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**LE PRESIDENT EST UNE FEMME:
THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING GENDER IN UN TEXTS**

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[INTRODUCTION](#)

Feminist thought and translation studies both emerged in the 1970s and became recognised research fields in the 1980s, at a time that “gave strong prominence to language” (Sherry Simon 1996,8), a factor that is likely to have contributed to the overlap between the two. A central argument in the fight against linguistic androcentrism from the 1970s onwards was the belief that language influenced thoughts, and therefore formed part of the problem of discrimination against women (Benedicta Lomotey 2015,168), an idea reflected in Judith Butler’s denouncing “[t]he power of language to subordinate and exclude women” (1990,26). The potentially performative dimension of language described by John Langshaw Austin (1962) informed Butler’s (1990) argument that gender itself is brought into being through the performance of activities perceived as gendered. For instance, Robin Lakoff’s 1975 study of ‘woman’s speech’ – characterised by insecurity, powerlessness and triviality – shows how speech forms part of the process of acquiring a gender.

With the advent of third-wave feminism came a shift towards a more discursive analysis of gender in language through third-wave feminist linguistics (Sara Mills 2003). Third-wave feminist translation “encourages the examination of not only literary texts (as has been the case almost exclusively up till now both from the Canadian school and from later approaches) but

also all kinds of text types” (Olga Castro 2009,13). As a consequence, the focus of feminist translation studies is no longer limited to literary texts but extended to pragmatic ones as well.

There is still no consensus today on the exact nature of the link between language and gender and on whether, or to what extent, the former influences the latter. However, feminist scholars agree that language at the very least reflects the power dynamics between men and women, and that “conventional and prescriptive ‘patriarchal language’ [has] to be undone in order for women's words to develop, find a space and be heard” (Luise von Flotow 1991,6). The “inherently sociopolitical connections between gender and language” (Flotow 2008,122) are particularly relevant to pragmatic texts such as legal and institutional texts, in which language is a doubly political matter: for example, ambiguity deriving from the use of the generic masculine can lead to juridical loopholes. Moreover, since the beginning of research on gender and language, one key aspect of it has been the role of language in the marginalisation of women in the public sphere and institutions (Deborah Cameron 2005). Sylvia Shaw’s 2000 study investigates the influence of 100 new female MPs entering the British Parliament in 1997, in order to determine whether this had any effect on the infamously aggressive style of parliamentary debates. Her results showed that the rules designed to guarantee equal participation were frequently violated, and that women’s interventions only amounted to two-thirds of men’s in relation to the respective numbers of the two groups.

The corpus of this study similarly explores pragmatic texts from the public sphere: it is composed of eight texts in English and their Spanish and French translations, all related to the United Nations’ four World Conferences on Women. The specificity of these texts is that they are aimed at fighting sexism, which one would expect to entail a greater awareness of linguistic sexism and a conscious effort to avoid using sexist language. The goal of this article is to explore whether and to what extent these texts testify to such a writing and translating strategy, and to determine how the use of gender-related language evolves between 1975 and 2015.

While the results do show an increasing awareness of the centrality and sensitivity of the linguistic dimension of gender issues, they also point to the lack of a coherent strategy both across languages and within individual ones.

LINGUISTIC SEXISM

Although the question of whether languages in themselves can be sexist is a highly debated one, there is no doubt that the use of sexist language can and does reflect, and probably feeds, the existence of a metalinguistic sexism.

Sexist language has traditionally been described as language that makes invisible, stereotypes and/or denigrates one sex, typically women (Nancy Henley 1987). Within sexist language, Álvaro García Meseguer (1994) distinguishes between lexical sexism at the word level, and grammatical sexism at the syntactic level. According to him, grammatical sexism is the most resistant form of linguistic sexism, being the expression of a sexism deeply rooted in society. As pointed out by Elena Teso, “most studies have focused on lexical sexism as it has been argued that sexism at the word level can be eliminated” (2010,15). Moreover, “three potentially responsible agents of linguistic sexism have been identified: speakers and their mental context, listeners and their mental context and the language as a system” (García Meseguer 1994; Teso 2010,15).

This last point is particularly relevant to the translation of natural versus grammatical gender. As Simon points out, “[w]hile grammarians have insisted on gender-marking in language as purely conventional, feminist theoreticians follow Jakobson in re-investing gender-markers with meaning” (1996,17). Thus, Cameron speaks of “metaphorical gender” (1992,82) for words that are apparently neutral but carry a gender-specific connotation. Similarly, Pierre Zoberman makes a strong case against the “fallacy of inclusiveness”, and unlike Cameron who advocates total feminization (generic feminine) he claims that “[t]he translation process renders

the underlying focus on man explicit—or should do so” (2014, 244). Choosing to keep the sexist language of a text in its translation can indeed serve the purpose of exposing and thus implicitly denouncing the original text’s linguistic sexism.

Anti-sexist or gender-inclusive language, conversely, involves using language in a way that avoids gender bias, usually through a conscious effort, and/or serves a feminist agenda. There are two main strategies of gender-inclusivity. Gender-neutralisation, or degendering, involves “the use of one term to refer to both sexes” and “reducing or abolishing terms that connote one sex to the exclusion of the other” (Teso 2010, 41). Gender-specification, or feminization, is “a strategy used to achieve linguistic equality by making the ‘invisible sex’ (in most cases, women) visible in language through systematic and symmetrical marking of gender” (Pauwels 2000,141). The former strategy is often better suited to languages that only have natural gender, while the latter is often used in the case of languages with grammatical gender.

