

The ‘engendering’ approach in audiovisual translation

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Abstract

Within academia gender analysis has been circumscribed mainly to Social Sciences. For years the focus of this analysis has been on the unbalanced representation of men and women as perceived through the use of the (sexist) grammatical and linguistic patterns of a language – for example, in literature – and the use of the images selected to portray male and female bodies – in the case of the mass media. With time, an interest in the implications that also the translation of written and audiovisual texts may have on the representation and perception of gender has grown, and attention has gradually shifted from the literary translation field to the audiovisual one. In the last decade, the study of audiovisual translation discourse from a gender perspective has ranged over a number of genres (TV series, films and commercials) and has resulted in a fruitful debate around the manifold approaches from which gender bias may be investigated, questioned and eventually reversed. In particular, De Marco (2012) has shed light on how much the consideration of audiovisual translation (AVT) as a social practice may benefit from implementing theories inherent to the multifaceted disciplines of Linguistics, Gender Studies, Film Studies and, obviously, Translation Studies. The present article discusses the extent to which such an interdisciplinary and ‘engendering’ approach may contribute to building a valid methodological framework within which AVT can be explored. At the same time, it highlights the limitations entailed by the difficulty of applying the same approach to the study of such a practical area – AVT – in which gender priorities are not perceived as important as other professional priorities.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, gender awareness, gender mainstreaming, intersectionality, interdisciplinarity

1. Gender and audiovisual translation: an overview

The growth of audiovisual translation (AVT), not only as a professional activity which has found a fertile ground for establishment in the developments of the DVD and digital industry,

but also as a scholarly discipline, has involved a shift in the research approaches adopted to explore this activity/discipline. In the past twenty years we have witnessed a multiplication of foci in the analysis of audiovisual programmes and their translations. We have enlarged the study of the technical dimension of these texts (Gottlieb 1994) and the peculiarities of – and challenges posed by – different AVT modes (Agost 1999, Pettit 2004) with the study of their social dimension, in terms of both the diverse social needs of some sectors of the audience that AVT may serve (Matamala and Orero 2010), and the economic and ideological hurdles which affect the distribution and translation of these texts (Hernández Bartolomé and Mendiluce Cabrera 2005, Díaz Cintas 2012).

This interest in AVT beyond the technical dimension – which started to sprout already in the 1990s (Delabastita 1989, Ivarsson 1992) – ran parallel to the development of another new object of research, namely the intersection between translation and gender. Many are the publications which have explored this relationship from multiple angles and which, as a consequence, have resulted in heated debates around the extent to which translation discourse may contribute to counterbalancing the (mis)representation of women that has been provided for centuries in literature and other cultural manifestations (Chamberlain 1992), the need to revert this (mis)representation through feminist interventionist strategies (von Flotow 1997) and more inclusive language practices (Castro 2013), as well as the importance for translators to be fully aware of the ideological stand they take when transferring the messages of texts (Godayol 2002). These studies have made a substantial contribution to the understanding of translation as a means of subversion of dominant, androcentric positions, but have had literary texts as main corpus of analysis.

Despite the above-mentioned concurrence of sociological developments in AVT and Translation Studies, and despite gender dynamics having been extensively investigated in cinema and more generally in the mass media, we have to wait until the first decade of the 21st century to find scholars establishing a direct link between gender and AVT. If we look back at the case studies carried out in this period, we come across publications which explore gender issues in different audiovisual genres: films (Baumgarten 2005) and sitcoms (Toto 2009, Feral 2011, Ranzato 2012). These studies provide an interesting cross section of how far the manipulation of certain gender-related allusions can go, and the impact that such manipulation can have on the audience's perception of the portrayed reality.¹ The last three

¹ Baumgarten has mainly analyzed James Bond films, whereas Toto and Ranzato have analyzed the sitcoms *Will & Grace* (2003-2005) and *Sex and the City* (1998), respectively.

studies seem to share some important elements: the focus of analysis is on the linguistic dimension of the selected programmes; they all show that there is a tendency to naturalize expressions which have marked feminist allusions (in Feral's case) or cultural references to gay speech (in Toto's and Ranzato's case); this tendency occurs more often in dubbing than in subtitling and usually in Romance languages, such as French and Italian. Also, they highlight another important shift in attention. While the great majority of gender-focused studies on literary translation have women as category of analysis, or as main performers of this analysis, in the aforementioned case studies of audiovisual texts the language of both women (Feral 2011) and gay men (Toto 2009, Ranzato 2012) comes under scrutiny. This points out a relevant, though often forgotten, dimension of gender analysis in translation, namely, that gender is not just about male dominance over women globally perpetrated by a patriarchal model, but rather about the "ways in which [men and women] think about their lives, the kinds of opportunities they enjoy, and [...] their ways of making claims" (Rosaldo [1980], quoted in Kabeer [1994, 54]). Consequently, gender concerns are perceived – and need to be put forward – by both women and men, and masculinity needs to be examined "not as a direct oppressor of women, but as a category of definition itself" (Jeffords [1989], quoted in Wiegman [2001, 368]).

