

What Changes Emerge when Translating Feminist Literature from English into Polish?

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to investigate to what extent gender matters in translation. The discussion centres on the translation of English feminist writings into Polish: „A Room of One’s Own”, „Orlando” and „Written on the Body”. Unlike English, Polish is a highly inflected language, which requires gendered choices in the language used to describe characters. Thus, there is a risk that the translation may distort the original meaning of the whole text. I will begin by introducing some concepts of feminist theory of translation, which draw attention to gender issues. Then, I will analyse the Polish translations of books in question. The main argument of this essay is that because translating sexual ambiguity into Polish is impossible, feminist translators may take it to their advantage to transfer their own attitudes. This ultimately may shape the overall perception of the book and the author by a given readership.

“Those of you who are women this will not apply -- you are yourselves the problem”. (Freud 1933:113)

Keywords: Gendered Translation, Feminist Theory, Grammatical Ambiguity, Cultural Influence, Translator's Ideology, Linguistics, Polish Studies, Translation Theory, Feminist Literature.

1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to address some questions related to gender issues, such as to what extent gender matters in translation and whether it may constitute a significant factor in the process of translation. The discussion centres on the translations of Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” (“Własny pokój” [Own Room]), “Orlando” (“Orlando”), and “Written on the Body” (“Zapisane na ciele” [Written on the body]) by Jeanette Winterson into Polish. While certain grammatical aspects in English allow for sexual ambiguity, Polish is an inflected language, which means that verbs, adjectives, and nouns have different endings for males and females. Because of this, a Polish translator is forced to make a difficult decision regarding gender choice from the very first sentence. In my essay, I will prove that additional factors may aggravate the problem and, as a result, translation of canonical texts may become a means for fostering feminist ideology. I will also show that translating sexual ambiguity into Polish is impossible and it always deprives the original text of its primary meaning. I will therefore begin by introducing some concepts of the feminist theory of translation. I will critique it, showing that many of those aspects concern translation studies in general, and

most of those problems refer to another thing, namely cultural awareness. Then, I will analyse the Polish translations of the books in question by applying some concepts from Bourdieu’s theory of sociology: *habitus*, *illusio*, and *capital*. I will also analyse how the translators explicitly and implicitly constructed the biological sex of the characters in question in “Orlando” and “Written on the body”. I will use the following abbreviations to mark the gender: M for male and F for female.

2. The Feminist Theory: Theoretical Framework

Scholars such as Luise von Flotow and Sherry Simon argue that the feminist movement has powerfully influenced the practice of translation [1,2]. Its biggest contribution was to identify and draw attention to certain gender-related issues. The feminist theory of translation, for instance, critiques the concepts which undermine the role of both women and translations in literary practice [3]. They too are concerned with the recovery of lost female writers’ works. Usually, those translated works are accompanied by prefaces and commentaries that inform readers how patriarchal values had previously deliberately limited its publication [1]. Moreover, as von Flotow contends, feminist thought has had an

impact on the choice of translated texts; the increased interest in feminism has resulted in a greater demand for the translation of experimental female writing [1]. The term ‘female writing’ immediately evokes the name of Hélène Cixous, (Cixous, Clément and Wing, Cixous, Cohen and Cohen,) and her concept of *écriture féminine* [feminine writing] [4,5,6]. Her two essays - “*The Newly Born Woman*”, co-authored with Catherine Clément, and “*The Laugh of the Medusa*”- theorise some aspects related to this type of writing. She defines it as a sort of bisexual writing, not in the sense of being neuter, but rather one in which neither of the halves is repressed [4]. Its source of inspiration is the female body, objectified and defamed in a patriarchal world. Inevitably, this requires the creation of a new language equipped with new forms and meanings. As von Flotow shows, feminist translators have become particularly interested in this area [1]. They tackle the censored anatomical vocabulary and try to find or create such language that would address women’s erotic needs. In the practice of translation, such innovative writing has further implications. A translator frequently faces difficulties related to word choice, gender forms, and the presence of neologisms.

Feminist theory also evokes issues of grammatical gender marking. In this, they follow the ideas already noted by such scholars as Roman Jakobson [7]. In “*On the Linguistic Aspects of Translation*”, Jakobson shows that in the language of art, poetry and mythology, grammatical gender may acquire a symbolic meaning [7]. This may pose a problem in translation because two different language systems may have different gender for the same word. For feminist theorists, however, this idea of gender-marking in language has, after all, an ideological importance. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the technical aspects of constructing the biological sex of the characters within the text. Monika Fludernik distinguishes two ways of doing it: explicit in forms of, for instance, “(pro)nominal expressions”, and implicit through, for instance, “the paraphernalia of our gendered culture (shirt vs. blouse)” [8].

Taking these motives into consideration, the value of the feminist approach arises. I do not think there exists either a female or male approach of translating and I am alone in this. Anna Bednarczyk also criticises feminist theory, calling it an artificial creation whose value has been overstated because many of those aspects concern translation studies in general [9]. For instance, gender-marking and translating neologisms are problems that face any translator regardless of whether they are male or female. On the other hand, creating an erotic language that is supposed to appeal to the opposite sex may be an issue, because as Jacques Derrida says, “it is impossible to know what the other [sex] feels [my emphasis]” [10]. In contrast, Zbigniew Białas doubts any gender-related differences regarding erotic language [11]. He questions in what way male erotic language should be spicier than female. Nevertheless, most of the problems emphasised by feminist theoreticians concern another matter, namely cultural awareness.

In the 1990s, translation theorist Susan Bassnett drew attention

to the role of extra-textual factors, such as culture, in translation practice [12]. Although she does not contest that translation is, after all, a linguistic transfer, she notices that those aspects related to a language only account for some part of this process. Factors such as social context, cultural convention, the subjectivity of the translator, and the particular historical time when the translation takes place also participate in this act. This is in line with another translation theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who also sees translation as a process more complex than a mere equivalence transfer [13]. In her essay, “*The Politics of Translation*”, she states that she is aware that a translator is a free-acting individual with the ability to make a choice [13]. Notwithstanding the freedom, a translator still has a responsibility towards the original text, which is paying careful attention to both rhetoric (form) and logic (content) of the original and, in the case of the feminist translator, to trace any gender-related issues in the language used [13]. The last claim of Spivak is controversial as it encourages an ideological approach to translation. As such, it may lead to text manipulation, which I will prove later in the text was the case with Polish translation of “*A Room’s of One’s Own*”.

Basnett argues that by comparing the original with the translated text we may note the strategies implemented by a translator and see what role each text takes in their literary systems [12]. This comparison should also reveal the translator as an individual, his views, and his ideology. In constructing the methodological tools, she uses concepts from the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, which I also use in analysing the chosen texts. In this essay, I apply only three of his concepts, which are as follows: *habitus*, unconsciously acquired norms guiding human behaviour; *capital*, the material, cultural, intellectual, and social assets; and *illusio*, motivations stimulating people’s activity [14,28].

3. The Analysis of Polish Translations of English Feminist Writings

3.1. The Feminist Intervention

I consider the works of Virginia Woolf to be the most manipulated texts of English literature in Poland and I find the Polish translation of her texts to play a significant part therein. The oeuvres of Woolf were relatively overlooked in Poland until the 1990s due to political pressures. Although Woolf as a propagator of feminism could have written herself well into the contemporary socialist context, as translation studies scholar Magda Heydel argues, the authorities considered her feminism to be a type of erotic and imperialist import [15]. Woolf’s works became more popular alongside the economic and political changes which occurred in the Polish arena after 1989. We observe here the feminist motif of recuperation of women’s “lost” work - in this case due to the political system. However, as Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga illustrates, feminist intervention in the choice of books for translation and publicity around it is the main reason why the Polish readership today perceives Woolf as an advocate of feminism, androgyny, and transgression [16]. It is the translation of “*A Room of One’s Own*” from 1997 by Agnieszka Graff that particularly shaped Woolf’s perception as such [17].

