms, however, may seem outdated today, as they do not reflect the plurality of identities and discourses of our age. The theory of *performativity* (Butler 1990, 1993) gradually gains more currency in understanding the notions of gender and sex, which are basically conceptualized in terms of performance or display. Feminism and gender studies themselves have to go periodically through a process of redefinition and adaptation to new social, cultural and ideological realities. A revision of their critical idiom is needed in order to open up meanings and identities to a plurality of configurations and influences.

Deconstruction and post-structuralism have also been influential in the gender/ translation interdiscipline. From a deconstructionist point of view, translation can be used to challenge the limits of language, writing, reading or identity. Poststructuralism has directed attention “away from the authority of the author towards the role of the reader, as well as undermined the notion of the “original” as a stable, objectively transferable entity”.<sup>1</sup> Both paradigms have proved highly influential in the language of gender and translation researchers, with the incorporation of terms such as *original/originality*, *(re)writing*, *author/authority* and many others which have been essential in contemporary theories of translation that reclaim the *visibility* of translators (and translatresses). Terms like *archaeology* or *genealogy* are derived from the poststructuralist work of Michel Foucault, who views subjectivity and identity as dynamic, discursive and historical constructions.

All these terms – and others like *resisting reader* or *positioning*, which come from feminist-oriented stylistics – are instrumental to the main objectives of gender and translation studies, which can be summarized like this:<sup>2</sup>

1. Rereading the traditional, misogynist metaphors of translation
2. An ideological transformation of texts
3. Claiming a new authority over source text and translation
4. Translation as ‘feminine’/‘female’ solidarity and genealogy

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<sup>1</sup> Wallmach, “Feminist Translation Strategies: Different or Derived?”, 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> See Santaemilia, “Feminists Translating: On Women, Theory and Practice”, 2011a.

## A Wealth of Metaphors

Translation is an ideal breeding ground for a multiplicity of metaphors – in fact, translators have been compared to travellers, discoverers of intertextual maps, nomads by obligation, creative artists, puzzle solvers, musical arrangers, honest brokers, magicians of illusions, and many others.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the connection between translation and women has generated a wealth of metaphors in the past, and an intense re-reading in the present and – presumably – in the future. What Chamberlain (1988) calls ‘gender metaphors’ in translation is a sort of ‘metaphorical trap’ which subverts all gender-related or sex-related identities, and condemns women to sexual/textual subordination and derogation. Such a popular paradigm as *les belles infidèles* reflects “widely held beliefs and stereotypes about fidelity, both in marriage and in translation, and long centuries of double standards during which only women and translators, not men and “original” texts, could be guilty of the crime of infidelity”,<sup>4</sup> thus delineating the metaphorical boundaries set by tradition on women in many areas of life and creativity. In recent years, however, feminist-oriented scholars working with translation have been:

subverting and deconstructing some old metaphors, but also inserting a web of connections with the act of translation. Translation is a way of writing/reading/interpreting women’s voices. In their theoretical discussions, feminist scholars have created new metaphors for translation and translators: translation has become a practice of translation/performance, ‘transformance’, a performative act, a daring act which requires courage and faith, ‘a living process, ever beginning anew’, an act of skilled ‘manipulation’, an assertive practice. Feminist translators have visualized metaphors of territory, translators working in the ‘contact-zone’, translations as political acts, and translations as archaeological works.<sup>5</sup>

While in the past two millennia the metaphors that defined women and femininity were deeply sexist (see Chamberlain 1988), in the last two decades the association between gender and translation studies is generating new metaphors that see women as a positive force: translation as a feminist practice that lies at the margins, at the border (Godoyol 2000); Pandora as a multiplicity of meanings (Littau 2000, von Flotow 2007); translation as a ‘metamorphosis’ that, in the form of a female matrix, allows difference, creativity and interdependence (Shread 2008, von Flotow 2008). Thus translation can help either to consolidate an identity or to demolish it, either to reinforce a stereotype or to disclose its artificial

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<sup>3</sup> See Federici “The Visibility of the Woman Translator”, 2011a.