LANGUAGE REFORMS

Pauwels (2003, 550) underlines the fact that in terms of language change, women have traditionally derived a form of authority from their role as norm-enforcers. However, it is men that have played the central role of norm-makers and language planners, particularly through typically male-dominated language academies.

Thus, the insistence of the Académie française (French Academy) that the masculine being the unmarked form in French is a purely grammatical matter, and that the masculine must prevail over the feminine in word agreement, has played a key role in the strong resistance to reforms promoting inclusive writing in France¹. Anne-Marie Houdebine (1998) claims that the difficulty of feminising the French language is a social and ideological problem rather than a linguistic one. This view is supported by Marie-Marthe Gervais-Le Garff’s 2007 comparative study, which shows that feminising reforms were implemented earlier and more successfully in

Canada and Belgium – where no institution plays a role equivalent to that of the Académie française – than in France.

Similarly, the Real Academia Española (Spanish Royal Academy) continues to champion the generic value of the masculine, in spite of ongoing debates since the 1990s. It has also spoken both against the use of abstract nouns such as ‘ciudadanía’ (citizenry) to avoid gender-marking, and against more informal and innovative forms such as the symbol @, which is being increasingly used as a way to represent both the ‘o’ of the masculine and the ‘a’ of the feminine, especially on social media. A 2013 study by Uwe Kjær Nissen showed that the use of anti-sexist language in the Spanish press remained sporadic and inconsistent, and that its most widespread manifestations were split-forms such as ‘él o ella’ [he or she], abstract nouns and unmarked forms such as ‘persona.’

Even in the absence of such influential and prescriptive language institutions, the likes of editors and grammarians – such as Fowler in the English language – can play a similarly prescriptive role. However, phenomena such as the now widespread use of ‘they’ as a gender-neutral pronoun for a singular referent, or the existence of the title ‘Ms’, which does not give away the marital status of the referent, point towards a greater flexibility in English than in both French and Spanish. As pointed out by Pauwels, the studies on the use of non-sexist nouns and pronouns in English led, among others, by Cooper (1984), Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King (1994) and Pauwels (1997b, 2000), all report “a decrease in use of masculine generic nouns and pronouns in favour of non-sexist alternatives both in forms of written discourse and in public speech” (Pauwels 2003 563). The greater flexibility of the English language, as opposed to the version of French spoken in France for instance, testifies among other things to the lower prevalence of linguistic purism among English speakers.

In 2010, Teso published a study aimed at ascertaining whether recommendations for gender-inclusive writing were being applied, through comparison of a natural gender language

(English) and a grammatical gender one (Spanish) in institutional texts. The results show only a limited attempt at gender-inclusivity, with for instance 2 occurrences of the word ‘chairperson’ in English, against 60 for ‘chairman.’ In Spanish, all the occupational terms were in the masculine, even those with a generic meaning, presumably to improve readability. Languages’ natural preference for linguistic economy is indeed a recurring argument in the opposition to inclusive writing.

CASE STUDY

CONTEXT: THE UN AND GENDER EQUALITY

The 1945 Founding Charter of the United Nations is known for being the first global treaty for gender equality, defining “the equal rights of men and women” as a “fundamental human right” in its very first paragraph. However, this founding text already contains the germs of the gender-related translation issues that occupy us here: the French and Spanish translations mention respectively “les droits fondamentaux de l’homme” and “los derechos fundamentales del hombre”, which both translate literally as “man’s fundamental rights.” In that pre-feminist era, such was the accepted wording, but more surprising is the fact that it still largely is the case in French, as shown below.

The United Nations reaffirmed the principle of equal rights in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which encourages member states to take measures to fight stereotypes and prejudice against women. This marked the beginning of the use of inclusive language in text drafting. The UN’s ambition to fight gender discrimination also manifested itself in the choice to make the 1975-1985 years the Decade for Women. This decade was marked by three major World Conferences on Women in 1975, 1980 and 1985, which led in turn to a fourth one: the landmark 1995 Beijing Conference. The corpus of this study comprises the texts of these four conferences and of the four reports

issued between 2000 and 2015 on the outcome of the Beijing Conference. It covers a period of 40 years, from the first conference in 1975 to the last report in 2015.

METHODOLOGY

Between the English, French and Spanish versions, the corpus is comprised of twenty-four texts. Originally, the Arabic translations were also meant to form part of the corpus. However, two of the earlier texts turned out to be unavailable despite repeated attempts to secure them, to the point that one may wonder if the translations exist at all. This might reflect “the cultural authority of language, and of the position of the speakers within dominant codes” (Simon 1996, 127), and brings to mind what Lynn Penrod describes as “the most fundamental decision of all: whether or not to translate a given text at a given time” (1993, 39). It is all the more unfortunate as the existing literature on gender and translation already focuses largely on European languages.

