Mutual Pun-ishment?
Translating Radical Feminist Wordplay:
Mary Daly’s ‘Gyn/Ecology’ in German*

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Abstract. Feminist writing of the 1970s has been viewed in many
Western literatures as avant-garde literary work with political
clout. It uses wordplay extensively to deconstruct and mock
‘patriarchal language’ and indicate directions that women’s
words might take. The translation of this experimental feminist
writing has often been undertaken in the name of women’s and/
or feminist solidarity. Yet, the problems posed by wordplay
translation seem to jeopardize ‘transnational’ goals of feminism
as well as ideas about women’s shared knowledge and experience.
This article focuses on wordplay translation in the German version
of Mary Daly’s American feminist classic ‘Gyn/Ecology’. It sets
both the source text and the translation into the context of feminist
discursive practices of their time, looks in some detail at the
German translator’s options and solutions for wordplay
translation, and discusses their effects.

Résumé. Les écrits féministes des années 1970 ont été considérés
dans beaucoup de littératures occidentales comme une produc-
tion littéraire avant-gardiste ayant un impact politique. Ils font
un usage important de jeux de mots pour déconstruire et se
moquer du ‘langage patriarcal’ et pour indiquer des directions
que pourrait prendre le discours des femmes. La traduction de
ces écrits féministes expérimentaux a souvent été entreprise au
nom de la solidarité féministe et/ou entre les femmes. Mais les
problèmes posés par la traduction des jeux de mots semble
compromettre de tels buts ‘transnationaux’ du féminisme, ainsi
que certaines idées concernant l’expérience et la connaissance
commune des femmes. Cet article se penche sur la traduction
des jeux de mots dans la version allemande du classique féministe
américain “Gyn/Ecology” de Mary Daly. Il replace tant l’original
que la traduction dans le contexte des pratiques discursives
féministes de l’époque et examine en détail les stratégies de la
traductrice allemande et leurs effets.

This article is concerned with wordplay in the translation of a ‘radical femi-
nist’ text: Gyn/Ecology, A Metaethics of Radical Feminism by Mary Daly,
published in Boston in 1978. Erika Wisselinck’s German translation came out two years later in the face of “economic, political and existential risks” which the source-text author gratefully acknowledges in her (English) foreword to the German edition. While the translation appeared, as Daly says, to “expand and strengthen our supranational Network of radical feminism” (ibid:19), it seems in retrospect to have jeopardized such goals. A major contributory factor is the way Daly’s wordplay was dealt with, wordplay being an integral part of the creative and ideological structures of ‘radical feminist’ writing of the 1970s.

The first section of this article contextualizes ‘radical feminist’ writing in North America and Western Europe and discusses the role assigned to wordplay. In section two, I examine a number of responses that feminist readers have had to translations of this material. The third section explores the three options that the German translator of Mary Daly’s text discusses in her preface as ways to solve the practical problems of wordplay translation. I focus in particular on the remarkable number of footnotes in which she offers explanations of many of Daly’s puns. The concluding section suggests how the translator’s copious annotations can also be seen as a part of her political ‘agenda’.

1. ‘Radical feminist’ writing

In the course of the 1970s a particular strain of feminist writing developed in North America and Europe which sought to deconstruct ‘patriarchal’ language, the language of male-run institutions such as the media, universities and schools, the editorial boards of publishing houses, dictionaries, literary anthologies, and so on. This deconstructive practice came to be known by various names, among others, radical feminist writing in the United States, écriture au féminin in Québec, écriture féminine in France (where it included marginalized forms of writing by men and was hotly disputed among women), and weibliches Schreiben in Germany. These writing trends, which were not at all homogeneous and which revealed distinct cultural and political differences, did, however, largely share the view that language is a construct which strongly influences, even determines, what can be thought and said. Because conventional language was controlled by ‘malestream’ institutions, it had, thus far, served as the criterion according to which women and their creative or scholarly works were systematically ignored, denigrated or excluded. Luce Irigaray, the French psychoanalyst who broke with Lacanian theory to become an important feminist theorist, describes the problem facing women succinctly. In *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (1977:205) she writes:

> Si nous continuons à nous parler le même langage, nous allons reproduire la même histoire. Recommencer les mêmes histoires ....
Si nous continuons à parler le même, si nous nous parlons comme se parlent les hommes depuis des siècles, comme on nous a appris à parler, nous nous manquerons.

(If we continue to speak the same language, we will reproduce the same history/story. Begin the same stories over again .... If we continue to speak the same, if we continue to talk the way the men have been talking for centuries, the way they taught us to talk, we will not reach each other.)

Irigaray here warns of the dangers of the vicious circle created and maintained by the use of male language; she cites the indoctrination of women through this language, and points to the need for women to cross the limits imposed upon them by language in order to reach each other. Apart from Irigaray, whose work has achieved international recognition, many other writers expressed similar views in France (Claudine Herrmann, Annie Leclere, Hélène Cixous, Marina Yaguello), in Canada (Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, France Théoret), in the United States (Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Monique Wittig), and in Germany (Verena Stefan, Elfriede Jelinek). They have worked as fiction writers, poets, dramatists, filmwriters, scholars, journalists or critics, sometimes combining all these functions.

The purposes of this feminist work on language were multiple, yet two major objectives can be isolated, namely the deconstruction of ‘patriarchal’ language and the construction of a women’s idiom. Deconstructive activity enabled women to flex their linguistic muscles and participate in the wrecking job on oppressive language; it enabled them to clear a space for the construction of new forms of language by and for women to ‘give voice to’ their different experiences, intuitions and knowledge. The whole process was liberationist, as women were encouraged and enabled, even exhorted to get beyond the confines and constraints of conventional ‘malestream’ thought. And wordplay was an important instrument in both the deconstructive and the creative dimensions of this work.