<sup>4</sup> Garayta, “(M)othering the Text or The Feminist Critique of Translation”, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Federici, *Translating Gender*, 17.

and contingent nature. Today translation is, undoubtedly, emphasizing the agency of women in every text or creative act.

## **A Gender and Translation ‘Map’**

The gender and translation field shows a split between, on the one hand, a well-defined theory or *discourse*, and on the other hand, a more or less heterogeneous practice, which is mainly based on the use of certain paratexts (book covers, prefaces and introductions, footnotes, and others).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of this gap – which seems only obvious, with theory usually being more articulate and homogeneous than practice –, the gender/translation interdiscipline, with its ups and downs, its advances and its contradictions, has been generating a new, dynamic map over the last few years. Although the connection between gender (or woman) and translation has existed since the beginning of time, it was not made explicit until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this regard, a key role was played by Canadian women authors and translators, who reclaimed a more central role in the culture of both translation and women, both underrated throughout the centuries. Lori Chamberlain (1988) denounced the traditional sexualization of translation *and* women, and challenged the “patriarchal notions of translation”<sup>7</sup> that had been put forward until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other Canadian translators – such as Barbara Godard, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood or Luise von Flotow, to cite just a few – also became researchers of their own overtly feminist project, and explained and justified the right to intervene in the texts they were translating. They coined a new tradition (‘feminist translation’), with a strong commitment to both writing *and* translating, that vindicated translation as (re)creation, manipulation, and (woman)handling. After significant books by de Lotbinière-Harwood (1991) or Krontiris (1992), this Canadian focus (impulse) became more than apparent when two key publications appeared in the late 90s: *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (1996), by Sherry Simon; and *Translation and Gender: Translating in the Era of Feminism* (1997), by Luise von Flotow. In a way, both texts inaugurated the *gender and translation* discipline, as they provided both a theory and a practice of identity issues in translation, from a feminist perspective and focusing particularly on women translators.

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<sup>6</sup> See Santaemilia, “Virginia Woolf’s *Un cuarto propio*: Feminist Translation, from Practice to Theory”, 2011b.

<sup>7</sup> Arroyo, “Fidelity and the Gendered Translation”, 153.

The contribution of Canadian authors and translators – particularly from Québec – to the emergence of a *new* field of practice and research has been fundamental. Since the late 90s, though, this presence seems to have vanished or lost its momentum. With the new (21<sup>st</sup>) century, the focus has shifted to Europe, where a number of initiatives have taken up and extended the initial research. After review articles by Nikolaidou & López Villalba (1997) or reconceptualizations of the ethical limits of feminist translation by Vidal (1998), I would like to underline the appearance of *Espais de frontera: Gènere i traducció* (2000), by Pilar Godayol, who adopted a post-structuralist approach to translation and generated new metaphors that considers woman and femininity as positive and regenerative forces. The 2010s saw a series of conferences and seminars that gave rise to publications by Grbic & Wolf (2002), Santaemilia (2003, 2005), Palusci (2010, 2011) or Federici (2011). Particularly relevant is the case of Catalan, a national language without its own state, with leading research by Pilar Godayol and colleagues, and where a complete genealogy of women translators has been unearthed over the last decade. Over the last three or four years, it is in Italy where we find a renovated impulse that is interrogating writing and translating at a European level. Two very recent projects (Flotow 2011, and Santaemilia and Flotow 2011) originated in a proposal I made to the new *MONTI* periodical – a joint initiative of the universities of Alicante, Valencia and Castellón – and that has fuelled a rediscovery of a new and rapidly expanding (European) gender-and-translation geography that leads us to hitherto unknown territories such as Galicia, Turkey or Russia, and even China (Santaemilia and Flotow 2011). Though in many places of the world, both women and translation studies are still subjected to prejudices and taboos, it is also true that a clearer, less fragmentary map (particularly, a European map) of the field is emerging.

## **A New European Tradition?**

I will devote now a few lines to elucidate (or rather to pose) the question of whether there is or isn't a *new European tradition* in gender and translation studies. Lack of time and perhaps perspective prevents a more definite answer.