At the same time as these case studies came out, another piece of research entered the collection of publications which has openly promoted an 'engendering' approach in the study of AVT, namely, *Audiovisual Translation through a Gender Lens* (De Marco 2012). Surprisingly, at the time of writing the present article, this is still the only monograph entirely devoted to the challenges posed by the interconnection between gender and AVT, thus offering the only opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of adopting this approach in the study of AVT.

In this monograph, gender hierarchies in audiovisual texts are dissected crosswise, that is, by offering alternative frameworks for different levels of analysis. In order to address the issue of the ideological mediation across different cultures, in this book a corpus of ten contemporary films is examined in three languages (English as source language and Italian and Spanish as target languages).² The tri-dimensional nature of the audiovisual text is addressed by exploring gender bias not only through the linguistic dimension (what the

² The films analyzed are: *Working Girl* (1988), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Sister Act* (1992), *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993), *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *East is East* (1999), *Billy Elliot* (2000), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) and *Calendar Girls* (2003).

characters say and how they address each other), but also through the visual (how they are portrayed on the screen) and audio ones (what kind of alteration the pitch of their voices may undergo in the dubbing process). Lastly, although most of the characters starring in the selected films are women, femininity is scrutinized alongside masculinity and in relation to other important aspects of gender identity: social status, sexual orientation and ethnicity.

For such a diverse spectrum of elements, the author relies not just on a theoretical framework drawn from Translation Studies, but on a wider one which crosses all the disciplines that this book encompasses. With regards to the linguistic dimension, different contributions made by feminist scholars in the field of Linguistics (Code 2000, García Meseguer 2002, Coates 2004) are gathered. These scholars have unmasked the sexist patterns inherent in languages which result in triggering derogatory social behaviours (Lledó Cunill 2004). Reference is also made to the campaigns in favour of the implementation of inclusive practices spread through institutional guides for the use of non-sexist language (Sabatini 1987, Doyle 1998). These arguments are deployed along relevant considerations about stereotypes – which can turn risky because of “who controls and defines them [and] what interests they serve” (Dyer 2002, 12) – and about symbolic violence (Bourdieu [1998] 2000), which works at a subconscious level and is therefore difficult to fight.³ When the notion of gender is applied to that of stereotype it is easy to verge on symbolic violence, as gender stereotypes “easily engender prejudices, and prejudices tend to be silently instilled in our minds and [...] catch on dangerously” (De Marco 2012, 95).

In terms of visual analysis, a solid framework is found in the work of some of the most relevant feminist Film Studies theorists, such as Mulvey (1975, 2003), De Lauretis (1987) and Kuhn (1991). These theorists stood out for their insights into the ways in which Western narrative cinema – which is notoriously at the service of economic interests that fuel patriarchal values – uses images and sounds to instill and nurture androcentric and heteronormative expectations in the audiences. The selected corpus, consisting of commercial Anglo-American films, lends itself to a full application of these theories, although some of the traditional mainstream roles that male and female characters play are also openly questioned, thus resulting in overturning the well-known equation highlighted by many feminist scholars: narrative cinema = prominent male gaze = objectification and subservience of the female body.

³ By symbolic violence it is meant the set of verbal and non-verbal threats which defines any symbolic dominant position: of men, aristocrats, chiefs, etc. (Bourdieu 1998, 49).

Finally, the focus of analysis regarding the audio dimension of this corpus is the pitch of the voice of both male and female characters. Drawing mainly on Cameron's (1992) and Chion's (1999) theories about the impact of voice on the audience's perception of the characters' roles, the voice is also seen to become a factor of gender discrimination and control of the viewers' expectations, especially when it comes to the representation of female and gay characters.

It is clear from this overview that the study promotes an intersectional reading of gender dynamics in audiovisual texts. It is intersectional not only because – as stressed at the outset – it takes into account all the facets of identity which *intersect* with gender, but also because it unmasks how these dynamics articulate with the three dimensions of audiovisual texts all together. At the same time, this thematic and structural intersectionality merges with an interdisciplinary approach when discussing the theoretical framework. This approach turns to be useful if we appreciate that, due to its multilayered nature, AVT shares some common grounds with disciplines such as Linguistics (and its interconnection with Sociolinguistics and Discourse Analysis), Film Studies and Cultural Studies. These disciplines all have a strong feminist legacy; therefore their influence cannot be neglected when we probe into the ways in which gender representations take shape in AVT.