It is worth pointing out that the different texts of the corpus do not officially follow the traditional original/translation divide. Multilingualism is defined as a core value of the United Nations, and in theory every UN text is issued in the organisation’s six official languages, with all six texts enjoying the status of authentic, original textⁱⁱ. Although the English version was written first in the texts under study (and in the majority of cases), as is clearly perceptible in some passagesⁱⁱⁱ, there is no hierarchy between source language and target language. This raises interesting questions in terms of translation studies, by giving every translator – or team of translators –, at least in principle, full responsibility for the text. Therefore, according to this particular approach to translation within the UN, the translators/authors of all three versions of the texts under study are to be held equally accountable for the use of both sexist and non-sexist language.

A quantitative study was carried out on the English, French and Spanish texts to determine the extent to which both sexist language and gender-inclusive language were used. A discursive analysis of the use of about sixty key words and expressions was then conducted. The choice of these words and expressions was made both on the basis of the UNESCO guidelines, described below, and on an *ad hoc* basis – i.e. including any expression of sexist or anti-sexist language in the texts that I considered to be significant.

The goal of this study was to answer two questions. What is the prevalence of sexist and anti-sexist language in the corpus for each of the three languages? And is there a writing/translating strategy for the expression and translation of gender? For both questions, the diachronic dimension was considered in the analysis.

It must be noted that in general, translational choices made within an institution are not solely the work of individual translators. Even in the absence of an institution-wide policy across languages, or within individual languages – as suggested by the present study – standardising translation tools are increasingly at the heart of translation practice within most major organisations, including the United Nations. In the last decade in particular, computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools have become a central component of translation within the UN. In particular, the translation interface eLUNa was developed in-house specifically for this purpose and has been used systematically since 2014. Among other functionalities, it identifies terms in the source text and links them to equivalents from a terminology database, the UN TermPortal, also dating back to 2014. eLUNa also matches up segments in the source text with previously translated segments in the target language, a process that is bound to foster homogeneity across translations. However, at the beginning of the time period under study – and probably during most of it – these tools were still largely underdeveloped, so that in 1980 there was still no computerised terminology bank in the organisation. It is unclear to what extent CAT tools were used between 1980 and 2014, but the very absence of information on the

subject tends to suggest that their use was at least limited. In the absence of any conclusive data, however, the existence of an institution-wide policy cannot be excluded. It is therefore difficult to determine to what extent responsibility for sexist and anti-sexist language lies with the institution as opposed to the sum of the individual translators' voices.

UNESCO GUIDELINES

In 1989, at a time when linguistic sexism had already emerged as a central feminist concern, UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, one of the UN's main agencies – published the first edition of a booklet entitled 'Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language.' Its aim was to tackle "the issue of sexist language", in the context of "a growing awareness that language does not merely reflect the way we think: it also shapes our thinking" (1999, 3-4). This line of thinking, sometimes described as a milder version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1929), denotes a bold stance on the part of the institution. The guidelines, which were published in English, French and Spanish, give definitions of the main terms involved and examples of sexist language, as well as alternative, non-sexist expressions. Because each language poses a different set of problems, the examples and strategies provided differ. These recommendations were meant to lead to a revision of formerly published texts and to serve as guidelines for the avoidance of sexist language in the United Nations systems in general.

The three sets of guidelines show different overall strategies for English on the one hand, in which gender-neutralisation prevails, and the two Romance languages on the other, in which gender-specification is dominant. However, the three sets have in common the importance given to an empowering strategy in the use of occupational titles.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

SEXIST LANGUAGE

GENERIC MASCULINE: GENERAL USE

Generic masculine corresponds to the first kind of sexist language described by Henley: making one sex invisible. In the corpus, outside of occupational titles and words related to ‘man’ – which will be treated separately – generic masculine is relatively rare. It happens most in Spanish, with a total of 41 occurrences, and least in French, with only 3 occurrences.

In example 1, drawn from the 1995 Beijing Conference, the speaker uses the word ‘citizen’, which is an unmarked form in English but must be translated either as a masculine or feminine name in both French and Spanish (emphasis mine throughout the examples):

1.a. We now need a sea change: women will no longer accept the role of second-rate citizens (1995, 213).

1.b. Necesitamos un cambio inmediato y definitivo: las mujeres no aceptarán más el papel de **ciudadanas** de segundo orden (227).

1.c. Ce qu’il faut maintenant, c’est un changement radical, car les femmes n’accepteront plus le rôle de **citoyen** de deuxième classe (234).

The more logical choice here would be to use the feminine form in the translations, since the referent is ‘women’ (‘femmes’ – ‘mujeres’), and it is the case in Spanish with ‘ciudadanas’ [citizens-female]. However, the French translation resorts to the masculine form of the noun (‘citoyen’ as opposed to ‘citoyenne’ or ‘citoyennes’), presumably regarding ‘citoyen’ [citizen-male] as the generic, default form. The fact that the noun is also in the singular, in spite of having a plural referent, is consistent with this hypothesis. This choice reveals that the generic

value of the masculine form was, at least for the French translators of the 1995 conference, strong enough to trump semantic gender agreement.

Occupational terms: generic masculine

Within occupational terms, generic masculine is widely used in the earlier texts in all three languages. Although it does decrease over time, the use of generic masculine for job titles persists in all four conferences, particularly in French, as seen in example 2, from the 1975 Mexico Conference:

2.a. “The Conference shall elect the following officers: **a President, 46 Vice-Presidents and a Rapporteur-General** as well as **a Chairman** for each of the main committees provided for in rule” (1975, 42).

2.b. “La Conferencia elegirá a las siguientes autoridades: **un Presidente, 46 Vicepresidentes y un Relator General**, así como a **un presidente** para cada una de las comisiones principales a que se refiere el artículo 42” (148).

2.c. “La Conférence élit les membres des bureaux suivants : **un président, 46 vice-présidents et un rapporteur général**, ainsi qu’**un président** pour chacune des grandes commissions prévues à l’article 42” (148).

The indefinite singular masculine pronoun ‘un’, common to French and Spanish, leaves no doubt as to the gender of the underlying referent in these two versions, and neither does the term ‘chairman’ in English. The use of generic masculine is thus consistent in this example.

By 1995, however, the lack of a unified language policy has become apparent, as shown in example 3:

3.a “Opening of the Conference and election of **the President**” (1995, 138).

3.b. “Apertura de la Conferencia y elección **de la Presidenta**” (149).

3.c. “Ouverture de la Conférence et élection **du président**” (147).

Here we are presented with a problem typical of the translation of gender, which Castro describes as “the translational [problem] produced by words that, depending on the discourse, can have women and/or men as their referents” (2009, 14). However, the following paragraph makes a clear reference to the election of a woman: “[T]he Conference elected, by acclamation, as President of the Conference, **Her Excellency Madame Chen Muhua**, Vice-Chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China” (1995:138). The ambiguity of the English word is therefore not enough to explain why the French text should refer to a male president and the Spanish text to a female one.

Furthermore, while English uses the gender-neutral ‘president’ and ‘chairperson’ and Spanish the gender-specific ‘presidenta’ [president-female] and ‘vice-presidenta’ [vice-president-female], the French translation mixes masculine and feminine in a surprising way, using respectively ‘président’ [president-male] and ‘vice-présidente’ [vice-president-female]: “À la 1^{re} séance plénière, le 4 septembre, la Conférence a élu **président**, par acclamation, S. E. Mme Chen Muhua, **Vice-Présidente** du Comité permanent de l’Assemblée populaire nationale de la République populaire de Chine” (146). With the masculine and feminine form of the word coexisting in the same sentence for one and the same referent, it is unclear whether the former is meant as a generic masculine or reflects the conservative approach that recommends using the masculine form of such job titles for women. In any case, such an awkward combination of masculine and feminine is certainly more damaging to the text’s readability than any version of inclusive writing might be.

Occupational terms: masculine form for female referent

This phenomenon occurs in all three languages, but most commonly in French. In the 1990s, the election of the first (and to date only) female Prime Minister of France, Edith Cresson,

sparked a debate in the national press. It pitted supporters of the conservative ‘Madame le premier ministre’ [Madam the prime minister-male] against advocates of the feminised version, ‘Madame la première ministre’ [Madam the prime minister-female], and was eventually resolved in favour of the latter (Teso 2010).

As far as occupational terms go, the English texts only comprise 2 occurrences of a masculine form (‘chairman’) for a female referent, in the 1980 and 1985 texts. The Spanish translations contain 5 instances, also occurring between 1980 and 1985. The French texts, on the other hand, present no less than 96 occurrences, including words that can easily be feminised, such as ‘président’ [president-male], ‘secrétaire general’ [general secretary-male] or ‘administrateur’ [administrator-male]. Moreover, the feminine forms of these words (‘présidente’, ‘secrétaire générale’, ‘administratrice’) are all used at other places of the corpus, including in the earlier texts. There seems to be no significant evolution towards avoidance of the masculine generic. In the last two reports from 2010 and 2015, however, this phenomenon is limited to the words ‘chef’ [chief] and ‘professeur’ [professor], whose feminised forms (‘cheffe’, ‘professeure’) remain controversial even today. According to Patricia Niedzwiecki (1993), the resistance to the adoption of feminine forms for women holders is partly due to women’s awareness of the association of the masculine form with prestige, and to their fear that a feminine form might devalue their title.

A particularly striking example of such a male-for-female title can be found in the 1995 Beijing conference:

4.a. “... priority should be given to the creation of a new post of **Deputy Secretary-General** in charge of women’s affairs. Needless to say, this post must be occupied by a woman” (1995, 203).

4.b. "... dar prioridad a la creación de un nuevo puesto de **Secretaria General Adjunta** encargada de los asuntos de la mujer. Ni qué decir que ese puesto debería ser ocupado por una mujer" (216).

4.c. "... il conviendrait d'envisager en priorité la création d'un nouveau poste de **secrétaire général adjoint** aux affaires féminines. Il va sans dire que ce poste devrait être occupé par une femme" (220).

Beyond the fact that both French and Spanish translate the assertive 'must be' rather timidly ('devrait être occupé', 'debería ser ocupado' [should be occupied]), it is interesting that French, unlike Spanish, chooses to translate 'Deputy Secretary-General' with a masculine form instead of the expected 'secrétaire générale adjointe.' This is all the more perplexing as the feminine form 'secrétaire générale' [general secretary-female] appears as early as the text of the 1985 conference, ten years prior to Beijing.