### **Tradition?**

*Gender and translation* has existed ever since translation was born – it is a clear example of a discipline *avant la lettre*, mainly because of the special



and privileged connection of males to translation and the absence of women. Though translation has historically been considered a ‘feminine’ profession, women have accessed it in a position of subordination; or, as Chamberlain put it, “in some historical periods women were allowed to translate precisely because it was defined as a secondary activity”.<sup>8</sup> Gender and translation, then, as a field, bears witness to a long, unrecognized tradition of women (as translators, and also as writers) neglected, ignored or censored.

### European?

As mentioned earlier, the 2010s have represented a definite focus on Europe as a rich and heterogeneous area of research for a new generation of young women and men who believe in equality and are ready to approach the discipline with clear and unprejudiced eyes. A number of European universities (Graz, Valencia, Vic, Napoli, Calabria, Málaga) have been home to meetings and seminars that are giving visibility to women, men and translation. We may not be able to speak of a *European* tradition, but at least we can speak of a renovated impulse – one which is shifting from an exclusively feminist concern to a wider, less political interest perhaps, but which involves a more widespread interrogation of the categories of *woman*, *man*, *gender* and *translation*. This (new) European thrust is offering now a dynamic panorama, with a synthesis of literary and non-literary traditions, and with a variety of critical paradigms that have progressively empowered women and women’s work (i.e. gender studies, translation studies, deconstruction, postcolonial studies, and so on).

### New, Really?

What is new, then? The fact that there are women translating? Or women translated? Neither. Women have been translators and translated for a long time. Whereas Chamberlain’s 1988 seminal paper hinges on a basic opposition between writing (“original and masculine”)<sup>9</sup> and translating (“derivative and feminine”), and derives a political interpretation from it, gender and translation studies, in contrast, makes explicit the bond – or the continuity – between writing and translating. It is not clear or obvious where translation stops and original writing begins; the only sure thing is

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<sup>8</sup> Chamberlain, “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation”, 470.

<sup>9</sup> Chamberlain, “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation”, 454.

that both belong to a common category ('texts') whose main existential trait is that they depend on previous texts and are the origin of unending future texts.

As for women, they were virtually non-existent *in translation* until very recently, with just a few having entered the canon; what is *new* nowadays is the unprecedented scale in which women are translating and being translated, and, what is more, the strong identification between women translated and women translators (Santaemilia 2011a).

## Finale

The association of gender and translation, and the consolidation into an academic discipline, has proved useful in many ways. Firstly, women have become more visible, and so have the dialectics between men and women. Secondly, women have been progressively reclaiming an authorial space, be it as writers or translators, or both. Thirdly, this association has brought about a positive, full-scale re-reading of the traditional misogynistic metaphors about translation. Fourthly, it has generated a wealth of positive metaphors focusing on women's bodies or skills. Gender and translation studies has definitely broken away from the traditional dichotomies that have stalled Western life and thought for centuries. As a result of this, women gain a new authority – i.e. on the one hand, they acquire the status of *authors*, (co)creators of meaning, and on the other hand, they can show their *authority*, that is, their social and cultural power. One immediate consequence of this visibility process is the discovery of a genealogy of women (whether translators or not) who, for at least three or four centuries, have used translation to claim varying degrees of presence in social, literary, cultural or political scenarios.

This paper also claims that Europe is gaining ground in the field of gender and translation, as exemplified in – *inter alia* – Godayol (2000, 2011), Santaemilia (2003, 2005), Castro (2009), Palusci (2010, 2011), Santaemilia & Flotow (2011), or Federici (2011). That does not mean denying the initial impetus from Canadian women writers and translators ('feminist translation') or the impressive work that has been carried out by researchers and/or practitioners such as Luise von Flotow, Barbara Godard or Sherry Simon. This *new* European thrust is offering enthusiasm, seriousness and a growing richness of perspectives. We should look attentively at what the future has in store for us.

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# CHAPTER TWO

## TRANSLATING DOLLS

### ORIANA PALUSCI

#### **Gender and Translation: an Introduction**

The introductory section of this paper briefly deals with gender and grammar, in terms of Suzanne Romaine's *Communicating Gender*,<sup>1</sup> an indispensable book on the gender and linguistics debate. Considering both a definition of gender as a communicative process and the awareness of the grammar of gender, will be functional to the application of these concepts in translation. The further step will be to relate theory and practice through some examples taken from contemporary English and American literary texts.

#### **Gender: a Communicative Process**

In the chapter "Doing Gender", Suzanne Romaine gives the following definition of gender:

Gender is [...] an inherently communicative process. Not only do we communicate gender [...], but we also "do it" with our words. Because we construct and enact gender largely through discourse, this book is about the crucial role of language in particular and communication more generally in doing gender and displaying ourselves as gendered beings'.<sup>2</sup>

The question of gender is relevant to the issue of communicative competence as Penelope Eckert and Sally Mc-Connell-Ginet also stress:

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<sup>1</sup> Romaine, *Communicating Gender*. On language and gender, see also, among others, Holmes and Meyerhoff, *The Handbook of Language and Gender*.

<sup>2</sup> Romaine, *Communicating Gender*, 2.

People develop their linguistic competence in use, and along with the linguistic system or systems, they learn how to put the system(s) to work in social situations. What they develop, then, is not simply linguistic competence but also a wider *communicative competence*. [...]neither language nor the social world comes ready-made, and neither language nor the social world is static. [...] They are both maintained – and maintained mutually – in day-to-day activity. And they change – mutually – as well.<sup>3</sup>

Given the strong nexus between women's oppression and discourse, language is pivotal to women's positioning in social landscapes:

If women's oppression has deep linguistic roots, then any and all representations, whether of women, men or any other group, *are embedded first in language*, and then in politics, culture, economics, history, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Romaine further introduces two essential elements structuring language in the communication of gender, i.e., the deployment of gender stereotypes, namely “sets of beliefs about the attributes of men or women”,<sup>5</sup> and the function of context, suggesting that “[a]lthough language is central to our constructions of the meaning of gender, much of language is ambiguous and depends on context for its interpretation”.<sup>6</sup>

## Grammar and Gender

Anyone who has studied a European language other than English has had to deal with gender as a grammatical category. Languages such as French, German, Spanish, and many others have two or three so-called “genders”, masculine, feminine, and neuter. These can be understood simply as noun classes. All nouns, however, not just those referring to males and females, must be either masculine or feminine. Gender extends beyond those nouns so that articles, adjectives, or other modifiers that go with them must be marked accordingly. This includes pronouns.<sup>7</sup>

Grammatical gender manifests itself when words related to a noun (determiners, adjectives, pronouns) inflect according to the gender of the

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<sup>3</sup> Eckert and Mc-Connell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 52-53.

<sup>4</sup> Romaine, *Communicating Gender*, 3 (*italics mine*). According to Heiko Motschenbacher, “natural gender is [...] unable to explain all linguistic gendering mechanisms” in English (*Language, Gender and Sexual Identity. Poststructuralist Perspectives*, 63).

<sup>5</sup> Romaine, *Communicating Gender*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

noun they refer to. When we find gender agreement between a noun and other modifiers, we deal with a language that employs gender as a ‘grammatical category’; the circumstances in which this occurs, and the way words are marked for gender vary across languages. Modern English<sup>8</sup> is said to incorporate “natural gender”, relying “more or less straightforwardly on the criteria of humanness and biological sex”,<sup>9</sup> that is, nouns such as man, boy, male animals are in fact biologically male, while woman, girl, female animals are biologically female. We must add that a conspicuous list of nouns are of common gender, that is the same name is used for male and female, such as *friend, person, student, teacher, child, friend*.

On the other hand, objects are neutral, unless they are represented as persons. With a few exceptions, nouns are uninflected for case (except for possession, for instance *girl/girl’s*), adjectives are invariable, while English pronouns are declined. Some pronouns, like *I, you, them*, do not make gender distinctions, third-person personal pronouns and adjectives have a number of forms, named in accordance with their typical grammatical roles in a sentence. In fact, English has three gender-specific pronouns and adjectives in the third person singular, as well as three possessive forms: masculine *he/his/him*, feminine *she/her(s)*, neuter *it/its* and the common gender *one/one’s*.<sup>10</sup> Besides, in English the gender of an adjective or of a pronoun coincides with the gender of its referent (*Kate and John live together in his house. The house is his*; i.e., Kate is not the owner), in place of the grammatical gender of the noun, as it happens, for instance, in Italian (*Kate and John vivono assieme a casa sua*. La casa è di lui; i.e. *sua* is declined in the feminine in accordance with the noun *casa* while the owner is male).

Henceforth while English is a ‘neutral’ language, with no productive gender markers, Italian (also French, German and Spanish) is a language with grammatical gender, which continuously draws the listener’s attention to the issue of gender through agreement on a syntactic level.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, when speaking or writing in English, feminists often use or

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<sup>8</sup> Old English had a fully productive inflectional category.

<sup>9</sup> Romaine, *Communicating Gender*, 73. Greville Corbett employs the term ‘pronominal gender’ in place of ‘natural gender’ for those languages, such as English, where pronouns present the only markers for gender (*Gender*, 5).

<sup>10</sup> Also the reflexive form is gender-specific: himself, herself, itself.

<sup>11</sup> For a comparative analysis of gender across languages see Hellinger and Bußmann, *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*. The editors enucleate four different categories of gender (grammatical, lexical, referential and social).

manipulate linguistic signs to make social meaning, they blur the boundary between semantics and pragmatics in order to stress what they want to say; suffice it to mention the playful word formation with *her* (a *de facto* neologism), such as *herland* or *herstory*.

## Translating Gender

Gender is without doubt a cultural construction, but first of all it is conveyed (marked) through language. Since the 1980s, definitions of the translation process have insisted on the linguistic and cultural passage from one linguistic and cultural context (source text) to another (target text), underlining how a translator manipulates and re-writes a text in order to make it available to another language reading public. This opened the way to the fruitful encounter between feminism and translation, adding a broader perspective on language, sex and power relations. I think that one of the first issues in translating gender (an issue which is not sufficiently considered, according to me, by translators) is the basic question of the implications, both ideological and linguistic, raised by the passage from a natural language (English) to a grammatical system (Italian). Only after solving this issue, the social and cultural gender differences between the two systems can be dealt with. In addition, this practical exercise of comparative gender spotting is a good way of detecting linguistic behavior patterns, offering an insight into the two linguistic systems in relation to gender.

### Practice: Translating the ‘I’ from English into Italian

I would like to apply the aforementioned discussion on gender to the translation of pronouns. I will use samples from feminist literary texts pertaining to different narrative genres in British and American English, comparing them to the respective Italian translations, in order to weave a possible web enveloping theory and practice in the translation of gender. Such a connection is often set aside or underestimated. The examples chosen are willingly provocative, out of norm, in order to un-mask how language can be overcharged with gender stereotypes.

My first quotation is taken from a 1992 British novel in which the author uses a first person narrator, who remains ambiguously impossible to label a ‘she’ or ‘he’. As we know through translation studies, the translator must first read and decode the whole text before actually



translating it. In this case, the use of the “unnamed autodiegetic narrator”<sup>12</sup> jumbles up the reader’s perception of sex roles and of sexual relations. As the writer explains on her website:

All my work is experimental in that it plays with form, refuses a traditional narrative line, and includes the reader as a player. By that I mean that the reader has to work with the book. In the case of *Written on the Body*, the narrator has no name, is assigned no gender, is age unspecified, and highly unreliable. I wanted to see how much information I could leave out - especially the kind of character information that is routine - and still hold a story together.<sup>13</sup>

The writer is Jeanette Winterson; her novel, *Written on the Body*, published in 1992, is a story about love and passion.<sup>14</sup> We should bear in mind that the narrator is given neither name nor gender. Generally, when there is an I – first person narrator — the name and gender are sooner or later revealed by other characters. Here the narrative focus and gaze belong to a genderless I/eye. Obviously, Winterson wants to test gender prejudices and presuppositions in the construction of the self and the other. For instance, when we read “I had a girlfriend once who was addicted to starlit nights” (*WB* 19), we immediately assume the *I* to be male, giving ‘his’ heterosexuality for granted. By eliminating the gendered possessives, the writer easily succeeds in concealing the protagonist’s gender. What then should the grammatically gender-oriented Italian translation be? How can the sex of the *I* remain undeclared?