2. The drawbacks of engendering audiovisual translation

The merits and feasibility of such a complex approach will be discussed in section 3, but some limitations need to be pointed out at this stage. It has been previously stated that although some of the most recurrent gender stereotypes are questioned in the corpus examined in De Marco (2012), the representation of male and female characters offered therein is in fact somewhat mainstream. As a consequence, drawing on feminist theories (Mulvey 1975) which denounce the mainstream-ness (i.e., the male-centered-ness) of the cinema gaze may appear to be a taken-for-granted approach. In another study (De Marco, forthcoming) this limitation has already been stressed, together with the possibility of drawing on alternative interpretations to the ones proposed by Mulvey. These interpretations – developed, for example, by Evans and Gamman (1995) and Mackinnon (1999) – present women as not the only 'to-look-at' object, and the cinema gaze as mutual, contradictory and shifting.

However, it is also worth pointing out that the aforementioned corpus is made up of mass-marketed films which tend to provide a more canonical representation of gender. Therefore it is very likely that the translated versions of these films also maintain – and sometimes even enhance – the stereotypes which support such canonical representation. On the contrary, independent films, which usually tend to promote less canonical portrayals (of gender, amongst other things) that challenge mainstream cultural values, would be more suitable for suggesting alternative readings. They would disclose how different cultures tackle the challenging social issues therein disclosed, and show whether these cultures are open to welcome this challenge by giving up language practices which encourage biased behaviors. In other words, it would be interesting to see whether something similar to what happens in the translation of literary texts with an overtly gender-inclusive language also occurs in the translation of ‘gender-friendly’ audiovisual texts. In this respect, Castro (2013, 43) argues that “quite often these translations also incorporate sexist elements when having to render an overtly inclusive source text written from an explicit feminist position (consciously applying strategies for non-sexist language).” She goes even further and stresses that when translators try to promote gender-inclusive practices, their work risks not being published.

The issue with independent films, however, is that because they do not easily encounter the financial support of the big studios, due to the non-mainstream messages they tend to promote, they are produced with low budgets (Hall 2009). As a result, they hardly cross the boundaries of the country in which they are shot and are not translated in other languages either. This explains why most studies so far which have implemented a gender approach in AVT rely on films or sitcoms addressed to large audiences and which have been broadcast internationally.

This difficulty in getting to the bottom of the reasons why only certain films are distributed/translated, and the suspicion that translators may feel pushed into perpetrating gender-exclusive/offensive practices, unmask a more subtle problem. This turns to be another drawback when investigating gender issues in AVT: the lack, or lack of knowledge, of a gender policy implemented within the audiovisual industry. Many Translation Studies scholars have touched upon the issue of the factors which determine which works are worth translating and how – e.g., Danan (1991), Toury ([1995] 2012), Díaz Cintas (2004) – and upon the extent to which the invisibility and underpaid status of translators, and of women translators in particular, prevent them from confidently using approaches which depart from the canonical gender-normalising practices (Wolf 2006). Within the AVT industry, the situation looks even harder to tackle, as it is well-known that a wide range of professional

figures take part in the translation process. Therefore, it becomes challenging to identify who is ultimately responsible for the way in which audiovisual programs are broadcast and translated. The mass media have often been targeted as being carriers of (gender) stereotypes in Western countries. Despite some important social changes that have happened in response to feminist critiques and campaigns against sexist advertisements (Gill 2007), finding the measures to oppose this trend which has the unpleasant effect of preserving social inequalities does not appear to be a straightforward task.⁴

In contexts other than translation (e.g., in economic development, education) where gender equality is perceived as one of the primary goals, the concept of policymaking is linked to that of gender mainstreaming, that is, “a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated” (International Labour Office 1998).

According to Squires (2009, 55), “mainstreaming questions the presumed neutrality of bureaucratic policymaking, highlighting the way in which apparently impartial policies might reproduce existing inequalities by failing to address their structural impact.” In light of this remark, one may assume that the gender policy enforced by those who control the mass media information is only apparently impartial. This means that although the mass media give space to information about gender concerns and campaigns promoting gender equality, in fact the representation of gender relations and identities given in most films and commercial advertisements is far from being balanced. As such, this policy appears neutral to the concerns that men and women need to express and, as a result, becomes difficult to address.

3. The contributions of engendering AVT: concluding remarks

Despite these difficulties and the limits that analyzing audiovisual programs from a gender perspective poses, the approach put forward in De Marco (2012) makes a significant

⁴ Due to the latest technological developments in the way information is made accessible to people, the concept of ