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It is time to write about "women and translation" again, time to return to and perhaps expand on the "first paradigm" of gender studies as applied to translation, revisiting a series of agents—translators, writers, fictional characters—that "call themselves or are called 'women,'"2 a category that for a few years was set aside as "essentialist," or "monolithic," or unjustifiably homogeneous. Inevitably, in returning here, feminist social and cultural activism is brought back into play.

Almost twenty years have passed since the first work focusing on women translators and women authors in translation started to appear in North America, work that was usually couched in terms of gender and translation and was inspired by the many forms of feminism that had developed over the 1970s and 1980s. It came on slowly at first, with occasional brief articles by women translators, who were encouraged and mobilized by feminist assertiveness and agency in the late 1980s and wondered how they might subvert certain aspects of texts they found unpleasant, or belittling, or simply silly in the face of newly-won feminist confidence, and who discussed the creative efforts required to translate innovative feminist writing (often from French). Meanwhile, of course, Bible translators and scholars had already been at work for a decade—in many parts of the West—adapting, rewriting, and re-translation biblical materials as well as liturgical texts for the new social environments created by the different feminist movements and to reflect new readings of the old texts. Religion could, after all,
no longer address only ‘brethren.’ Short theoretical pieces came next—often on feminist literary theory and its impact on translation and translation studies—and so did numerous historical studies of women translators, or of women authors in translation. This burst of activity finally led to entire books, also ostensibly on the subject of ‘gender and translation’—but again with an almost exclusive focus on the category of people “called women.” (De Lotbinière-Harwood 1992; Simon 1996; Flotow 1997). Identity politics underlie most of this writing, and in the area of translation, this produced theoretical work engaging directly with power differentials that rule relations between the sexes, within society, and between cultures, and that are often revealed in the detailed study of translated literatures. These issues include censorship through translation, the silencing of women’s contributions to society as translators and writers and, more generally, the non-recogniton of women as influential actors in culture and writing.

During these same twenty years, many wide-ranging translation projects took place, also inspired by various feminisms: not only were books of feminist theory, feminist medicine, and feminist literary history translated across cultures and languages, but so were many literary works by women writers. Enormous anthologies of women’s writing were assembled—with texts patiently unearthed, collected and translated for the present—in all the languages of the West, and in many other parts of the world as well. This work, largely by women researchers, translators, and editors, in the wake of the feminist movements of the 1970s and the developing interests in so-called intersectionalities in the 1980s and 1990s, collected and distilled, and doubtless constructed, women’s “voices” in translation from many different countries, and intersections.

This (feminist) work of translation and on translation had a strong international influence across the humanities and social sciences, lending further credence and power to the gendering of other disciplines and discourses, yet almost always tying gender studies to the female sex, staying within the “first paradigm,” and in the process also demonstrating the power that women academics, translators, publishers, editors, administrators and even (some) politicians can wield in the present, though they have wielded considerably less in the past, or in other parts of the world.
More recently, with the advent of queer theories, the focus on women as a fecund part of gender research abated somewhat, giving way to theories that developed around gay activisms and set aside the neat binary categories expressed through the terms “women” and “men.” This led to a spate of texts on gay translation using approaches similar to those inspired by the identity politics in feminist work (Harvey 2003) and to work exploring the “closeted” facets of translation and their resonance with homosexuality (Larkosh 2007). Oddly, however, current, related ideas about the contingent, performative aspects of gender identity and the discursive construction of gender in social and subjective contexts, which have led to heated debates in social and political theory (Butler 1988, 1990; Parker and Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1995), seem to have found less of an echo or application in translation studies. While gender identities may now be seen as a continuum, on a cline ranging from the two extremes of female to male, and not as a female-male binary, the much discussed performative aspects of gender, which would seem to fit nicely with the performative aspects of translation, have hardly been explored or developed. The potentially convenient fit between the contingency of meaning that translation performs and the contingency of gender that notions around performativity promote has not yet been explored to a great extent. One explanation for the lack of focus in this area may be gleaned from the work of a contemporary gender theorist, who writes, “Fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power” (Gamson 1998, in Lorber 1999, my emphasis). If these categories become too blurred, Gamson claims, “you have neither a politics of identity nor a politics of transgression” (Gamson 1995, in Lorber 1999). The apparent dearth of work in the area of contingent gender and translation may, in part, be due to this blurring of categories.

Nevertheless, it is true that much like the feminist work of the 1970s and 1980s, ideas around “gender trouble” (Butler 1990) that celebrate precisely this blurring of hard and fast gender categories and that pose questions about the production of gender through discursive means and strategies arose from social-activist motivations, that is, with political intent. The original impulse of Butler’s work on gender performativity and the performative was clearly activist. Similarly, Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick are unapologetic about the socio-political
goals of their theorizing. Given the inevitable tinge of social activism in a book entitled *Translating Women*, it is of interest, here, to delve into some of the work connecting performance theory, the performative, discourse and gender and examine to what extent these ideas may, in the end, be of use to Translation Studies. After all, most translation is intentional; and much like any other performance, translation represents/perform a text, planting it into a new space for a new readership/audience. Translation makes deliberate choices about which writer to translate, which foreign ideas and materials to disseminate. These choices are premeditated, planned and carefully evaluated, and the meticulous word-by-word labour of translation is often equally self-aware. In other words, translation, it can be argued, is as intentional, as activist, as deliberate as any feminist or otherwise socially-activist activity.

