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La traduction comme transmetteur d'idéologie féministe

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Translation as a transmitter of feminist ideology

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Abstract:

Language is indeed, the spirit of human communication, a communication that can be analyzed from various theoretical perspectives among which is that of translation. The verb "translate" comes from the Latin "latus trans" in the sense of "transported through". In fact, translation has often been defined by reference to meaning; a translated work is said to "have an analogous meaning" with the original version. Thus, translation is, above all, a discipline which aims to convey the meaning of a given linguistic discourse from one language to another.

Keywords:

language, translation, linguistics, feminism, communication.

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Résumé :

La langue est en effet, l'esprit de la communication humaine, une communication qui peut être analysée à partir de diverses perspectives théoriques parmi lesquels se trouve celui de la traduction. Le verbe "traduire" vient du latin "latus trans" au sens de "transporté à travers". En fait, la traduction a souvent été définie par référence au sens ; une œuvre traduite est dite "avoir une signification analogue" avec la version originale. Ainsi, la traduction est, avant tout, une discipline qui vise à transmettre le sens d'un discours linguistique donné d'une langue à une autre.

Mots-clés :

langue, traduction, linguistique, féminisme, communication.

Language is indeed the spirit of human communication, a communication that can be analyzed from various theoretical perspectives among which stands that of Translation. Etymologically speaking, the verb "to translate" comes from Latin "trans + latus" suggestive of "carried across". Translation has often

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been defined with reference to meaning; a translated work is said to "have an analogous meaning" with the original version.

Thus, Translation is, above all, a discipline that aims at conveying the meaning of a given linguistic discourse from one language into another. However, it often happens that the meaning of a given original word / text is not always preserved in the target version. Besides, one of the central creeds of critical linguistics is the certitude that language reproduces ideology. In that case, a very close bond between cultural standards and language is assumed by what might be dubbed "ideological linguistics" such as Marxist or feminist approaches. Here, one should be contended with the second movement significant role in the Translation process.

Translators always come to a text with a number of beliefs and values that they want to cast on others, they are, in fact, far from being a cognitive "tabula rasa" as attested by Nida (1961) for whom: "Language is not used in a context less vacuum, rather, it is used in a host of discourse contexts; contexts which are impregnated with the ideology of social systems and institutions. Because language operates within this social dimension it must, of necessity reflect, and some would argue, construct ideology"[(1)].

They are generally among the first readers in the target language texts, and many of them exercise their natural "penchant" to deduce for the readers the detected implicit meanings according to their own standing. Consequently, translators are relentlessly grappling with difference. They are both called to transcend it in order to uphold the spreading of cultures throughout the world, yet faced and confronted by it. The proof is that throughout the ages, they have been defamed, suspected, persecuted and even blazed at the stake[(2)].

Jean-François Joly (1995) revealed in his prelude to Translators through History that the object of this attitude is not the translators themselves, but rather "the new, foreign and

sometimes strange values that they introduce into their own cultures"[3]. He goes on saying that: "We are always somewhat unsettled by novelty, difference and otherness, which challenge our own values and hold up a mirror that forces us to examine ourselves"[4].

Among these challenges, for instance, are those problems which may be encountered when setting up the ground for the inclusion of feminist ideology into societies which have not shown any particular concern in the issue. Here, one is merely referring to traditions and mindsets and their related obstacles in contemporary societies.

Feminism, in fact, is at the same time a complex and a broad notion to be evaluated in few lines. Its first appearance can be drawn to the nineteenth century, more precisely to 1872 with the writings of Alexandre Dumas. The latter borrowed this neologism (invented around 1870) from a medical jargon where it meant a cease in the development and virility of masculine patients. One can notice that political lexis made use of this word to characterize all those women who ask for equality with men. This is basically due to their belief in the subordinate position they occupied in politics, education and the economic system of their country.

They tried by all means to change the image that men had about them, and perhaps that among the key domains where this "upheaval" was felt is that of literature. Indeed a huge change took place vis-à-vis the relation between women to literature.

Besides, the growth of modern feminist literary reflection takes us to 1949; a year in which Simone de Beauvoir published a book entitled "The Second Sex". The book laid bare all the social practices (including manners of speech, jokes, decrees, etc.) that led women to believe that they were "second-rate" beings. From that on, many other contributions were undertaken to impose a descent status for women and to show how indignant patriarchal societies were.

However, from a historical point of view, translation was one of the unusual activities in which women had some room for manoeuvre to endorse their social existence. Feminist movements have also had a deep political and literary influence on either translation theory or practice. Indeed, for some feminist translators translation is seen as a means of commitment with literature.

To support this view, consider these two instances. The first example is the controversial 1992 article on gender by the feminist and lawyer Lori Chamberlain, in which, and among other things, she speculated on the fact that the relation between the original and the translated versions echoes the general ties in a patriarchal society. The original piece of writing representing masculine actions and the translated one standing rather for feminine values and virtues.

One year later, that is in 1993, another feminist named Catherine Mac Kinnon succeeded to fuel a debate in the United States by her publication of a translated book that she entitled Only words. This, put to the fore the claim that pornography is akin to rape.

It is worth pointing out, that feminist ideology in such places as the United States (or the Quebec) became familiarized with its public as a result of intellectual feminist movements. It is only then, that experimental feminist translation came out of the scene. This fact was intimately coupled with feminist writing practice in a definite ideological and cultural milieu. Furthermore, feminist translators made their work visible by defying the writers they translated.

Feminist strategies in general concern footnotes and commentaries, they sometimes induce the translator to discuss a specific text by contributing in one way or another to a targeted understanding, by including, for instance, remarks in the text itself, or even getting rid of passages that the translator considers non-feminist.

Their techniques, which were quite distinct from the traditional ones, offered them the prospect of unveiling the concealed and masked meanings of words and to transmit their own beliefs. A case in point is chiefly documented by Von Flotow(5) (1991) who quotes a very illustrative example of a feminist translation of the title of Nicole Brossard's book L'Amer by Barbara Godard.

L'Amer, in French is a term that encloses at least three denotations: mere/mother, mer/sea, and amer/bitter. The issue of the patriarchal mother - the woman confined to reproduction and to her consequent predisposition to stifle (smother) her own children - permeates the first part of the book.

Godard (1990), appending the untranslatable wordplay of the title, whose effect rests on the mute "e" and the sound associations in French, presents a kind of an explained text advanced in her own version. Thus, her title turns out to be The Sea Our Mother: ee, S = our, Mother.

It can be observed that the present title encompasses the sour and smothering aspects of patriarchal motherhood, in addition to the association of "mer" and "mere", complementing the lack of silent "e" in English.

It follows from the previous discussion that language is far from being innocent. The presence of a particular word in a particular context is never innocuous; there is always some concealed "idea" behind it. This was all at the advantage of feminists who used their translated versions as weapons against societies whose interest went beyond the actual status of women.

Notes:

1 - E. Nida: The setting of communication, Communication et Traduction, détaché de la Documentation en France, numéro spécial, Paris 1961, p. 3.

2 - Etienne Dolet, among others, received this chastisement in Paris merely for having translated the New Testament into English, 1546.

3 - J. F. Joly: Translators through History, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John

Benjamin's Publishing Company, 1995, p. 12.
4 - Ibid., p. 13.
5 - L. Von Flotow: Feminist translation, context, practice and theories, TTR, Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction IV/2, 1991, pp. 75-76.

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