Occupational terms: asymmetry

The third form of sexist language analysed here is the use of asymmetrical linguistic forms for male and female referents, in which the term designating women typically evokes a more vulnerable or powerless position than that designating men. Asymmetrical forms happen in all three languages of the corpus – 17 times in English, 8 in Spanish and 43 in French. Examples of such asymmetrical pairs include 'girls'-'men'; 'las jóvenes'-'los hombres' [young women]-[men]; 'jeunes filles'-'hommes' [young women]-[men], or the androcentric pair 'jeunes filles'-'jeunes gens' [young women]-[young folk].

Their distribution across the texts shows no sign of diminution, and in fact peaks in the 2005 report for English and French. The 2010 report, however, shows an interesting case of correction of the asymmetry of the English text in both Spanish and French:

5.a. “**Young women** are more susceptible to HIV infection and in many countries they have a higher HIV prevalence rate than **men**” (2010, 39).

5.b. “Les jeunes femmes sont davantage susceptibles d’être infectées par le VIH et dans de nombreux pays le taux de prévalence du VIH est plus élevé chez **les femmes** que chez les **hommes**” (44).

5.c. “Las mujeres jóvenes son más propensas a la infección por el VIH, y en muchos países la tasa de prevalencia de este virus es superior entre **las mujeres** que entre **los hombres**” (45).

By inserting in the second part of the sentence a new subject (‘les femmes’, ‘las mujeres’ [women]) that is the equivalent of the masculine referent, the two translations erase the sexism of the English wording. This case remains exceptional, however, and although Spanish generally stays clear of asymmetrical turns of phrase, they abound in French – particularly through the pair ‘garçons’-‘fillettes’ [‘boys’-‘little girls’], in which the ‘-ette’ diminutive suffix is a clear illustration of the vulnerability associated with females.

ANTI-SEXIST LANGUAGE

Gender-specification

The strategy of gender-specification is mostly represented in the French and Spanish texts – respectively 266 and 354, against a total of 12 in English. This can be explained by the fact that French and Spanish are grammatical gender languages, and it is therefore morphologically easier to decline a given word both in its masculine and feminine forms.

A first form of gender-specification is the avoidance of generic masculine in general, in words such as ‘worker’ or ‘citizen.’ This phenomenon turned out not to be relevant in English apart from a few words including ‘-man’ in their morphology. In French and Spanish, it represents a fairly small proportion of all occurrences of gender-specification but is very present

in the earlier conferences. Arguably, the feminine forms of ‘worker’ (‘travailleuse’, ‘trabajadora’) are bound to be less controversial and meet less social resistance than the feminine forms of ‘president’ or ‘general secretary.’

Strikingly, the French translators of the 1980 conference explain in a note their alleged decision to use a generic feminine throughout the text for the translation of the words ‘representatives’ and ‘participants’:

6. “* Faute de précisions à cet égard, on a utilisé, pour plus de commodité, dans tout le texte français du rapport, le substantif féminin (représentante, participante) pour désigner les orateurs” (1980b:149).

[For lack of instructions on this matter, for greater ease, throughout the French text of the report the feminine substantive (representative-female; participant-female) was used to refer to the speakers.]

This note, which appears twice in the report, serves as a justification for the use of feminine as the default gender in the translation of the English gender-neutral ‘representatives’ and ‘participants’, the translators being presumably not in a position to determine the gender of the referents. This use of generic feminine forms, also called visibility strategy, can be related to the “total feminisation” advocated by some feminists such as Cameron, who uses it systematically in her books and sees it as “positive discrimination through positive language” (1985,88). As a translation strategy, the use of the generic feminine to translate gender-neutral words corresponds with what Von Flotow calls ‘hijacking’, or a work of ‘correction’ through “the translator’s deliberate feminising of the target text” (1991, 79). However, in the present case this translation choice seems to be an isolated phenomenon rather than a deliberate translation strategy. Unlike what is announced in the note, the French text uses the form ‘participante’ as a generic feminine only in the two passages that bear the note in question, and

makes inconsistent use of the feminine and masculine forms of the French for ‘representative’ throughout the rest of the text.

The main manifestation of gender-specification in the corpus lies in occupational titles in French and Spanish. English has no instance of gender-specification for job titles: the word ‘chairwoman’, for example, is totally absent from the corpus. In the two Romance languages however, in spite of some inconsistencies, there does appear to be a diachronic evolution of the translation of job titles in respect to gender. The 1995 conference appears to be a turning point in Spanish, with the apparition of the feminised forms ‘profesora’ [teacher-female], ‘ministra’ [minister-female], ‘investigadora’ [investigator-female] and ‘jefa’ [chief-female]. However, some generic masculine forms continue to coexist with these until the end of the period under study. The same goes for French, although there is no clear turning point in this language. Interestingly, in the 2005 report, the masculine form ‘rapporteur’ is used in the generic masculine 12 times, and even once for a female referent, but the rather daring feminine form ‘rapporteuse’ also features once. In the following two reports, though, the generic masculine has disappeared and female referents are consistently referred to as ‘rapporteuse.’ This choice is also a bold one, not from a morphological point of view this time but from a semantic one: the term ‘rapporteuse’ brings to mind another, informal and pejorative meaning of ‘rapporteur’ – tell-tale. This tendency of feminine words to acquire a derogatory connotation over time corresponds to Henley’s third type of linguistic sexism: the semantic derogation of women. Francine Frank (1985) argues that the difficult acceptance of feminine forms, making them seem unsuitable for new social titles, is linked to this phenomenon. However, the use of words such as ‘rapporteuse’ could contribute over time to fighting such negative associations.

