BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN GENDER (STUDIES) AND (AUDIOVISUAL) TRANSLATION

ENLAZANDO (ESTUDIOS DE) GÉNERO Y TRADUCCIÓN (AUDIOVISUAL)[1]

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ABSTRACT

Since translation started gaining ground in academia in 1980s and since the translation process began to be explored from a socio-cultural – rather than a linguistic – perspective, this practice has become the terrain in which relations of power, ideological views, clichés and stereotypes are examined and challenged. Gender has been one of the most debated themes within the academic circles in the last few years and its analysis has been approached from many angles. Within the translation discourse, many contributions have been made in literary translation and only recently gender concerns have also come to the fore in audiovisual translation (AVT) debates. The aim of this article is to bridge the gap between the study of gender and that of AVT since this still appears an unconventional route that few scholars seem willing to cover. For this purpose, I will give an overview of the theoretical background on which this new approach is based and summarise the main aspects that the analysis of gender issues in AVT encompasses.

KEY WORDS

Gender, Translation, Audiovisual Translation, Ideology, Language

RESUMEN

Desde que la traducción empezó a ganar terreno en el mundo académico en los años 80, y desde que se comenzó a estudiar el proceso de la traducción desde un punto de vista sociocultural, más que lingüístico, esta práctica ha venido a formar parte del campo en el que se investigan y

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desafían las relaciones de poder, las posiciones ideológicas, así como los estereotipos y los lugares comunes. En los últimos años, el género ha sido uno de los temas más discutidos en los círculos académicos y su análisis se ha abordado desde muchos ángulos. En el discurso traductológico, ha habido muchas aportaciones en el campo de la traducción literaria y sólo recientemente las cuestiones de género han visto la luz en los debates sobre la traducción audiovisual. El objetivo de este artículo es establecer enlaces entre el estudio del género y el de la traducción audiovisual lo cual todavía parece una senda poco convencional que pocos académicos se atreven a transitar. Para este fin se ofrece un recorrido de las premisas teóricas en las cuales se fundamenta este enfoque, para luego resumir los aspectos principales que supone el análisis de las cuestiones de género en la traducción audiovisual.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Género, Traducción, Traducción Audiovisual, Ideología, Lenguaje

1. Introduction

Gender has been at the centre of academic debates in the last few decades. This is due to the richness of meanings that this term has taken on in different settings and at different times. It is also due to the difficulty in providing a comprehensive definition which addresses all the concerns that gender-related issues entail, as well to the complexity of implications that its analysis may have in social, political, economic and academic contexts.

In socio-economic terms, analysing gender means addressing issues such as "the division of labour between women and men, the needs of women and men in the world of work, the sex-based division of access to, and control over, resources and benefits" (Bureau for Gender Equality, 2007: 8). Hence the expression 'gender analysis' – as opposed to the more academic 'analysis of gender' – which places emphasis on the economic consequences of relying on a more or less gender-balanced society.

Within academia, analysing gender generally implies reflecting upon – and theorising about – the effects that the perception of sexual roles and responsibilities has on us as individuals and on our relationships with other people. Gender Studies is the discipline which best embraces the need to redefine the relationship between the sexes in order to prevent sexual/social oppression from spreading. Due to the manifold questions – concerning not only the sexual sphere – that it raises and the variety of subjects that it addresses, Gender Studies has intersected with other disciplines (e.g. Psychology, Philosophy, Literature, Film Studies and Cultural Studies). Here gender has found a fertile ground for analysis.

Since the translation practice started gaining academic acknowledgment in the 1980s, and since – as a consequence of the Cultural Turn – it became clear that translation discourse can turn into a conflicting area in/through which relations of power are unmasked, ideological stands are made explicit and clichés and stereotypes are filtered, gender has become one of its objects of analysis too and, concurrently, translation has increasingly been perceived as the means by which resistance to a largely patriarchal, heteronormative and Western-focused social system has to be expressed.

As a result, in the last few decades the relationship between gender and translation has been explored from multiple angles – although mainly within the literary context. The range of scholarly approaches that these perspectives have engendered has brought to the light how intercultural and interdisciplinary the analysis of gender can be. One of the latest translation approaches through which gender issues have been investigated is the one implemented by De Marco (2012) who has explored the mechanisms through which mass media activate stereotypes concerning gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and social status, and the extent to which audioviosual translation (AVT) mediates their transmission.

This articles aims to provide a summary of the aspects that the analysis of gender issues in AVT encompasses. Before doing that, an overview of the background on which this new approach is based will be offered.

2. The inheritance of literary translation

That of gender and cinema/audiovisual programmes seems to be a straightforward relationship as the big screen – and the mass media in general – has always offered an invaluable tool to dissect gender roles and (patriarchal) power dynamics (Mulvey, 1975; Haskell, 1985; Gill, 2007). Consequently, it might appear obvious to establish a link between gender and audiovisual translation, the latter being the means by which information, images and messages broadcast through audiovisual programmes travel across the world. However, when looking back at the journey which has brought to elaborating a framework for analysing audiovisual texts from a gender (studies') perspective, we see that such interconnection is not a well-trodden path yet. The most prolific terrain for analysing gender constructions remains literary translation and the focus of the critical analysis of gender is mainly on women. One of the reasons is that

the translation of literary texts has been the means by which, in the past, women had access to the public world and their translations have brought to the fore the misrepresentation of women that literary texts has often offered. It is clear that the interest in the linguistic patterns through which literature nurtures androcentric visions and the reasons why the translation industry endorses them is still vivid.

Apart from the notorious contributions made by feminist scholars who, in making public their interventionist translation practices, have exposed the misogynist substratum of most literary works (De Lotbinière-Harwood, 1991; von Flotow, 1997) and have challenged the view of translation as a secondary, subservient activity (Levine, 1991; Arrojo, 1994) as well as its paternalistic metaphorization (Chamberlain, 1992), recent publications have shown that literary texts and women continue to be the pivot on which most feminist Translation Studies critique revolves.

In his co-edited book (Santaemilia and von Flotow, 2011) Santaemilia contextualises the analysis of women and (literary) translation in specific geographical, cultural and identity-related territories. He gives space to contributors who on the one hand examine the role of women translators in determining literary processes and social changes in different countries, and on the other hand stress the need for current feminist translators to become more self-critical. In doing so, Santaemilia demonstrates that translation can be both a geographical space where the female/feminist voice asserts itself, and an ideological arena where male and female translation strategies can be confronted.

2.2 The value of feminist interventionist translation practices

Beforehand I referred to feminist interventionist translation practices which have been one of the most compelling and challenged themes within TS debates. By 'interventionist practice' it is generally meant the permission that "in the lead of the feminist writers she translates [a feminist translator] has given herself […] to make her work visible, discuss the creative process she is engaged in, collude with and challenge the writers she translates" (von Flotow, 1991: 74). In other words, it is the way in which the translator's gendered agency is made explicit in the text. There is a tendency to generalise about these practices and (mis)conceive them as synonymous with outright manipulation of the source text. This, in turn, often results in thinking of female/feminist translation as an unconceivable and unfeasible practice which cannot be

backed by translation agents. Santaemilia (2011: 68) has pointed out that "[s]ome techniques or strategies have received little attention, while others (particularly *hijacking*) have received perhaps too much, thus distorting the praxis of feminist translators". In fact, although there are translation strategies which re-work the original texts, interventionism can also refer to the implementation of a more gender-inclusive language aimed at sensitising the readership about the natural developments which have been taking place in languages, and about the need to hinder – through language – the spread of dangerous usages which may result in perpetuating social inequalities. Interesting, in this respect, is Castro's (2013) contrastive analysis of two (ideologically) opposite translations into Galician of the British book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2003): one tried to implement gender-inclusive language and eventually did not get to publication, the other instead kept faith to traditional, dominant gender values and therefore was accepted and published. Castro argues that:

> [t]he dominant (mainstream/*malestream*) translation eventually published was justified by appealing to notions such as fidelity to the source text and to the author, translator's invisibility, objectivity and fluency – all of them concepts which have been superseded in the theoretical field (Castro, 2013: 53).

Castro sees these conflicting positions as representative of a gap between the theory and the practice of translation, or better as a "missing link between feminist approaches to linguistics and translation studies" (*ibid*: 53).

A similar insight about the scarce favour that gender-inclusive language enjoys in the translation industry was offered a few years ago by Wolf (2006) who contended that while feminist translation has clearly given women greater visibility and is therefore welcomed by translation associations, in fact publishing houses seem more prone to hold to mainstream practices. In order for (women) translators to achieve a more established position in society both Wolf and Castro advocate a closer collaboration between the parties involved in the translation process. This, however, is not an easy-to-attain goal.