#### Example # 1

**Poor me.** There’s nothing so sweet as wallowing in it is there? Wallowing is sex for **depressives** (*WB* 26)

**Me infelice!** Non c’è niente di più dolce che crogiolarsi, no? Crogiolarsi è il massimo di eccitazione sessuale per i **depressi**.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Lanser, “Sexing the Narrative: Propriety, Desire, and the Engendering of Narratology”, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Jeanette Winterson, online at:

<http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=13>

<sup>14</sup> Winterson, *Written on the Body*. All references are to this edition, with the page references in the body of the text, abbreviated as *WB*. Emphasis mine. For an introduction to Winterson’s novel, see, among others, Andermahr, *Jeanette Winterson: A Contemporary Critical Guide*.

<sup>15</sup> Winterson, *Scritto sul corpo*, 24. All quotations are from this edition, abbreviated as *SC*. Emphasis mine.

*Poor me* in English is genderless. The Italian version, in order to avoid the disclosure of the gender of the nameless protagonist through the equivalence (poor = povero/povera) easily adopts the ungendered form *infelice* (*unhappy*).<sup>16</sup> In the next sentence, though, the generic masculine form is re-established through the use of the male plural noun *depressi*. Does this imply that the masculine form includes everyone, both males and females, or are only male persons depressed?

#### Example # 2

I considered **her**. I didn't love **her** and I didn't want to love **her**. I didn't desire **her** and I could not imagine desiring **her**. These were all points in **her** favour (WB 26).

Cominciai a pensarci sul serio. Non l'amavo e non volevo amar**la**. Non **la** desideravo e non riuscivo a immaginare di desiderar**la**. Erano tutti punti in **suo** favore (SC 25).

In this passage, the feminine possessive *her* stands out: it is repeated 6 times in 4 short sentences. The emphasis on the female gender of the beloved person is crucial in *Written on the Body*, and it is in contrast with the genderless *I* whom the writer plays with by dwelling on linguistic tricks of veiling/unveiling gender. Even when the source text insists on the use of the female marker, the translator dilutes the tension by opting for the use of the gendered suffix *la*, which is correct in Italian, but not emphatic enough to represent the obsessive repetition of *her*. A possible solution, in order to make *her* central to the I's discourse, would include the seemingly unnatural repetition of the pronoun *lei* (*her*). For instance: "Non amavo *lei* e non volevo amare *lei*".

#### Example # 3

Over the months that followed my mind healed and **I no longer moped** and groaned over lost love and impossible choices. **I had survived shipwreck** and I liked my new island with hot and cold running water and regular visits from the milkman (WB 27).

Nei mesi che seguirono la mia mente guarì. **Non ero più triste**, né mi lamentavo per l'amore perduto o per scelte impossibili. **Ero reduce da un naufragio** e mi piaceva la mia nuova isola con acqua corrente calda e fredda, e visite regolari del lattaio (SC 26).

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<sup>16</sup> The Italian language has adjectives ending in *-e*, which are the same for the masculine and the feminine singular. In the plural, the *-e* changes to *-i*.

In example # 3 the translator recurs to conscious strategies in order to conceal the I's gender by employing once again an ungendered adjective in Italian (*triste* and *reduce*). In both cases, the substitution is clear with the shift to a nominal phrase in order to delete the final gender vowel markers.

Example # 4

I was **rigorous**, hard working and ... and...what was that word beginning with B?

'You're **bored**,' my friend said.

I protested with all the fervour of a **teetotaller** caught glancing at a bottle.

**I was content. I had settled down** (WB 27)

Ero **inflessibile**. Solo lavoro e ... e... qual è quella parola che comincia con la N?