Gender-neutralisation

The gender-neutralisation strategy is, conversely, difficult to implement in languages with a grammatical gender. In the corpus, gender-neutralisation is a scant phenomenon in Spanish,

and even more so in French. It mainly appears through the use of abstract nouns – a strategy also called gender abstraction – such as ‘administration’/‘administración’ [administration], or ‘présidence’/‘presidencia’ [presidency]. Towards the end of the 2010 report, for instance, the gender-neutral ‘Chair’ is translated in Spanish as ‘el Presidente’ [the President-male], but the French translation uses an abstract noun meaning ‘presidency’: ‘La présidence a formulé des observations finales.’ (67)

In the English texts, gender-neutralisation is mainly relevant to occupational titles. For instance, the term ‘chairperson’ first appears in the 1995 Beijing Conference, and coexists with ‘chairman’ in later texts. However, its distribution in the corpus seems to endorse the suggestion made by feminists such as Cameron (1992) that the term ‘chairperson’ is in practice used exclusively for female referents. Throughout the 2005 report for instance, ‘chairperson’ systematically refers to females and ‘chairman’ to males:

7. “[I]ntroductory statements were made by the ... **Chairperson** of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the **Chairman** of the Commission on Human Rights” (2005:32).

The question does not arise in the French and Spanish translations, which use the feminine form in the first instance (‘présidente’, ‘presidenta’) and the masculine form in the second (‘président’, ‘presidente’).

KEY GENDER-RELATED WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

Gender

The term ‘gender’ itself appears in 1985 but becomes widely used only in the 1995 Beijing conference, which is likely to be connected with the development of a certain type of feminist thought and theory in the early 1990s. Its adoption in English was met with a degree of resistance, with some countries expressing the fear that differentiating between a natural sex

and a constructed gender might endanger the institution of marriage and implicitly condone homosexuality and other sexual practices perceived as deviant (Jane Adolphe, 2012). Some feminist participants, conversely, feared that too vague a definition of the word might lead to a mistaken assimilation of 'gender' and 'sex' (*ibid.*19). Sure enough, the definition that was settled on was imprecise enough to explain the confusion perceptible in the subsequent translations: 'the word 'gender' as used in the Platform for Action was intended to be interpreted and understood as it was in ordinary, generally accepted usage' (1995, 218).

In Spanish, the systematic translation of 'gender' with 'género' starts in the first 2000 report, but the French texts betray a greater reluctance. At first, the French translators use *ad hoc* paraphrases, with for example 'rôles dévolus par la société aux hommes et aux femmes' (1995, 21) [roles attributed to men and women by society] for 'gender roles'. In some cases, the word is even left out of the translation altogether, with for instance 'la division du travail' [labour division] (1995, 14) for 'the gender division of labour' (12). In the following French reports, however, 'gender' is almost systematically translated with 'sexe' [sex], which bears witness to a confusion between sex and gender. Similarly, while the expression 'gender mainstreaming' coined at the 1985 conference is translated as 'perspectiva de género' [gender perspective] in Spanish, the French translation again reflects a perceived equivalence between sex and gender by using 'perspective sexospécifique' [sex-specific perspective]. It must be noted, however, that the French translators' inclination to use terms derived from the word 'sex' also extends to the words 'sexisme' [sexism] and 'sexiste' [sexist], which appear a total of 59 times against 6 in English and 8 in Spanish. The French reports even use the neologism 'antisexiste' [antisexist] in their translation of 'gender', a surprisingly bold choice given the otherwise conservative tendency of the French translation.

The translators' reluctance to adopt the direct French translation 'genre', which appears only 4 times in the whole corpus (in 2005 and 2015), is most obvious in the translation of the

English definition of gender at the Beijing conference (see above). The French translators chose to borrow the English word ‘gender’, but only in the paragraph containing this definition, thereby making the explanation obscure as well as pointless for French readers: “le terme ‘gender’ [est] couramment employé dans son sens ordinaire, conformément à l’usage généralement admis dans de nombreuses autres instances et conférences des Nations Unies” (1995, 239). On top of being rather confusing for the reader, this translation strategy is bound to undermine the alleged equality of status between the source and target languages.

Empowerment

Similarly, the term ‘empowerment’ starts being used at the Beijing conference and subsequently becomes a key concept, but here again the French and Spanish translations take longer to adjust to its innovatory aspect and to accept its centrality. Spanish uses paraphrases on a case by case basis until 2010, when it starts systematically using the straightforward translation ‘empoderamiento.’ The French texts, on the other hand, keep alternating between a few options such as ‘autonomisation’ or the paraphrastic ‘renforcement du pouvoir d’action’ [reinforcement of the power of action], without ever settling on a systematic translation.