3. Gender in audiovisual translation

The struggle described above is indicative of the issues that endorsing alternative professional practices in translation and using translation as a tool to claim ideological consensus raise. Challenging well-established, hegemonic positions has never been easy, especially in contexts such as the translation environment where translators tend to hold secondary roles and struggle to raise their visibility, even more in audiovisual translation. As a matter of fact, in AVT many professionals are usually involved in the process and therefore it becomes difficult to identify who, in the end, is responsible for the way in which the final product is delivered, as well as the commercial and political interests which control the circulation of audiovisual programmes. An insight into the dictates that translators and other professionals have to obey would certainly help investigate whether gender needs are addressed within the (audiovisual) translation industry, whether gender-related concerns are perceived as important, and to what extent these concerns may have an impact on the working dynamics. This difficulty in targeting the holders of control in the audiovisual (translation) industry and in accessing information about the existence of a policy which takes gender needs into account, translates into a difficulty in carrying out studies which address gender issues in AVT. This explains why up to now only few contributions have been made in this area.

The beginning of this decade has seen the emergence of scholars who have attempted to explore the translation of audiovisual programmes from a gender perspective. For example, Baumgarten (2005) has analysed the suppression of sexist references in the dubbed versions of some of James Bond films paying attention to same-sex and mixed talks. Toto (2009) has unmasked the process of emasculation that most cultural references in the gay speech of *Will & Grace* has undertaken in the Italian dubbed version. Similarly, Ranzato (2012) notices that most of the homosexual vocabulary present in the original versions of *Angels in America* and *Six Feet Under* tend to be censored or "sanitised" (in her own words: 381) in the Italian dubbed versions, but this is seen more as representative of the lack of a vocabulary as rich as the English one, rather than as an example of overt manipulation.

The focus of these scholars has been mainly on the linguistic dimension of the films/sitcoms considered. Recently, De Marco (2012) has proposed a sociological analysis of the Italian and Spanish dubbed versions of ten Anglo-American films encompassing the linguistic, the visual and the acoustic dimensions of these movies.

She looks at these programmes not just as texts which pose linguistic and technical challenges but also, and above all, as hybrid spaces where political, ideological and cultural views collide. It is through the use of verbal and non-verbal language that these views come to the surface.

Aware of the power of persuasion that the mass media have on people and of the extent to which the messages which are subtly filtered through them can mould people's conscience and, eventually, their behaviours, De Marco thinks that it is paramount to establish a link between the effects that words have on the audience's perception of gender and those produced by manipulating images and sound.

In the absence of a pre-existing theoretical framework which conceptualises the binomial gender-audiovisual, most of De Marco's argument about the visual representation is centred around the application of theories formulated within (feminist) Film Studies (Mulvey, 1975; De Lauretis, 1984). Someone could argue that too much space has been given to the often quoted theorization about the prominence of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975) which, in mainstream narrative cinema, results in an easy – although misleading – association between the male gaze (to which female characters are subject) and patriarchy.[3] However, the great majority of the films under scrutiny in De Marco's study seem to confirm Western feminists' remarks about the objectification of the female, rather than the male, body and the enhancement of voyeuristic fantasy through the use of specific cinematic techniques.

The analysis of the audio dimension has, instead, been influenced by Chion (1999) who argues that voice, rather than images, is what counts most in cinema as "the ear is inevitably carried toward it, picking it out, and structuring the perception of the whole around it" (*ibid*: 5). In fact, the voice (meaning the pitch) plays an important role in determining the impressions that people get of others and, in fact, De Marco (2012) shows in her study that some actors'/actresses' pitch has been altered to reinforce the stereotypes evoked by the roles that the characters perform in the films. Therefore the theory according to which the voice can also be a factor of gender discrimination (Cameron, 1992) is validated.

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[3] There exist a remarkable presence of scholars who have questioned Mulvey's (1975) theories for not including the experiences of black people, for presenting women as the only "to-look-at" object and for excluding the possibility to integrate feminist messages into mainstream cinema (Evans and Gamman, 1995; Mackinnon, 1999).