«Noia, ecco di cosa si tratta» disse uno dei miei amici. Protestai con l'ardore di un **astemio** scoperto a fissare una bottiglia. **Provavo un senso di appagamento. Avevo trovato una sistemazione** (SC 26)

The nominal form (*I was rigorous; You're bored*) is gendered in Italian. Once again *rigoroso/rigorosa* (*rigorous*) is left aside in favour of an adjective ending with -e (*inflessibile*), a strategy used all through the translated text. The same strategy would not work, though, for *You're bored*, where *bored* (*annoiato/annoiata*) is gendered, so the translator adopts a reduction and a class shift (from *annoiato* to *noia*) and then recurs to addition (*ecco di cosa si tratta*). Anyhow, the translator is like Sisyphus, who tries hard in his effort, but unreluctantly fails, when, for instance, the Italian translator needlessly introduces a questionable *uno* (one) to translate *my friend*: *uno dei miei amici* (one of my friends) to avoid marking the gender and ends up emphasising the male gender of the protagonist's friend. Instead, a possible way out could have been *mi disse un'anima amica*, which is genderless. The word *teetotaller* is gendered in Italian – *astemio/astemia*. Here, as in example #1 for *depressed*, the masculine generic form is used, consequently inflecting the indeterminate article and the past tense (*un astemio scoperto a fissare*). A possible alternative could have been: *di chi ha rinunciato all'alcol e sta lì a fissare*). In order to avoid the gender marker in translating *I was content*, the translator recurs to a periphrasis (*Provavo un senso di appagamento*), while in the following sentence she recurs to substitution: *I had settled down* (*mi ero sistemato/sistemata*), switches to *Avevo trovato una sistemazione*.

Translating *Written on the Body* is quite a Sisyphean task. Winterson's *I* shares both female/male attitudes. The translation should reflect her experiment on grammar-gender-sex without unduly clarifying the text. Is the *I* male or female? That is not the question. Winterson is saying (hopefully the target text as well) that there are profound mental frames in the construction and in the perception of gendered bodies.

### Practice: Upsetting the Grammar of Gender

My next literary text explores gender as socially constructed in the juxtaposition of two worlds, one before (the present of the novel, preserving the use of *he* and *she*) and one in the far future, after a radical revolution of sex roles and behaviours. In the future utopian universe the traditional pronominal system has been replaced by the epicene (common-gender) neologisms *person* and *per*.<sup>17</sup> Pronouns have been reformed, because in this alternative world individuals are not neatly divided into male and female: sex-role differentiations have been drastically reduced through mechanical brooding, and thanks to the handing over of mothering to both sexes, as men are also able to lactate.

The protagonist from present day New York 'mentally' visits the utopian Mattapoisett, a village in Massachusetts, the outcome of a decentralised, anarchic, cooperative and ecological community in 2137. In a peaceful land devoid of taboos and of laws, based on the principles of responsibility and of consensus, the society is modelled as an extended family without biological links while the biological traits between the two sexes have vanished. Mattapoisett exemplifies a cultural project based on radical social, biological and cultural transformations matched by the creation of a new language. The visitor is Consuelo/Connie, a poor unemployed Chicano woman, the victim of ethnic, class and sexual discriminations. We see her, at the beginning of the plot, locked in a mental hospital. The novel is *Woman on the Edge of Time* by the American writer Marge Piercy, published in 1976.<sup>18</sup>

Piercy's novel is a continuous reflection on language, grammar and gender. The first difficult task for the Italian translator lies in the rendering of the title *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which becomes *Sul filo del tempo*<sup>19</sup> where the 'woman' (*donna*) disappears, leaving the Italian version

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<sup>17</sup> Livia, *Pronoun Envy: Literary Uses of Linguistic Gender*, 159.

<sup>18</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*; all quotations are from this edition, abbreviated as WT.