Writing and reading wordplay is work

Suzanne Levine (1991:13) links puns with pain when she writes that “[p]uns hide (hence reveal) pain .... Puns are punishment”. Her comments are partly based on the puns produced between languages, by writers living in exile, hence between languages. Exile is pain, too. For many 1970s feminist writers such as Mary Daly, women live in exile in patriarchal language; punning expresses their pain, but it is also a way to fight back. A writing project based on linguistic deconstruction in which wordplay has an important role, however, requires more than solidarity and exhortations for women to develop
writing experiments. It also requires hard work from writers and readers alike. Mary Daly stresses this aspect of ‘radical feminist’ writing in a footnote to the preface of *Gyn/Ecology* (1978:xiv):

This book contains Big Words ... for it is written for big, strong women, out of respect for strength. Moreover, I’ve made some of them up. Therefore, it may be a stumbling block both to those who choose downward mobility of the mind and therefore hate Big Words, and to those who choose upward mobility and therefore hate New/ Old Words, that is Old words that become New when their ancient (‘obsolete’) gynocentric meanings are unearthed. Hopefully, it will be a useful pathfinder for the multiply mobile: the movers, the weavers, the Spinners.

Daly thus highlights the importance she places on linguistic innovation, on her own invention of words, and particularly on the renewal and rehabilitation of gynocentric terms that, one might say, have been ‘lost in patriarchal translation’, i.e. debased and devalued precisely because they once held positive meanings for/about women. But Daly also calls upon her readers to participate, and she flattens them into doing so: the book is written for “big strong women” who are “multiply mobile”. As Daly acknowledges, however, reading her requires work, and perhaps more importantly, intellectual mobility and flexibility.

This footnote is useful for a first look at the wordplay in her writing. The term “big strong women”, for example, is uncommon in English; it is an ironic takeoff on the conventional big strong men who purportedly look after their little ladies or Daddy’s little girls. Similarly, the play on the “downward ... upward ... multiply mobile” picks up on contemporary American usage, normally applied to the jockeying that goes on for social position. It revamps the expression, here, to refer to feminist consciousness and the willingness to accept challenges and learn. In these instances, Daly’s wordplay has an ironic function, referring to mainstream ideas, giving them a negative colouring, and directing readers toward other options and ideas that are opened up by the play on conventional words.

Neologisms such as the terms “the-rapist”, “bore-o-cracy” or “the Totaled Woman”, invented by Daly, function similarly. They call upon more or less familiar ideas and undermine them with a deconstructive twist, which is both amusing and politically purposeful: the implication is that therapists work for patriarchy, keeping women in check by the age-old method of sexual violence or the threat of it; bureaucracy bores people into passivity and non-creativity and exists to maintain its boring self; the ‘Total Woman’ as the finished product of fashion magazine dictates is closer to being ‘totaled’ the way a car is after a serious crash than being a desirable end in herself.

Much of Daly’s punning emphasizes this satiric, deconstructive approach
to contemporary American culture and language. Her term **ludic cerebra-
tion**, on the other hand, points to feminist appropriation of language. In her
preface, Daly (ibid:23) refers to the “patriarchal erasure” of women’s trad-
tions and knowledge and she ties this in closely to the warped aspects of
patriarchal scholarship, which, she asserts, kills creative thought and is only
“made plausible through the mechanisms of male bonding”. **Ludic cerebra-
tion** is women’s answer to this scholarship: a creative, crazy, celebration of
their own cerebral competencies that originates in “the free play of intuition
in our own space, giving rise to thinking that is vigorous, informed, multi-
dimensional, independent, creative, tough” (ibid). Daly defines the term in
her text, yet it carries much of this meaning of joyful thinking-against-the-
grain within itself and is an integral part of Daly’s own creative style. Thus,
while wordplay is, paradoxically, also work, the crazy, ludic, fun component
cannot be overlooked.

**Wordplay in French**

For the French and Québécois ‘radical feminist’ authors I briefly cited above,
wordplay has similar functions. It is a tool in the deconstruction of fixed
concepts inherent in patriarchal language and thought, and it opens the way
toward new concepts. For example, Nicole Brossard (Quebec) exploits the
capacity of French to feminize the gender of words, and thus to indicate new
directions: terms such as “maternelle”, “homoindividuelle”, “l’essentielle” or
“ma continent” demonstrate this appropriation and creation of innovative
feminized language through wordplay. Neologisms such as “la mourriture”
— connecting death (mourir ...), nurturing activities (nourriture ...) and
putrefaction (pourriture ...) — serve to deconstruct ideas about the special
nurturing qualities assigned to women.

Similar examples can be found in work by Hélène Cixous; one of the most
famous lines from *Le rire de la Méduse* reads in English translation: “Let the
priests tremble, we’re going to show them our sexts” (Cixous, tr. Cohen
1976:885). Here, as in Brossard’s work, the ‘patriarchal’ reference remains
tangible; in the example from Cixous, it concerns oppressive misogynist relig-
ion and its taboo on women’s sexual and textual expression, which is,
however, usurped by empowered women’s writing. This is what renders femi-
nist wordplay seductive. It is amusing for those who are open to the political
message and it demonstrates the arbitrary nature of linguistic oppression by
showing how easily it can be undone, even reversed.

**German conditions**

In German feminist writing of the period, the same dis-case with language
exists. Yet, while wordplay has a role in linguistic deconstruction, other
strategies seem to predominate. In the preface to her *Häutungen* (1975), arguably the most influential ‘radical feminist’ text of the time, Verena Stefan, writes,

Language fails me as soon as I try to speak of new experiences. Supposedly new experiences that are cast in the same old language cannot really be new. (Stefan 1975, tr. Moore & Weckmueller 1984:53)

She is as speechless in conventional language as other women writers of the time; however, her book is more of an (auto)biographical, subjective account of a woman’s feminist politicization in post-1968 Germany than a text that focuses on language. It is a search for identity via liberation from male-imposed patterns and not a search for some form of utopia via neologisms and other language acts. Indeed, as Angelika Bammer (1991:74-75) has argued, German feminism has had difficulties thinking in terms of utopias, due at least in part to the abuse of utopian ideas perpetrated by national socialism. The linguistic deconstruction that Stefan practises most frequently consists of fragmented syntax, the rejection of genre categories, the development of new imagery, and orthographic changes (e.g. splitting words such as ober-leib, ‘upper body’, and unter-leib, ‘lower body’, to draw attention to the fragmentation of her protagonist’s body through language). Some wordplay occurs in her work; for example, she signals her awareness of the ‘patriarchal’ content of words such as “herrlich” (‘wonderful, great’). On the whole, however, deconstructive wordplay is not a tool she uses with the same aggressive panache, humour, or utopian purpose as some French- and English-language feminists. Like many other German women writers, she pursues a separatist course that emphasizes women’s difference rather than engaging with ‘malestream’ institutions.

Luise Pusch, on the other hand, a linguist-cum-journalist writing some years later in Germany, has exploited and popularized the amusing aspects of feminist wordplay to supplement her living outside the academy. Taking her cue largely from Anglo-American feminist work and often writing in support of maligned German feminist colleagues, she has published both scholarly work and short witty articles on feminist linguistic analyses and the debunking of conventional language (Pusch 1984, 1990). Her scholarly texts are often analyses of the patriarchal aspects of language to be found in semantics and syntax, while her more popular writing addresses the patriarchal politics of journalism and publishing, and often includes clever demonstrations of feminist deconstruction of language. This makes it all the more surprising that she also published a severe critique of wordplay translation in the German version of Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*.
2. The critical reception of feminist wordplay in translation

All translation of wordplay raises particular problems regarding the transfer of cultural knowledge and specific context-bound shades of meaning, besides the question of the unavoidable differences between semantic items and their range of meanings and connotations in different languages (e.g. Levine 1991; Delabastita 1994). In addition, wordplay translation in feminist writing has raised issues of political solidarity between women across linguistic and cultural boundaries. It in fact highlights problems originating in cultural and historical differences, similar to those aired on the occasions of international or 'supranational' women's congresses, where vastly differing economic and cultural groups try to reach understanding and agreement.

Reading Mary Daly in German

The wordplay that laces Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, her classic of 'radical feminist' (now viewed as white-middle-class-educated-feminist) thought, made it a pleasure for me to read in English (perhaps because I, too, fit the white-middle-class-educated-anglophone category). My first reading of the work in the summer of 1979 had me in stitches over her inventive impudence, her sarcasm and lack of respect for conventional American English and the culture that supports it, and over her unceasing and creative efforts to find ways to take the wind out of the complacent sails of 'patriarchal' language. The book's main focus is on the historical victimization of women, and on the role filled by 'hencwomen' of patriarchy for this purpose. It is written in three "passages": the first uses wordplay and etymological research to show how language has become a political tool of patriarchy, the second presents scholarly research — in largely scholarly discourse — on the victimization of women, and the third again returns to wordplay and linguistic innovation to invoke women's solidarity in working toward utopian possibilities. While English-language critics have commented on the Gnostic aspects of the text as well as on the historiographical, philosophical and literary challenges it presents, they always also acclaim its important, though sometimes idiosyncratic, work on language (Kraemer 1979; Eisenstein 1983). For me, the wordplay was one of the more important aspects, providing respite and relaxation from an often disturbing content.

The German translation of this work was completed by Erika Wisselinck shortly after its English publication. Translating the complex, innovative and highly political wordplay was a major problem for the translator, a problem she announces in the opening line of her translator's preface: "Mary Daly's* Originaltext lebt von Wortspielen, die schwer oder gar nicht zu übersetzen sind" ("Mary Daly's text lives from wordplay that is difficult or impossible to translate"). For some German readers too, the wordplay presented a major
hurdle, apparently creating the opposite effect to what I had felt in reading the English source text. Luise Pusch, for one, does not mince words on this issue in a critical text that first appeared in 1987 in German.1 Though Pusch had every political reason to support the Daly/Wisselinck project,4 her text is entitled ‘Mary, please don’t pun-ish us any more!’. Pusch begins with the disclaimer that she admires Daly as a thinker, and has greatly profited from her work — read in English. Read in German, however, it is painfully difficult, not because of its challenging content or its scholarly style, but precisely because of the wordplay in translation. According to Pusch, wordplay seldom translates adequately and a surplus of ‘untranslatable’ wordplay, accompanied by copious translator’s notes, defeats the project of readability, which is for her an important factor in feminist discourse. Pusch readily agrees that wordplay in a source text increases reading pleasure, because it triggers unexpected connections between concepts, sounds and words in the reader, creating a sense of specialized perception and ‘knowledge’, even a sense of connivance with the author. However, she continues, since different languages organize their concepts, sounds and words differently, the translation of wordplay is risky, in places tedious, and in the case of Mary Daly, perhaps even a waste of (feminist) effort. Pusch’s conclusion seems to be that feminist work would do better to forget about ‘playful’ puns in translation, and get on with other (real) concerns:

Und was ihre [Dalys] Wortspiele betrifft, so könnten zumindest wir Nicht-Englischsprachigen auf viele davon gut verzichten. Marys Werke wären dann auch schlanker, Erika brauchte dann beim Übersetzen nicht solche Schmerzen zu leiden und wir nicht beim Lesen ... (Pusch 1990:111)

(And as for her [Daly’s] wordgames; we non-English speakers could do without a good number of them. Mary’s [Mary Daly’s] works would then be slimmer. Erika [Wisselinck] would be spared her suffering when she translates, and we would be spared ours when we read ...)

While Pusch’s critique is not an attack on the translation as a whole, it seriously questions the value of Wisselinck’s solutions to the problems posed by wordplay. Writing in the spirit of proselytizing feminism, one of the main points in her attack is that, in order to understand Mary Daly, many German women have “reverently and energetically” formed special “reading and study groups” (ibid:106) only to disband them again, because as Pusch says, women have too much work and too little time as it is, which renders difficult reading material relatively ineffective in the cause of feminism. Ironically, Pusch’s critique echoes the functionalist, meaning-based strategies used by the translator in support of the same feminist urge to teach.
Reading French wordplay/Quebec wordplay in English

While Pusch focuses almost exclusively on wordplay as an issue in the reception of this text in translation, North American reception of French *écriture féminine* has tended to problematize other issues as well. These have been discussed by numerous writers working on the transatlantic ‘dis-connection’, and have largely concerned problems such as excessive intellectualism, elitism, lack of feminist praxis, all encased in opaque, inaccessible writing. Donna Stanton (1980:79), for instance, recognizes that “dense texts replete with plays on words and devoid of normal syntactical constructions” could well be considered “virtuosic and exhibitionistic” by those Anglo-American feminists who base their work on empirical analyses. Nonetheless, she insists on the value of French radical work on language for Anglo-American use and strongly advocates the selective integration of this work, not only to raise American women’s awareness of the limited nature of their own critical discourses but also to transcend the differences between women and “give voice to woman [which] binds us together in one radical and global project” (ibid:81). The push to internationalize the women’s movement and the utopian underpinnings of the project are as apparent here as in Daly’s preface to the German translation.

In Canada, the situation has been somewhat different, due to the particular situation of Quebec. Both Québécois writers such as Hubert Aquin and English-Canadian critics have seen Quebec as a culture from which avant-gardist creative work has almost been expected. In a recent study of what she calls the new poetics in Canada and Quebec, Caroline Bayard (1989:55-137) develops this idea by showing, on the one hand, how strong the political investment of Quebec poets and artists in the past thirty years has been, and on the other, how mainstream reception inside Quebec has welcomed their work. The implication is that, in this case, political concerns and literary/artistic experimentalism have been able to come together. ‘Radical feminist’ writing, one of the most important experimental developments in 1970s Quebec, and the visible cultural activity that developed around it, thus gave rise to appreciative academic essays, often glowing reviews, and many translations.

Even before translations became available, the interest quickly spilled over into English-speaking Canada. Thus, a favourable review (Richard 1976) of Louky Bersianik’s *L’Enguélionne* (1976), a book in which wordplay takes on a major deconstructive role, was published in English in the same year the book appeared in French. And essays by bilingual women writers such as Gail Scott (1989) sought to bridge the gap between Québécois and Anglo-Canadian feminisms, and in particular mediate the peculiarities of *écriture au féminin*. Further, since academics were the main translators, they produced numerous texts in which the process of translation was thematized as a factor in the intercultural and ideological exchanges between women. For example,
the group that founded the academic journal *Tessera* did so precisely in order to make the theoretical background to Quebec women’s writing available to Anglo-Canadian readers.

In the process, translation came to be viewed as creative and cooperative interaction, rather than suspect and uncertain approximation. And the challenge that wordplay translation presented was answered with ‘polysemic’ approaches in which the translator used unorthodox, multiple methods to deal with multiple meanings— even mimetic translation of wordplay, which abandons the conventional striving for semantic equivalence in favour of interlingual formal association. This, in turn, “violate[d] the current rule that a translation must not give the impression that it is a translation” (Godard 1987:7), so that the Canadian academic-cum-translator became a reader/writer who was as liberated from the constraints of translation norms, as the writer she was translating was liberated from ‘patriarchal’ textual norms.⁶

3. Mutual punishment: Mary Daly in German

So why is the German version of Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* a form of punishment, as critic Pusch claims, and as the hasty disbanding of the German women’s reading circles may show? If Anglo-American-Canadian feminist academics and critics have been able to integrate foreign wordplay into their critical practice to some degree, or use it to posit themselves as revolutionary and subversive elements, why is this not possible with the German text? One answer may simply have to do with the excess of wordplay in the source text, which, Pusch suggests, is indigestible in translation (1990:107-9). Another may lie in the translator’s apparent awe in the face of Daly’s virtuoso display of language mis-use, and also with her feelings of inadequacy, even pain, at her impossible task. She describes this pain in the preface to her translation of another of Daly’s books, *Pure Lust* (cited by Pusch 1990:107): “dennoch schmerzt jede Stelle, der ich im Deutschen ... nicht gerecht werden konnte” (‘nonetheless, every place where I could not do justice [to the text] in German *pains* me’). Finally, a more systemic explanation for the wordplay problem may lie in the area of intentionality—in the function ascribed to the text in translation, the translation’s agenda.

Indeed, the desire to educate the German reader—a feminist urge to popularize, even proselytize—may well lie at the heart of the problem. This urge may have been compounded by a sense of American superiority in the field. Thus, Edith Altbach (1984:7) argues that until the late 1970s German women tended to “overestimate the strength of the American [women’s] movement”. An American text in translation could therefore readily have been assigned an educational function it did not necessarily have in its source environment. Further, the marginal situation of all feminist writing and publishing in Germany of the late 1970s (Clausen 1984; Levin 1994) and the
precarious situation of the publishing house Frauenoffensive (which had gained economic independence as a women’s collective only a few months earlier due to the success of Verena Stefan’s Häutungen), support the hypothesis that the political, popularizing, agenda is likely to have played a role in this Daly translation. The American text was being translated for a readership viewed as being relatively uninformed about feminist political activity as well as about the theoretical concepts necessary for its immediate reception. The fact that the same political agenda motivates Pusch’s criticism almost ten years later leads me to wonder whether much progress has been made.