With regards to the linguistic dimension, a good part of De Marco's investigation is dedicated to examining verbal language with a particular focus on the extent to which language (in its original and translated versions) reproduces derogatory or demeaning connotations when talking about – or addressing – certain social groups: e.g. women in general, gays and lesbians, people of lower social status. Interestingly, although there seems to be an equal range of derogatory terms and expressions in the three languages under analysis (English, Italian and Spanish), a tendency to charge some dialogue exchanges with sexist/sexual overtones – inexistent in the originals – have been spotted in the Italian and Spanish translations. In the aforementioned study by Castro (2013: 43) it has been stressed that "quite often […] translations also incorporate sexist elements when having to render an overtly inclusive source text written from an explicit feminist position". Fidelity to the original is often passed off as the justification for the impossibility to adhere to gender-inclusive practices, thus implying that normative discourse is inherently sexist. However, De Marco's instances show that by adding connotations that the originals do not convey while other more literal renderings would have been possible, the translated versions have not been faithful at all. On the contrary, they use a kind of language whose only effect is that of reinforcing the general assumption, inherent in some countries, that referring, for example, to women by using labels which echo prostitution is a normal pattern. Rather than faithfulness to a source text, the ruling benchmark here seems to be reluctance to overthrow the consolidated – generally unfair – social dynamics based on binary gender oppositions by all means. Speech is one of the tools through which such an undemocratic goal can be pursued, with the result that distorted expectations are nurtured in the consumers of the audiovisual programmes.

4. Conclusions

At the outset of this article I made a distinction between the aspects that the analysis of gender entails in a socio-economic context and in academia, by stressing the more theoretical and reflective value of the academic approach. If we look at the aims that both organisations which promote gender equality and scholars (mainly in the Gender Studies discipline) pursue, we see that, in practice, they do not diverge extensively. The main goal is that of working towards the establishment of societies in which gender

differences are seen as richness, not as the terrain on which prejudices and discrimination thrive.

Throughout the article I have shown how pursuing this objective through the promotion of a more democratic use of language (both verbal and non-verbal), and through a practice (translation) which plays an important role in transferring messages and values, seems to be extremely difficult. As some studies herein quoted demonstrate, the persistence of a normative discourse which benefits some sectors of society to the detriment of others makes it hard to bridge the gap between the theory of translation and its practice.

From a theoretical point of view there are various ways in which this gulf could be bridged. 1) As mentioned in section 2 most contributions in the area of feminist translation (mainly, but not exclusively, literary) takes women as the main object of study. Although their usefulness is uncontested, these studies nevertheless risk perpetuating the idea that gender concerns mainly women and this, in turn, results in enhancing – rather than reducing – the opposition between the two sexes. These continue to be seen as two parallel worlds which cannot establish an unbiased and fruitful dialogue. Although there are scholars who are against the inclusion of masculinity in feminist studies (Modleski, 1991) I support Jeffords when she advocates a more comprehensive approach which brings together both women and men:

> Although masculinity is by far the category of privilege within patriarchy … [it is] manipulated by interests [race, sexuality, class] other than those defined by gender. For this reason an examination of masculinity, not as a direct oppressor of women, but as a category of definition itself is important to any feminist understanding of the operations of patriarchy (Jeffords 1989, quoted in Wiegman, 2001: 368).

2) There is a tendency to conceive gender as the social perception of individuals' sex. Although this is a valid benchmark, the analysis of gender cannot leave aside the other identity-related parameters it consists of: ethnicity, social status, sexual orientation, religious beliefs. As a consequence, a wider spectrum of studies which encompasses these other aspects of analysis is welcome if we want to tackle all sorts of social inequality.

From a practical point of view I do believe that more research on the power of didactics as a means to create more informed and gender aware translators is the key to reaching a more stable social system. Castro's (2013) study has shown that when a translator tries to implement gender-inclusive practices, his/her work tends to be rejected. This will happen again until these attempts remain rare initiatives taken by brave, individual translators who are more sensitive to gender concerns than others, but who do not find support within their professional category. The agents of the translation process are not just the translators, the proofreaders, the audiovisual technicians (in the case of AVT). The primary agents are the academics – in many cases the same who carry out gender-focused research – who teach translation courses and who can use their expertise to accustom their students (i.e. the future translators) to a gender-responsible approach. Once this gender-responsible approach in teaching/learning becomes a collective effort with which employers and publishing houses will be confronted on a regular basis, then we will be able to say that the gap between gender (studies) and (audiovisual) translation has been bridged.

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