

Feminist literary translation: preliminary insights

The Feminist Translation Network (FTN) was set up to explore what feminist translation means in practice in the twenty-first century. Feminist translation emerged as a concept in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s: a group of translators and academics became interested in avant-garde Quebecois feminist writing and experimented with ways of translating it from French into English using interventionist methods to highlight feminine or feminist aspects. While this concept of feminist translation has been influential in academic circles, it was tied to a specific context, and ideas about feminism and gender have come a long way since then. In the FTN we want to broaden the discussion about feminist translation beyond academia and see how ideas about feminist translation have developed in the present-day. Our current focus is contemporary literary translation in English and our key questions include:

- What is feminist translation (how does it differ – or not – from translations by/of women or from queer translation/gender-inclusive translation?)
- Is feminist translation a matter of identity or a matter of practice?
- What are the goals of feminist translation and whom is it for?

The FTN is creating a forum for different stakeholders to reflect on these questions on the basis of their own practice, research, or experience. While the questions are open-ended, and people will have many different and equally valid views, here are some insights which have emerged from the project so far.

Defining feminism

Feminist translation is difficult to define because of multiple understandings of the concept of feminism. Feminist translation emerged in Canada during the so-called second wave when feminism was firmly associated with women and the fight for women's rights. Now, the monolithic category 'women' seems problematic; more recent definitions of feminism have attempted to take into account interlocking systems of oppression, as in the famous formulation by bell hooks: 'feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression'. In the FTN we have not been working with any single definition. Participants have often stated or implied that their feminism centres on women but recognise a plurality of beliefs and suggest that we should speak instead of 'feminisms'. For instance, at our events, participants have reflected on how the growing wave of trans-exclusionary feminism might be accommodated within trans-inclusive feminism, and on the difficulties in translating feminism across cultures given different understandings of feminism in different contexts.

Gender of the translator

Most of the Canadians practising feminist translation in the 1970s and 1980s were women but not exclusively – the group also included Howard Scott who translated Louky Bersianik's novel *L'Euquélionne* as an MA project (['Louky Bersianik's L'Euquélionne: Problems of Translating the Critique of Language in New Quebec Feminist Writing'](#)) and later published his English translation with Alter Ego Editions (1997). For the FTN, we have not assumed that

translators identifying as feminists will be women, and we have invited people of all genders to take part in the project.

Choice of text

Many project participants seem to equate feminist translation with translating texts by women writers: they have spoken of recovering women writers from the past whose texts have been overlooked, or promoting women writers from minoritised groups or cultures, or championing women's voices more generally in a literary landscape still dominated by men. However, it's also recognised that being a woman is not the same as being a feminist: some women writers are uncomfortable with the label 'feminist', not all writing by women will necessarily be 'feminist', and people of other genders might think of themselves or their work as feminist too.

For some, feminist translation is rather about choosing texts with feminist themes or texts which are ripe for feminist re-interpretations. Examples we have discussed include children's/YA fiction with strong female protagonists, novels by authors (of any gender) who are interested in the construction of gender identities (whether feminine, masculine or non-binary), and re-translations of classics written by men such as the *Odyssey* by Emily Wilson or *Beowulf* by Maria Dahvana Headley.

Paratexts

A key feature of feminist translation in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s was the use of paratexts, the idea being that feminist translators should flaunt their presence and agency to counter the traditional inferior status of both women and translators. They purposefully added prefaces and footnotes to their translations and wrote about their practice in scholarly books and articles. A number of FTN participants have continued to advocate for translator visibility as a feminist practice, whether through prefaces and footnotes or through other commentary such as blog posts. But while academic translators may put in such labour as part of their day job, professional translators stress that they should receive a fee for writing notes or commentary. It has been observed that commercial publishers are less likely to include extra material from translators than academic publishers. The [#TranslatorsOnTheCover](#) initiative has been mentioned in connection to calls for translator visibility, but some professional translators believe that naming the translator is a superficial gesture while the real issue remains pay and conditions.

Linguistic strategies

The Canadian translators used specific strategies to 'make the feminine visible in language', as they put it. They gave themselves licence to intervene in their sources, often in collaboration with the authors. The procedures included 'supplementing', i.e. compensating for differences between source and target language and producing a matured version of the source, and 'hijacking', i.e. 'correcting' the source text, particularly to accentuate feminine or feminist aspects.

Let's briefly consider what these strategies looked like on the page. An often-quoted example of supplementing comes from Scott's translation of *L'Euguélonne*, a novel which is viciously critical of practices and language which subjugate women. With reference to abortion, we read in the source text 'Le ou la coupable doit être punie', Bersianik adding an extra 'e' to 'punie' to emphasise that it is the woman who is punished. Scott compensates for the lack of grammatical gender in English by translating the sentence as 'The guilty one must be punished, whether she is a man or a woman'. As for hijacking, we can turn to Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's translation of Lise Gauvin's *Lettres d'une autre* (1987; trans. 1990). Lotbinière-Harwood declares in her preface that she has employed every technique possible to make Gauvin's novel more feminist. This means, for instance, relegating the masculine element by using forms such as 'women and men' and 'she and he', or omitting the masculine element altogether, as in the expression 'la victoire de l'homme', which becomes in the translation 'our victory [...] over the elements'.

Among the FTN, there are translators who draw on the work of the Canadians, intent on highlighting feminist themes in their sources, though they sometimes describe their work along the lines of 'gender-conscious' rather than 'feminist'. Examples we have discussed include using feminine or gender-neutral nouns in place of the generic masculine. At the feminist translation slam, we saw how Michelle Geoffrion-Vinci had added 'Amazon' to a description of the female protagonist ('These were the limbs of an Amazon warrior'). Others pick up and develop ideas of ludic experimentation and intervention, as in Beth Caygill's [intersemiotic translation of Dolores Miquel's poem 'Sparrowhearts'](#).

Some translators have indicated that they have broader understandings of what feminist translation might look like in practice. For example, it might mean being sensitive to constructions of gender in literature, whatever the gender of the writer. Participants have been struck by Emily Wilson's description of her feminist approach to Homer as 'shining a clear light' on the sexist and patriarchal elements of the ancient text. Feminist translation is also seen as encompassing any 'disruptive' strategy which challenges the power dynamics of the white cis-heteropatriarchy, such as consciously incorporating loanwords from minoritised languages to give visibility to less translated languages.

It has been suggested that a feminist approach to translation may not be suitable in every case. Recent translations which have been identified by publishers or translators as 'feminist' include re-translations of classics and translations of other writers no longer alive such as Rosalía de Castro (1837-1885) by Michelle Geoffrion-Vinci, [Júlia Lopes de Almeida \(1862-1934\) by Leticia Goellner and Belén Rodríguez Salvatierra](#), and Maria Teresa León (1903-1983) by Laura Woolley-Núñez.

The question has arisen a few times about whether some strategies regarded as 'feminist' may simply be examples of 'good' translation practice.

Translators based in academia are the most likely to experiment with overtly interventionist strategies; professional translators working with commercial publishers are balancing a different set of a priorities.

A matter of identity

Many of the translators at our events have said that feminism is an important part of their identity even if it does not necessarily leave tangible marks on their texts. A number of translators have spoken about positionality and the importance of being alert to the context and power relations surrounding the act of translation.

Participants at our events seem happy to be labelled 'feminist' and have often stated that they are speaking as feminists, but have also commented that the word 'feminist' has not sat comfortably with their authors and may not with publishers.

Community

For some, feminist translation is about wider working practices and creating supportive networks rather than about a translator's approach to their text. [Collaboration](#) has been highlighted, in particular in relation to theatre translation.

The real-world application of feminist practices in the translation industry is a key issue for professional translators. It has been noted that the majority of literary translators in the UK and US are women, and literary translation has generally been a precarious, low-status and badly paid job. Feminist practices, therefore, include mentoring junior colleagues, and building a community of translators who can support each other in negotiating good contractual terms.

May 2025