**Three options and the translator’s run-on footnotes**

In her translator’s preface Erika Wisselinck isolates three possible ways of dealing with Daly’s wordplay (p. 9). First, she can seek out appropriate German alliterations or images, in which the reader might recognize idioms and images from her own context. This, she says, results in a rather ‘free’ translation (“dadurch mußte die Übersetzung manchmal ziemlich frei ausfallen”). Second, she can produce a literal translation in an attempt to remain faithful to Daly’s meaning (“um des Verständnisses willen wortgetreu bleiben”) and unfortunately (“leider”) lose the play on words. Third, she can select and explain particularly impressive puns (“besonders eindrucksvolle Wortspiele”) in a footnote so as to give the reader an idea of the source-text material she cannot translate. Wisselinck not only uses all these methods in her work, but she footnotes many of them, which results in a remarkable proliferation of translator’s notes.

A glance at the translation of *Gyn/Ecology* will reveal that a large majority of the translator’s notes deal with wordplay. In these footnotes Wisselinck generally accentuates the fact that the English pun is ‘untranslatable’. For example, in a passage on women’s subjectivity and identity, Daly discusses the conjunction between women’s forced use of an alien and hostile language and the loss of their perceptive abilities and integrity: “As the ‘I’ is broken, so also is the Inner Eye, the capacity for integrity of knowing/sensing” (Daly 1978:19). Wisselinck translates the surface meaning only, “Gebrochen wie das ‘ich’ ist auch das Innere Auge, die Fähigkeit zur Integrität beim Wissen/Wahrnehmen” (Daly, tr. Wisselinck 1980:40), and she adds the footnote:

> im englischen ‘I’ und ‘the Inner Eye’, eine im deutschen nicht übertragbare Lautmalerei (ibid)

(‘I’ and ‘the Inner Eye’ in English, a homophonic device that cannot be translated into German)

Similarly, in a section on the feminist creative process and the deconstruction of language as a part of this, Daly discusses her practice of hyphenating
certain words such as re-cover or de-light in order to read and understand them differently (p. 24): “Often I unmask deceptive words by dividing them and employing alternate meanings for prefixes (for example, re-cover actually says ‘cover again’)”. Wisselinck only translates as far as the parenthesis in her translation and then footnotes (p. 46): “hier folgt im englischen Text ein Beispiel, das nicht übertragbar ist” (‘in the English text this is followed by an untranslatable example’), which she then goes to some length to explain. Wisselinck proceeds in this manner to such an extent that the reader may be left with the impression of one long run-on footnote on the ‘untranslatability’ of Daly’s text.

Option 1: finding related puns

The first translation option Wisselinck describes in her preface seems to fit into the category that Delabastita (1994:224) recently described as lying “beyond the dogma of untranslatability”; the transfer of puns is made possible and their reading is made pleasant, even amusing, because there is more or less related linguistic and cultural material in the target language. Wisselinck makes occasional, tentative use of such related material.

For instance, in a short section on the rhetoric of space exploration, Daly comments sarcastically on the humiliating enslavement to technology that you find when you look behind the scenes of space travel (“nothing more significant than a computer-controlled crawl”, p. 52), but that is concealed in sexualized metaphors when the media report on these expeditions. She refers to the “first international docking in space” (p. 51 ff) as an act of “international intercourse”, “a lecherous link-up” in which, according to a news release, the “U.S. ship played the ‘male’ or active role ... inserting its ‘nose’ into the ‘nose’ of the Russian ship”. While most of this sexual vocabulary is readily available in German, Wisselinck only exploits the connection between koppeln (“to dock, hook up”) and kuppeln (a pejorative term for match-making). In German, the “international docking” thus becomes “erste internationale Raumschiffkoppelung” (p. 73) and “international intercourse” in the next line reads “internationale[r] Kuppelei” (p. 73). “Kuppelei” does not translate “intercourse” (which would be Geschlechtsverkehr, Beischlaf), but it is effective in carrying on the negative tone of Daly’s wordplay. Unfortunately, Wisselinck then translates “lecherous link-up” somewhat flatly as “geile Verbindung” (rather than use, say, “geiles Gevögel”, which would maintain the alliteration and also the negative connotation), and renders “copulating crafts” as “kopulierende Raumschiffe”, where she could perhaps have tried “kopulierende Karosserien”: the choice of “Karosse” (state coach or limousine) for “crafts” would have rendered the alliteration and connected smoothly to Daly’s subsequent allusions to the need for “sartorial splendour” in all “patriarchal processions” (p. 52).
While Wisselinck thus occasionally uses the linguistic resources of German to render puns, she tends to shy away from the ripple-effect that Daly creates by continually recycling semantic items in new combinations. Wisselinck clearly prefers the explanatory options, and it is only towards the end of the book that she admits the faintheartedness of this tendency. The translation of “Furious Women” triggers a footnote informing readers that she is finally gaining more courage (“auch die Übersetzerin wird mutiger”, p. 363). Up to this point she has translated “Furious Women” as “Wütende/Furien-Frauen”, since in her view, the German furies does not comprise the notion of anger; her approach has thus been explanatory. She now proposes to use the resources of the German language, and innovate. Referring to the musical notation furioso (“wild, passionate, raging”), she assigns this meaning to create the German neologism “Furiose Frauen”. The point is that the translator here innovates in German and does not content herself with glossing the English pun. Even so, she still feels she owes an explanation to her readers.

Such pun-for-pun translations are rare: a much more substantial number of puns are either rendered by a literal translation of the surface-level message, often with a footnoted commentary, or they are explained in detail in a footnote. This approach may be what turns the wordplay that tightens Daly’s complex text into the German wordlabour that renders the German version even more unwieldy.

**Option II: surface meaning translation (plus footnotes)**

Translation for surface meaning, causing ‘loss’ of connotation and associations vital to the wordplay, occurs relatively often. Take the section of text that follows Daly’s sarcastic discussion of “male mono-gender bonding” in space (p. 51). This section begins with the following question: “Where do women ‘fit in’ to this space of stale male-mating, this world of wedded deadlock?” (p. 52). Throughout the previous section Daly played with the terms “male bonding”, “male mating”, “the meaning of mated hands” as well as with ideas of sterile, inglorious, computer enslavement packaged as “achievement”. The puns “stale male-mating” and “wedded deadlock” refer back to these terms, but they also introduce the following piece on women’s traditional role as “wives smiling in frantic euphoria ..., ‘fit[ting] in’ to the picture, as pictures”, or, as she later says, in a state of servitude that can only be described as robotitude (pp. 52-53). In this way “stale male-mating” and “wedded deadlock” recuperate the previous ideas and enhance the following development.

The translation of Daly’s question reads: “An welcher Stelle lassen sich Frauen in diesen Weltraum steriler Männer-Paarungen ‘einfügen’, in diese Welt der ehelichen Sackgasse?” (p. 74). This adequately renders the surface level of Daly’s text, and refers back and forward to some degree, as Daly’s
text does. It does not, however, make the playful connections between \textit{stalemate} and \textit{deadlock}, or \textit{wedlock} and \textit{deadlock}, nor can it refer back by sound association to the other \textit{mating} references since Wisselinck translated them all differently: “männlich[e] geschlechtsgleiche Bündnisse” for “male binding”, “männliche Paarung” for “male mating”, and “Bedeutung der vereinigten Hände” for “the meaning of mated hands”.

A similar problem occurs in the translation of the term “womb-tombs” (p. 55), Daly’s term for spacecraft, which Wisselinck renders as “Mutterschoß-Grabstätte” (p. 77), a surface-level translation that completely misses the sound associations, and the joke. This is an instance where she footnotes: “als Alliteration unübersetznbar” (“untranslatable as an alliteration”).

These examples raise two problems that obtain in surface-level translation of wordplay. First the joke, the amusing part of the text, the rest and relaxation disappear. Second, the system of allusions, associations and connotations into which the wordplay is embedded and within which it functions is destroyed, as in the “mating” example above. While such results may be unavoidable at times, and while unilingual readers of the translation may not even notice, footnoting and commentary by the translator make the situation worse. Indeed, though some of the complex explanations may be useful, they are not playful; others are tedious, and some are just plain wrong. For instance, in the footnote to Daly’s statement on her use of hyphens in such words as \textit{re-cover} (p. 24), Wisselinck explains

\textit{recover} heißt auf deutsch entdecken, wird es als \textit{re-cover} geschrieben, bekommt es im Englischen die umgekehrte Bedeutung: wieder zudecken, aber auch wieder damit befassen. Im Deutschen hingegen wird durch die Silbentrennung der eigentliche Sinn von entdecken als ent-deck-en, etwas aufdecken, die Decke von etwas wegziehen, verstärkt. Dieser verschärfende Effekt hat jedoch ebenfalls einen aufdeckenden Wert. (p. 46; my italics)

\textit{(recover} means discover in German; when it is written as \textit{re-cover} in English it acquires the opposite meaning: cover up again, but also deal with again. In German, however, the hyphenation causes the actual meaning of discover as dis-cover, uncover something, pull the cover off something, to be reinforced. This heightening effect also has a value of discovery.)

Not only are there errors and confusion here—\textit{recover} does not mean \textit{entdecken} (‘discover’)—but the explanation is long-winded and heavy. The point that Wisselinck wants to make is that \textit{re-cover} (‘to cover again’) and her translation \textit{ent-decken} (‘to uncover’) basically have opposite meanings. In other words, she admits and points out to her readers that the translation creates a paradox—since ‘cover again’ ends up meaning ‘uncover’. No matter, she says, even
this paradox has “einen aufdeckenden Wert” (‘a value of discovery’). I wonder, meanwhile, whether such a contradictory point merits such a long explanation, when short, loaded phrases such as “the Toted Woman” (p. 21) or “ludic cerebration” (p. 23) are translated one-dimensionally, for surface meaning only, as “die vervollkommnete Frau” (p. 42) and “ludisches Denken” (p. 45).

While it is noticeable that the detailed explanations decrease significantly in length toward the end of the book, the emphasis on the inadequacy of the translation to deal with several levels of meaning remains. In the hope of rendering Daly’s witticisms as well as her political points, Wisselinck stresses the difficulties rather than the fun of the pun and explains at length what should be grasped briefly. Highlighting the inadequacies of her solutions to even the least inventive wordplay, she creates the impression of a source text looming somewhere beyond the translation, unreachable and unreadable at the same time. Her difficulties with the text are so tangible that the final product does more to alienate than ‘educate’ the readers.

**Option III: explaining ‘impressive’ puns**

A further problematic aspect of this didactic approach lies in Wisselinck’s explanations of wordplay based on American cultural references; they often seem to subtly undermine Daly’s, and even her own, political feminist objective of creating a ‘supranational’ network. For example, in certain instances where Wisselinck ostensibly sets out to explain a ‘particularly impressive’ English construct, she unwittingly distorts the cultural reference in which Daly’s wordgame is framed by giving it a curious German twist.

Some of Wisselinck’s explanations of cultural items are, of course, apt. For example, her note on “Cosmo-Girls” (p. 41) is to the point, as are her notes on the terms “glamour girl” (p. 24), “Free Spirit” lingerie (p. 25), and “Catch 22” (p. 291). Other such explanations, however, show evidence of significant disjunction. When such distortions occur, they may trivialize or gentrify the cultural practice in question. One particularly salient example is her footnote to Daly’s footnote on the term herstory (p. 46).

Daly does not approve of this term; she feels that the term herstory, a neologism for women’s history, implies “a desire to parallel the record of men’s achievements ... [and] has an odor of mere reactive manoeuvring” (p. 24). Prehistory would be a better term to use. Wisselinck enlarges on this, placing her own explanation of Daly’s comment before her translation of Daly’s footnote. She begins by stating that the German language has not yet developed the new woman’s language (“neue Frauen sprache”) that English has, and she speculates that German may lack the capacity to change. She then goes on to explain that married anglophone couples like to use toothbrush glasses, towels and place mats with His and Hers labels. It is from this practice, she implies, that the term herstory has been derived.
The sudden appearance of such lowly domestic items as toothbrush glasses and place mats in conjunction with excuses about why the German language resists change is more than disconcerting; it trivializes the issue. Anglo-American efforts to change language and thereby change gender awareness are undermined by parallels drawn to 'silly' American cultural artefacts and habits. The German language appears in counterpoint as a solid constant, impervious to such trivialities. Though Daly herself disapproves of the herstory wordplay for political reasons, she does not degrade the term in the way the German translation, perhaps unwittingly, does.

In another extended explanation, Wisselinck resists clarifying greater American practices, thus depriving Daly's wordplay of its clout. In a passage on how religious mythology conjures up images of paradise as a walled-in pleasure garden, Daly writes, "Despite theological attempts to make this seem lively, the image is one of stagnation (stag-nation)" (p. 6). The hyphenated "stag-nation" becomes one of the 'impressive wordgames' Wisselinck chooses to explain in detail (p. 27ff); again, one might ask whether it merits the attention. She gives the meaning of stag as 'male deer' and also 'castrated male animal', and claims that Daly is playing on this second aspect ("darauf spielt Mary Daly hier an"). The translator then goes on to explain what a stag is in American colloquial speech ("in der amerikanischen Umgangssprache ein unbewéibter Herr, ein Mann ohne Damenbegleitung") and adds a further point on the American stag party ("Stagparty – Herrengesellschaft").

The cultural problem here lies in the term "Herrengesellschaft". Herr is a respectful form of address and holds connotations of quiet, well-heeled elegance and status. Although Herr in combination with other nouns can simply mean 'man's' (e.g. Herrenhemd, 'man's shirt'), the overriding sense is one of power or wealth, as in Herrensitz ('estate'), Herrenhaus ('manor house'), Herrenleben ('life of a lord'), not to mention other, more abusive, national socialist uses of the word (e.g. Herrenvolk). Herr is a gentleman, and Herrengesellschaft a company of gentlemen. The vulgarity and misogyny of the (North) American stag-party is at a far remove; it is perhaps one facet of the source culture that is unfathomable to this translator.

While it may seem unfair to focus on the cultural references that have been misunderstood or misrepresented in wordplay translation, I do so in order to point to a core problem. Daly's wordplay works on several levels: it is effective because of immediate associations that individual terms conjure up, as in the examples of "stag-nation", "cerebration" or "the Toted Woman", But it is multiply effective because of the rhetorical techniques she uses, constantly varying a term and recycling it in different contexts, creating a ripple effect by continually making new associations, and so demonstrating her premise that language, culture, society (traditional conditioning, marketing, myth-making, and so on) are part of a vast enmeshed network. When,
however, the cultural and linguistic elements of such cyclical punning are
dissected individually, and in laborious detail, both individual flashes of as-
sociation and the overview are worked to death.

Here is a final example of this process of reduction. In an elaborate com-
mentary on the myth of Dionysus and the stereotypically “feminine” aspects
of the Dionysian element as they are described in patriarchy (p. 64-69), Daly
says that “male-centred Dionysian confusion” as the counterpart to Apollonian
rigidity may offer women an apparent escape. However, it leads to loss of self
and madness, blurring the senses, seducing and confusing its victims, “drag-
ging them into complicity, offering them his [Dionysus’] ‘heart’ as a love
potion that poisons” (p. 67). She indirectly refers to various movements of the
1960s and 70s in which women participated only to be “annihilated”: among others, she lists “christian sectarianism, Eastern spirituality, liber-
ated liberalism, ‘the people’s struggle’, straight suburban society, the
orgiastic sexual avantgarde” (p. 66). The passage continues with numer-
ous references to madness, including the “M-A-D-ness” filter (M-A-D
standing for Male Approval Desire) through which women channel their
lives, and which blurs the boundary to “clear-headed madness”, i.e. resis-
tance, rather than escape. Dionysian madness thus makes “such [resistant]
method in our [women’s] madness” (p. 69) impossible. Daly goes on,

Dionysus, the “gentle-man”, merry mind-poisoner, kills women
softly. Male Approval Desire, under his direction, lacks a sense of
distance from the Possessor. The Dionysian M-A-D-woman desires
the approval of her god because she loves him as herself. (ibid)

This excerpt gives only a taste of the entire passage; it contains biblical over-
tones, ironic abbreviations, and numerous cultural references, for example to
the Roberta Flack song Killing me softly and two subsequent feminist films
Killing us softly and Still Killing us softly that analysed the female stereotypes
used in advertising, to the Shakespearean line “though this be madness, yet
there is method in’t”, to a hypothetical earlier meaning of gentleman. It also
reflects a feminist topos of the time, namely that life in patriarchy drives
women mad/insane.

The translation does not cope easily with this polysemny. Wisselinck drops
the Shakespearean reference completely and she turns “gentle-man” into
“Gentleman”, erasing the ironic effect of the hyphenation that has been the
subject of several preceding footnotes. She adds a literal translation of “gentle-
man”, namely “sahnfe[r] Mann”, which misses the sarcastic point of Daly’s
usage. Her translation takes refuge in another long footnote, which begins

the wordplay in the following passage is untranslatable. We make
use of the English words whenever necessary, and replace them
wherever possible with German meanings. (p. 91)
The rest of the footnote explains the M-A-D abbreviation, giving a total of four synonyms, refers to American psychologist Phyllis Chesler’s book *Women and Madness* and gives the title of its German translation. In other words, it stresses the meaningfulness of the concrete items that can be explained, while it eschews the intertextual, cyclical effects that Daly’s writing creates in pages of culturally cross-referencing wordplay.

4. Critical contexts

While the cultural disparities that underlie Wisselinck’s translation may not be immediately apparent to target-text readers, the emphasis they are given in footnotes and the cultural stereotyping such footnotes may reveal do little to enhance the translation. Is the translator perhaps returning the punishment she suffered in working on such a text? Or is it her effort to translate for ‘meaning’ that, in effect, makes reading her work a reader-unfriendly chore?