This novel is an essay where the first-person narrator directly addresses the reader. While ‘*You*’ and ‘*I*’ in English sound neutral, for a Polish translator this constitutes a linguistic problem because Polish is an inflected language, which means that verbs, adjectives and nouns have different endings for males and females. The following examples illustrate how translators use female forms – *prosiłyście* [you asked – F], *bym powiedziała* [I would speak – F] – thereby deciding that the addressees and narrator are women:

“But you may say we asked you to speak...”

„Wiem, prosiłyście mnie o wykład...”
[I know You asked (F) me for a lecture...]

“When you asked me to speak...”

„Kiedy poproszono mnie, bym powiedziała...”

Woolf (2012:561)

[When I was asked I would speak (F)...]

Woolf (1997:23)

Terentowicz-Fotyga in her article argues that by choosing the recipients’ female sex Graff emphasises the feminist overtones in this book [16]. However, Terentowicz-Fotyga is wrong because Graff simply inferred the addressees from the historical context; we know that the inspiration for Woolf to write this essay was the lectures performed for the female colleges at Cambridge University [18]. Next, Graff makes other controversial, grammatical choices. In the following example:

“What one means by integrity, in the case of novelist is the conviction he gives one that is the truth....I have never known people behaving like that.”

Woolf (2012:604)

„To ca nazywamy uczciwością w przypadku pisarza, to przekonanie, które daje on czytelnikowi, że to właśnie jest prawda...nigdy nie widziałem ludzi postępujących w ten sposób.”

[This what we called honesty in the case of the author it is the conviction which he gives a reader that this is the truth...I have never seen (M) people behaving like that.]

Woolf (1997:95)

She chooses a male grammatical form for I have () known – nie widziałem [I have not seen (M)] – although it contradicts with her implied female narrator. In her article about her translation of “A Room of One’s Own”, she explains that she did it because she “felt deceived with pushy presence of a male novelist”, appearing two sentences prior [17]. Noteworthy is how the translator’s capital (the mastered knowledge of English) manipulates a non-English-speaking public, completely unaware of all those arbitrary choices. In another translation from 2002 by Ewa Kamińska, the same grammatical decisions prove Graff’s strategies to be trustworthy. Therefore, the factors that determined its feminist overtones must have been of a different nature. Terentowicz-Fotyga proposes the following ones: the translator was a very famous feminist, Agnieszka Graff; it was published by a publishing house involved in gender-related issues, Wydawnictwo Sic! [The Publishing House Sic!]; and the introduction was written by the feminist writer, Izabela Filipiak [16]. An interesting aspect of Filipiak’s introduction – sort of a feminist manifesto – is the comparison of Woolf’s times to the contemporary Polish position. What Terentowicz-Fotyga does not seem to notice is the historical context of its publication. The

book was published in 1997, four years after anti-abortion law enforcement [21]. Soon, Parliament began talks regarding the Equal Status Law draft and the Polish feminist movement was brought to life as a result of disillusionment with a new democracy that did not guarantee women’s rights [22]. In the chorus of those facts, Graff’s motives – *illutio* – become explicit; the translation of the canonical text becomes a tool to fight for the cause of women’s rights. Her comments regarding the process of translation are worth noting too. She calls “A Room of One’s Own” “a kind of feminist Bible” [17]. Also, she feels guilty about her decision in the choice of the female gender of the addressees, for she knows that it strips the text of its neutrality and gives it special meaning and overtones [17]. In the light of those comments, it appears that Graff was clearly aware of her *illutio* and its consequences.

Graff’s influence on the actual perception of Woolf in Poland is powerful and this is an example of how a translator’s habitus (feminist values) has contributed to that. Her translation of “A Room of One’s Own” is the most quoted feminist book in Poland. The quotations from this book even appeared in the popular women’s magazine “Wysokie Obcasy” [High Heels] [23]. In the line of Bassnett’s suggestion, the comparison of English and Polish versions allows us, also, to reveal their different status in their literary systems. While the English version was criticized for some aspects, for example, not including women of colour (Walker 1984:235), the Polish version was met with enthusiasm and only one negative stance [16].