<sup>19</sup> Piercy, *Sul filo del tempo*. All quotations are from this edition, abbreviated as FT.

without a subject. The Italian translator has added a long “Nota del traduttore” at the beginning of the Italian version of *Woman on the Edge of Time* in which he remarks on the abundance of linguistic inventions in the novel and on the role of invented terms, which he has tried to translate by capturing the lexical origin of the word. Sometimes he has left the most difficult items in the source language, as if they were culture-bound words. However, he regretfully explains that there was one linguistic invention (*per*) that he felt forced to ‘neglect’ because unable to work it out into the Italian language: that is the elimination of all gender connotations in Mattapoisett, since in Italian expressing the subject can be avoided (*egli/ella* or *lui/lei*), and that the possessive (*suo/sua*) does not inflect according to the subject, but to the gender of the object it refers to.

My first example is on the encounter between Connie and Luciente, two inhabitants of the same world far away in time.

#### Example # 5

“I’m here. I’ve been trying to reach you. But you get frightened, Connie”. Luciente grinned. Really **he** was **girlish**. (WT 40)

“Ma io *sono qui*. Sto cercando di raggiungerli. Tu però ti spaventi, Connie”. Luciente sorride. Era **davvero effeminato**. (ST 49).

Connie is convinced, because of her stereotypical ideas on power and gender, that Luciente is a man. It is true that in Italian the pronoun *he* can be omitted, but here it is arguably essential to underline Connie’s belief that Luciente is male. Besides, the Italian translation *Era effeminato* alludes to homosexuality. A solution could be to translate *he* into Italian and make another word choice for *girlish*: *Lui si comportava come una ragazzina*.

#### Example #6

**Her** arm grazed **his**. **He** was real enough, **his** arm muscular through the leather jacket [...] No, **he** didn’t walk in a **swishy manner**. **He** had a surefooted catlike grace. He moved with grace but also with authority (WT 41)

Con un braccio sfiorò il **suo**. Non sembrava affatto un’allucinazione il braccio muscoloso sotto il giubbotto di pelle. [...] No, non aveva un incedere **da checca**. Aveva una camminata sicura, da felino. Si muoveva con grazia ma non senza autorità (FT 49).

Even in the above quotation, Connie's gender stereotypes are at work, showing how prejudiced she is. The Italian translator Buzzi avoids any trace of ambiguity and puts in Connie's mouth the word *checca* (derogative for *homosexual*) in the attempt to substitute *swishy manner*, where *swishy* is the sound of a skirt when someone is walking. Once again, as in #5, the Italian translator is making the protagonist react as if she were homophobic. A gendered translation would be: *Lei sfiorò il braccio di lui. Lui era lì in carne ed ossa, si intravedeva il braccio muscoloso sotto la giacca di pelle. [...] No, non aveva movenze effeminate. Camminava con la grazia di un felino. Si muoveva con grazia e con autorità.*

#### Example # 7

"Now **person** is very old. It's time for **per** to die.[...] **Per** body has weakened since Wednesday" [...] "We have a five-minute limit on speeches. We figure that anything **person** can't say in five minutes, **person** is better off not saying" (WT 150)

"Ora è molto vecchia. E' arrivato il suo momento" [...]. Il suo corpo ha cominciato a indebolirsi da mercoledì" [...] "C'è un limite di cinque minuti per intervento. L'idea è che se **uno** non riesce a esprimere il proprio pensiero in cinque minuti è meglio che non lo esprima affatto" (FT 168-169)

Connie's exploration of Luciente's future coincides with the discovery of a linguistic system that abolishes gender markers, using 'the common gender pronouns to reinforce the egalitarian nature of that society'.<sup>20</sup> I would insist that **person/per** be left in the target text as the expression of common gender, the sign of a linguistic 'monstrum' which attracts attention and makes the reader wonder about its significance. The following could be an alternative translation which does not domesticate or delete the linguistic innovation of the future land, yet highlights the changes in the pronoun system by preserving the neologism which is present in the source text: *Ora **per** è molto vecchia. E' arrivato il momento di **per** di morire" [...]. Il corpo di **per** ha cominciato a indebolirsi da mercoledì." [...] "C'è un limite di cinque minuti per intervento. L'idea è che se **persona** non riesce a esprimere il **per** pensiero in cinque minuti è meglio che **persona** non lo esprima affatto.*

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<sup>20</sup> See Livia, *Pronoun Envy: Literary Uses of Linguistic Gender*, 158.