In what follows, theories of “the performative” are read as also stemming from a certain intentionality, a desire to make room for the (non-heteronormative) other, an impulse which is also very much present in (some) translation. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler, for example, explains that what originally motivated her to write *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she developed her theory of gender performativity, was her own personal experience, her own “trouble” with the apparently limited choice of gender options—either female or male, woman or man—at a time when she could neither subscribe nor correspond to either of the two limited and limiting “performances” that came with these options. She describes how this personal experience led to a broader socio-politically activist intention to

> imagine a world in which those who live at “some distance” from gender norms, who live in the confusion of gender norms, might still understand themselves not only as living livable lives but as deserving a certain kind of recognition. I wanted something of gender trouble to be understood and accorded dignity, according to some humanist ideal . . . . (207; my emphasis)

The terms “accorded dignity,” “livable lives” and “a certain kind of recognition” reveal her intention to correct an unacceptable “undignified”
social situation in which Butler, and others, could not live livable lives or garner recognition. Butler’s wish to revise the thinking and the socio-political systems and epistemologies that underlie this untenable situation thus locate her work in social activism.

However, this activism pales as Butler intimates that the social agent/human subject is in fact “the object [her emphasis] rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (Butler 1988: 519). She sees gender identity as produced through a “stylized repetition of acts,” a performance that “always and variously occur in a situation of duress.” Not only is gender identity a stylized, inescapable, social fiction, but it is pre-determined by what Butler calls “the performative.” Any gender performance, even if it is highly individual, is an “act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (1988: 526). Her analogy is theatrical—and oddly reminiscent of some views of translation: Butler parallels the performance of gender identity with the performance, by different actors, of the same script. One can imagine similar ideas applied to the many different translations of Emily Dickinson or Herta Mueller, for example. For Butler, humans are destined to live out “already existing directives” (1988: 526) since gender identity always precedes and predates the human subject; it is a socio-political construct that determines the options within which a human subject can only perform what has already been performed and what already constitutes that environment. This is “the performative,” and it is held in place by discourse.

Her turn toward the power of the historical and discursive environment in creating gender effectively reduces, perhaps destroys, the possibility and value of any individualistic ways of ‘doing one’s gender.’ It negates creativity and construes the gendered human subject as an object to which things are “done with words.” For Butler, only discourse produces signification [meaning]—there is no substantive subject “I” outside of discourse—or as she says in the concluding chapter of Gender Trouble:

To understand identity as a practice, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life. (198; original emphasis)
Not to recognize this effect of discourse is to “conceal the workings of signifying practice, and naturalize its effects” (1990: 197–198). Discourse, for Butler, is a social straitjacket that imposes the terms of gender and how they are understood. In parallel, translation, too, operates within and between discourses: to what extent can it be seen as constrained by the effects of Butler’s “performativity?”

Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also draw on notions of performance in theorizing gender identity, casting it as a connection between saying and doing, or rather saying as doing. Their introduction to *Performativity and Performance* (1995) tends to stay on the “intentional,” “active,” side of the argument around discourse, examining how,

as a certain stress has been lifted momentarily from the issues that surround *being something*, an excitingly charged and spacious stage seems to open up for explorations of … how saying something can be doing something. (16; original emphasis)

Their writing stems from personal concerns and is also motivated by socio-political goals, all of which are related to freely living out homosexuality in the contemporary United States. Unlike Butler, their position does not necessarily preclude the active subject, which in fact actively “does things with words.” The words this subject deploys, and the way it deploys them, dramatically, and in performance, allows interventions “in interlocutory space” (13). By speaking out, even in fragmented almost incoherent form, a human subject asserts and performs their subjectivity. Parker/Kosofsky Sedgwick associate this “explicit performativity” and its transformative effect on interlocutory space with political activism, and thus link the theatrical performative and the politically activist.

Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick’s description of the performative aspects of gender identity is rather more optimistic than Butler’s and linked to the potential of being politically active. While not negating the power and effects of discourse, they view performance as an active and creative activity. For Butler, in sharp contrast, gender identity is performatively acquired through repetition and under duress, and in response to always pre-existent discursive structures and strictures.
How can such ideas on the power of discourse to impose but also rattle the cage of gender identities be useful for Translation Studies in general and for the study and understanding of “women and translation” in particular? First, the socio-critical, activist foundations of these ideas around “the performative” are very pertinent: as much work on feminism and translation has shown, the translator (and the team made up of editor, copy editor, revisor, publisher) have considerable leeway in how they prepare and present a text for a new readership. Not only can the choice of text be made from a socio-critical standpoint, but the translation itself can reflect and draw attention to aspects of the source text that are new, or innovative, or deemed ‘useful’ for the new readership. In this volume, for example, Pascale Sardin examines the English translation of Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *L’enfant de sable*, which capitalizes on the book’s socio-critical standpoint—the situation of a girl raised as (constructed as) a boy in a traditional Muslim Moroccan community—and translates that aspect for the new readership but eradicates precisely those discursive features that perform the confusion of the gender-bending exercise to which the protagonist is subjected. The work by Valerie Henitiuk on a number of English representations of the ancient Japanese *Pillow Book* by Sei Shônagon also carries a socio-critical perspective, exploring the many different ways a historic woman’s text can be run through the scholarly paratextual apparatus of its various translators, who discursively twist each new performance to reflect their own views and appeal to those of the new readership. Social activism is never neutral, as is evident in the motivations driving performance theories and as has also been shown by feminist analyses of translations. It can work to both criticize and inform; it can reveal ‘abuses’ but also draw exaggerated attention to ‘desirable’ aspects of texts. It is part of an ongoing struggle about “doing things with words.”

Second, Butler’s determinist stance that sees “the performative” as always discursively predating, predetermining and thus producing a certain performance of gender identities, in texts as well as “on the street,” recalls, and to some extent parallels, the discussions around translation always being ethnocentric (Berman 1995) and always, somehow, reducing the foreign materials to the local, unable or unwilling to accommodate or perform difference. And yet, such a stance
ignores the work of several well-known feminist, gender-interested scholars and translators, Susan Knutson, Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei and others (1989) in Téssera, who first presented translation as “transformance” [translation + performance], especially in the case where various translators work with, understand and perform the same text differently. Their experimental work on translating feminist writing showed precisely how flexible and creative discourses (and translators, and translations) can be, intimating that it may well be possible to “do [and rewrite] one’s gender” in individual ways. In this volume, questions around discursive rigidity and flexibility are explored in James Underhill’s study of the sounds and prosodies of Emily Dickinson’s poetry in French, and of how the different French renditions produce/construct a different poetics. Equally, the piece on Ulrike Meinhof, which focuses on translation as an act of political memory and a “re-membering” of previously fragmented texts, can be seen to undermine Butler’s deterministic view. Here, translation into another language/discourse moves Meinhof into another “interlocutory space,” an English language theatre—where the author can be newly and differently heard/read by a new and different audience who has never had access to her.

Third, Parker/Kosofsky Sedgwick’s emphasis on the importance of “interlocutory space,” even for the most fragmented discursive performances, seems most useful for the study and perhaps the vindication of translation: every translation claims interlocutory space, every translator seeks access to it. Some translators may overstep the usual bounds of this space, as Stratford and Sturges imply in this volume, in regard to Susan Bassnett’s dynamic translations of Alejandra Pizarnik and Ruth Behar’s politically engaged feminist anthropology in Translated Woman; or they may struggle against the confinement this space imposes as Anna Bogic shows in her study of Howard Parshley’s translation of Beauvoir’s Le deuxième sexe. Nonetheless, they take up and fill the space, however inadequately, fragmentedly or brilliantly, providing transformances of new texts, and with that, new possibilities of reading and understanding.

Contrary to Butler’s pessimistic assessments of discourse as a restricted performative cage, but with her socio-activist motivations in mind, translation studies scholars, who choose to view translation as a deliberate and intentional act carried out between discourses,
may well find aspects of performance theory useful. Translations
allow various performances of a text; they foment differences in these
performances—from one language to many others but also from one
language to many versions of another; most importantly they take up
"interlocutory space"—gaining more in this transformance than they
"lose in translation," to counter that tedious old saying.

And so, the "women and translation" paradigm remains of interest,
a source of creative study and analysis, as this collection of articles
attests. Socially-activist and implicitly feminist approaches that
examine identity, power and visibility continue to bear fruit, and while
performance theory may not be cited in many of the articles here, it
can doubtless be seen to be implicit in much of the work: in Carolyn
Shread's comments on the debatable use of identity politics as a basis
from which to write and translate; in Bella Brodzki's exploration of
the give-and-take between cultures in regard to the concept of gender
itself, and its relative translatability, in this case, into French; in Tom
Dolack's study of Pavlova's selective translations of certain classics that
helped construct another female identity and in Anne Lise Feral's study
of the actual problematics of performative language when the gender
constructs of Anglo-American chick-lit and chick-flicks are translated
into French.

While translation and translation studies have to some extent resisted
reference to performance theories, work on the production of gender
through discursive and material structures within and through translation
may well produce stimulating new insights. Given the deliberate act
that is translation, and given feminisms' history of social activism, the
performance paradigm, though perhaps implicit, is there, enhancing and
complicating the very fertile area of women and translation.

NOTES

1. In 1999, I described the focus on women as the first paradigm in "gender
   and translation." The second paradigm, I thought, would develop queer
   theories, and the performative in translation.

2. This careful terminology comes from recent writing on gender that spares
   no effort to resist essentialism.
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