3.2. The Traps of Gender

Is it possible to translate a book into Polish without really knowing the gender of the main protagonist? The translators of “Orlando” by Woolf and “Written on the body” by Winterson were confronted with such a question. Both works meet the criteria of the theory *écriture féminine* set by Cixous, as both experiment with gender. “Orlando”, for example, is a novel about gender transgression when the main protagonist, in the middle of the narration, undergoes a sex change. Alongside the physical change, Woolf alters pronouns from he to she, so the reader knows it has occurred. The whole novel, still, takes androgynous overtones since Orlando’s sex remains doubtful throughout the narrative [24]. There is no doubt that the neutrality of certain grammatical rules in English help to maintain such sexual ambiguity, which is not the case in highly inflected Polish. Two translators, belonging to different habitus (two different strategies) Władysław Wójcik and Tomasz Bieroń, tackle this problem differently. What they have in common is that they both explicitly change the gender by swapping pronominal expressions from male on to female one and by adjusting other grammatical forms. They differ in their approach to name. In Bieroń’s free translation, the male Orlando becomes the female Orlanda, while in Wójcik’s literal translation, the gender remains unaltered. Jerzy Jarniewicz argues that both solutions are unsatisfactory [25]. Wójcik violates grammatical rules in Polish “since the male subject (Orlando) can say only *powiedziałem* [I said (M)] not *powiedziałam* [I said (F)]” [25].

On the other hand, Bieroń correctly pairs subject with predicate but deprives the book of its androgynous tone. Altea Leszczyńska disputes this, finding Bieroń's strategy irrational since Orlando is a male name in both English and Polish [26].

Helena Mizerska, the translator of "Written on the body" was left with an even greater difficulty. The story of the book is told by the narrator with no name and gender about his/her love towards a married woman, Louise. The author, in doing so, fulfils the requirement of Cixous' concept of bisexual writing where neither of the halves should be repressed. The first-person narration serves this ambiguity since in English it is less sex-specific than the third-person one. In her introduction, Mizerska recounts her initial choice of the male narrator because she believes that the protagonist manifests more male behaviour, such as the dream about castration. As the female markers, she considers, for instance, the poetic language of love. However, Winterson herself disagreed with her choice and eventually Mizerska translated again, changing the narrator to female and thus making it a lesbian story. Leszczyńska makes an interesting note: with the change of grammatical gender the translator changes the outfits of the protagonist, too - from shirts into blouses [26]. In this way, she implicitly constructs a female character through the accessories of the everyday life. Białas points out that Mizerska falls into a trap of stereotyping, as women can also have dreams about castration, and a man can use the poetic language of love [11]. This is another example of how a habitus of translator, this time in the form of a clichéd perception of certain behaviour, exerts its influence over the act of translation. Also, one may argue that Mizerska's first choice of male narrator might have something to do with, as Fludernik defines it, "heterosexual default structure" and "since A (Louis) is a woman so B (the narrator) must be a man" [8].

Białas, Jarniewicz, and Leszczyńska claim that it is impossible to translate into Polish books like "Orlando" and "Written on the Body" without losing their core meaning and that androgyny can happen only in English [11,26]. The lack of Polish experimental écriture feminine works in the national literary history may be the cause, for such works could serve as a language platform. I would like to summarise my views regarding the translation of sexual ambiguity into Polish by paraphrasing Freud's citation I used at the beginning: Those of you who are Polish does not apply; You (your language) are, indeed, the problem.

4. Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that the gender issue poses a problem in translations from English into Polish, especially when the intention of the author is to hide the sex of the protagonist. The core of the problem, naturally, lies in the different grammars. While some grammatical features of English allow for some sexual ambiguity, Polish is a highly inflected language and requires knowing the sex of the protagonist from the beginning. This conflicts with the aim of the book, stripping it of the original meaning and overtones. There are, however, other factors which aggravate this problem. In order to identify these, the Polish translations of "Room of One's Own",

"Orlando", and "Written on the Body" were analysed through three concepts of Bourdieu's theory of sociology: habitus, illusion, and capital. The essays concluded that such additional factors, such as subjective views, historical context, cultural tradition etc. may influence the perception of the author and book in a given culture, which was particularly so in the case of the Polish translation of Woolf's "A Room of One's Own".

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