It is not easy to answer these questions. In fact, other questions have recently been raised about the extent to which the “virtuosic and exhibitionist” feminist wordplay of the 1970s and 1980s can in fact be moved out of its particular linguistic and cultural contexts and translated for other (women) readers. In Canada, there has been criticism of one technique that Wisselinck does not use (precisely because she wants to privilege the ‘meaning’ of the text), namely mimetic translation, in which formal relationships between words in different languages are “privileged at the expense of, and in direct contrast with, lexical relationships” (Paolo Valesio, cited by Levine 1991:15). Such a technique has been used by Barbara Godard to approximate in English the sound of the wordplay used by Nicole Brossard in French, or in her words, “to play the ventriloquist” (Godard, cited by Gillam 1995:9). There are moments in her translations, where she deliberately mistranslates in order to spin out sound associations and create new wordplay though none may exist at that particular spot in the source text.

According to Robyn Gillam (1995), the strategy of mimetic translation extends the playfulness of the source text, making the translation “more obscure than the original by imposing French syntactic patterns on English” (Evelyne Voldeng, cited ibid:10) and aiming it “at a specialized, academic audience” (ibid). Thus, *écriture au féminin* in this translation is reduced to an intellectual game that has little to do with social activism in English-speaking cultures. Locating the problem of reception in the different political relationships that English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians have to their respective languages, Gillam writes:

So, although English-Canadian feminists recognize Brossard’s value as a writer and social activist, they are generally at a loss to translate either her texts or her ideas into their own culture. Perhaps that
is why it seems easier to translate the sound of her works rather than their sense. (ibid: 12)

Gillam identifies a translation strategy that seeks to transfer the sensitivity Quebec readers may have for the political uses (and sounds) of French wordplay into the Anglo-Canadian context. But English-Canadians are not as sensitive to such subtleties, since they are not a linguistically threatened minority. Hence, Gillam suggests, feminist activism in translation may need to take other routes in order to respond to and stimulate its English-language readership.

This mimetic translation strategy for Quebec feminist wordplay is quite different from Wisselinck’s options for American punning. Yet, the ensuing problem is similar: Godard’s work maintains the translated text in a position that is unattainable for all but a few (bilingual) readers who can marvel at the linguistic virtuosity of both writer and translator, while Wisselinck’s removes much of the fun and alienates the target-language reader with excessive commentary.

In an immediate response to Gillam’s commentary, Godard has emphasized the cultural and political context in which her translations were done, locating them in a specific historical moment at which many forms of mediation of feminist writing were available: ‘radical feminist’ writing was being performed, films were being made, writers were interviewed, conferences held, journals founded and distributed, and translation was a part of this activity. Further, it was carried out for specific events, specific purposes, and thus with specific “poetic” strategies (Godard 1995:40). In my view, translation in such a context also functioned within the ideology that women shared more or less similar forms of oppression and should/could therefore understand each other anyhow, with or without the mediation of ‘inaccessible’ texts.

The 1990s academic and political climate that emphasizes and explores differences – between women and between cultures – may thus be partially responsible for Gillam’s and my own critiques of translations that strive to speak to any “supranational Network” of women. Further, now that much of the more populist activity adjacent to feminism has subsided, the translations exist out of context and this renders them vulnerable. More vulnerable than the source texts, I suggest, since literary criticism provides a more or less real context against which these can be read. Translations, on the other hand, stand alone, out of date, out of context and without the critical support system that might explain why they are what they are.

The factors of time and context are clearly determining elements in the case of the German version of Mary Daly. Although the translation of Gyn/Ecology uses different strategies for wordplay translation, it places the American source material into a position as unattainable as the English translations
of Brossard — on an awesome, raised political and ideological dais. Much like the Godard translations of Brossard can be understood as products of the high time of feminist creativity, so the German text should perhaps be viewed as a document of the relationship between Anglo-American and German feminisms of the 1970s. Wisselinck's work comes out of — and simultaneously reinforces — the perception that the Anglo-American feminist tradition far outstrips the German tradition: in its willingness to experiment, its radical political thinking, and its success both at the grassroots and the institutional levels. Since German feminism is viewed as lagging behind, a view made clear in Wisselinck's comment about German not yet having developed a "new women's language", the translation's agenda is educational. This affects the confidence the translator has in her own skills and her language and leads to the didacticism I have discussed. This raises questions about the timing of translations, and the 'readiness' of the intended readership, particularly in the case of experimental work. From the example of this 'radical feminist' work in translation, it would seem that unless the intended readership is considered 'ready', the translator may be tempted to fill too many roles and, consequently, produce documents of her frustration that are as frustrating to read. This may have been the factor that caused Mary Daly's wordplay to become a form of pun-ishment in German.

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Notes

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German and French are mine.
2. These strategies are described in some detail and contrasted with the American situation by Jeanette Claus and Edith Hoshino Altbach in the anthology German Feminism: Readings in Politics and Literature (1984), which they co-edited.
3. I will be quoting from the (more easily accessible) 1990 edition of the text.
4. The issue is rather complex, since Pusch, denied a university appointment (and salary) largely as a result of her feminist interests, has had to make almost her entire living as a journalist writing reviews and articles for commercial mainstream publications. Earlier versions of her text on Mary Daly appeared in a small academic feminist journal and in the
Magazin of the Basler Zeitung, i.e. the weekend issue of a daily paper. It was then included in an anthology of short, witty (and saleable) pieces on women and language. Its tenor doubtless reflects this situation.

5. The discussion in Gaudin et al. (1981) and Freiwald (1991) give a good idea of some of the issues involved.

6. I have discussed some of the practices and contexts of ‘feminist translation’ in Canada, and listed some of the more important texts and translations in von Flotow (1991).

References


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