Ms.

The use of the terms ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs.’, which specify the marital status of the referent and have no masculine equivalent, corresponds to Henley’s second type of linguistic sexism: a narrow definition of women, here in terms of their relationship to men. The English texts give precedence to the appellation ‘Ms.’ rather than ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’. The term ‘Miss’ appears in the 1985 Conference only, and both the French and Spanish translators use equivalent terms: ‘Mlle’ and ‘Srta.’, short for ‘mademoiselle’ and ‘señorita’ [miss]. Overall, the French and Spanish translations also follow a similar pattern to English in later texts: even though there is no exact equivalent to ‘Ms’ in those languages, the terms used – ‘madame’, ‘señora’ – are usually

regarded as the default option rather than the indication of a marital status. As such, they are not analysed here as sexist language.

Man

At the heart of the debate on inclusive writing is the ‘Male-As-Norm Principle’, also known as MAN (Friederike Braun 1997: 3), which Castro sums up as the fact that “if the sex of the referent is not known, the masculine will be chosen for the translation unless there are stereotypes to the contrary” (2009, 13). As pointed out by Zoberman in his 2014 study of the translation of ‘man’ (‘homme’) in Pascal’s work, the definition of the word in the 1694 dictionary of the Académie française is a clear illustration of this phenomenon: “An animal endowed with reason. In this sense, it comprises the whole human species, and is used for both sexes” (2014, 235). Similarly, Simon claims that “the apparent gender neutrality of English is constantly belied by the identification of the species (mankind) with the male of the species” (1996, 18). This implicit identification is often more explicit in translation, especially in languages with a grammatical gender.

In the present case though, the use of ‘man’ as a generic noun is almost completely avoided in all three languages. In English, derived words such as ‘mankind’, ‘manpower’ or ‘man-made’ feature only a handful of times in the conferences. The Spanish and French texts also use the generic masculine ‘man’ (‘homme’, ‘hombre’) very sparingly, but not always in the same places as in the English text, which goes towards confirming the absence of a well-defined policy on the subject. The French and Spanish equivalents of nouns such as ‘human beings’ or the abstract noun ‘humanity’ are widely used alternatives to generic masculine.

A noteworthy exception is the French expression ‘droits de l’homme’ [man’s rights]. Its being a set phrase presumably makes it more difficult for the gender-inclusive alternative ‘droits humains’ [human rights] to become accepted, but there is no sign of any shift taking

place over time: in spite of the growing social acceptability of ‘droits humains’, this term only appears a total of 13 times, against 374 ‘droits de l’homme’. This insistence on using a blatantly androcentric expression forms a stark contrast with the English texts, which exclusively use the gender-neutral ‘human rights’ or gender-specific alternatives such as ‘women’s rights’, as well as with the Spanish texts, in which ‘derechos del hombre’ [man’s rights] features only 3 times, and exclusively in the first two texts. Given the norm-creating potential of the UN as an influential institution, it is regrettable that this opportunity to further spread the gender-inclusive alternative was not seized.

Latest developments

With the overall growing visibility of gender-related issues and the systematisation of CAT tools within the United Nations, the translation of gender has already evolved since 2015 within the organisation and is likely to change even more in the coming years. Even though it was not in use for most of the timeframe of this study, the terminology bank UN TermPortal gives a good overview of the difficulties and latest evolutions linked to the translation of gender.

At the entry for ‘gender’, under the heading ‘UNHQ [United Nations Headquarters] Human rights (general) Gender issues’ we can read the following definition: “Refers to the attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men”. The non-committal dimension of this definition, and in particular the vagueness of the term ‘attributes’, brings to mind the definition adopted at the Beijing conference.

The remark that follows denotes at first sight a firmer stance on the difference between sex and gender than in the texts of the corpus: “These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context-specific and changeable. [...]”. The absence of reference to biology seems to imply that the

more feminist approach has prevailed. However, this remark is followed by another one showing that the blurring of the distinction between ‘gender’ and ‘women’ (Adolphe 2012, 4) is still topical: “translation of ‘gender’ would be an equivalent of the English ‘women’ (e.g. femmes)”.

Interestingly, the corresponding Spanish entry only gives ‘género’, a straightforward translation of ‘gender’. This unique option and the absence of any comments tends to underpin the notion that the translation of ‘gender’ was not as controversial in this language as it was in the other two.

By contrast, the corresponding French entry shows a clear ambivalence on the subject. Thirteen different translations are listed for ‘gender’ that have been used over time and in different contexts by the UN:

genre
condition de la femme
condition féminine
problématique femmes-hommes
identité de genre
sexe culturel
sexe social
égalité des genres
~~*problématique hommes femmes*~~
~~*égalité des sexes*~~
~~*identité sexuelle*~~
~~*sexe*~~
~~*sexospécificités*~~

The crossed-out translations, several of which are used in the corpus of this study, appear as such on the website and are the ones that are described as ‘superseded’. A note next to the first one, ‘genre’ [gender], specifies that this translation must be used whenever possible. Nevertheless, the definition provided under the translations shows that the equivalence between ‘genre’ and ‘gender’ is still not taken for granted: « Le terme anglais « gender » ne renvoie pas normalement aux catégories biologiques (homme et femme, mâle et femelle) mais plus souvent aux catégories sociales ‘masculin’ et ‘féminin’. [...] Pour traduire ce terme, il existe donc

plusieurs solutions, en fonction du contexte, du point de vue, des connotations etc. »^{iv}. By defining the English word ‘gender’ rather than the French ‘genre’, the translators again appear to be taking refuge behind the English language. The reference to ‘several solutions’ shows a refusal to adopt ‘genre’ as a systematic translation, while the mention of biological categories perpetuates the traditional confusion between gender, women and biological sex. From this example we can see that despite undeniable progress, the meaning of ‘gender’ is still not quite fixed within the context of the UN, and that its translation into French continues to be problematic.

CONCLUSIONS

In total I identified 53, 96 and 198 occurrences of sexist language in the English, Spanish and French texts respectively. This excludes the specific terms discussed in the previous section. Overall there appears to be a real effort towards gender-neutralisation, and even more so towards the feminisation of occupational titles and forms of address. However, the generic masculine in job titles keeps appearing alongside gender-inclusive alternatives. This is consistent with the fact that throughout the period under study, the use of sexist language does not decrease in the same proportion as the use of gender-inclusive language increases, so that both coexist in the texts.

Overall, the French translation is the most problematic one when it comes to the translation of gender. However, determining whether this or simply reflects a persistent social and institutional resistance to gender-inclusive writing or also contributes to the problem of sexist language in French is beyond the scope of this study.

In the case of sexist language, the divide between a natural gender language (English) and grammatical gender languages (Spanish and French) appears to be less significant than that between English and Spanish on the one hand and French on the other. However, the divide

between grammatical and natural gender is more perceptible in antisexist language. According to my analysis, there are only 123 occurrences of antisexist language in English, for 506 in Spanish and 413 in French. Unsurprisingly, English is the language that most resorts to gender-neutralisation in the corpus. The French and Spanish translations tend to use gender-specification instead.

As for gender-related terms, the 1995 Beijing Conference seems to be the turning point for the introduction of new, key concepts in relation to gender. However, Spanish and French both appear to be lagging behind, often favouring paraphrase over straightforward translations. This strategy reveals the translators' interpretation of the concepts at hand, as seen in the French translations' absence of discrimination between sex and gender. It also shows the translators' reluctance to make the necessary adjustments that would ensure that these new concepts enter their language. The most striking difference between Spanish and French is that the Spanish translators, once they begin to adopt a direct translation, tend to use it systematically. The French translators, however, tend to keep using different translations, even when they are not using paraphrase.

There seems to be limited diachronic evolution in the use of sexist and/or anti-sexist language, and the pattern of evolution of each language does not appear to be correlated to the other two in any consistent way. Rather than a global, institution-wide policy on the use of sexist and anti-sexist language, there seem to be mainly text- and language-bound strategies. Further research on a more recent corpus could help to determine whether the recent boom of CAT tools, such as eLUNa and the UN TermPortal in the UN, has resulted in a more coherent strategy.

FURTHER READING

Cameron, Deborah 2005. "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions." *Applied Linguistics*, 26(4), 482-502.

This article introduces the changes in sociolinguistic research on gender and sexuality at the turn of the century, and in particular the shift from a binary concept to a focus on diversity. It describes the 'post-modern turn' and outlines the main differences between second- and third-wave feminism.

Castro, Olga 2009. "(Re-)examining horizons in feminist translation studies: towards a third wave." *Monografías de Traducción e Interpretación*, 1, 1-17.

The aim of this article is to acquaint the reader with the relationships between the fields of translation studies and gender studies, and to discuss new translation practices within third-wave feminism. The article exists both in Spanish and English.

Zoberman, Pierre 2014. "'Homme' peut-il vouloir dire 'Femme' ?": Gender and Translation in Seventeenth-Century French Moral Literature." *Comparative Literature Studies*, 51(2), 231-252.

This article explores the translation of the word 'homme' in texts by 17th-century French philosophers, and the presuppositions and consequences of the translators' choice. It denounces the "fallacy of inclusiveness" as hiding the original text's violence against women rather than mending it.

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Zoberman, Pierre. 2014. “Homme” peut-il vouloir dire “Femme”? Gender and Translation in Seventeenth-Century French Moral Literature. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 51(2), 231–252.

ENDNOTES

- i. The Académie française eventually decided to condone the feminisation of a number of job titles such as ‘docteure’ [female doctor] or ‘écrivaine’ [female writer] instead of insisting on the generic masculine. This long-awaited decision was made public on 28 February 2019.
- ii. Article 111 of the founding text of the UN Charter specifies that “The present Charter, of which the Chinese, French, Russian, English, and Spanish texts are equally authentic, shall remain deposited in the archives of the Government of the United States of America.” This statement, or close variations on it, is a staple of UN conventions.
<https://www.un.org/sg/en/multilingualism/index.shtml>
- iii. See section on the translation of the word ‘gender’, in “Key gender-related words and expressions”.
- iv. “The English word ‘gender’ does not normally refer to biological categories (man and woman) but rather, in general, to social categories: ‘male’, ‘female’. [...] It follows that there are several options for the translation of this word, depending on the context, point of view, connotations etc.” (my translation).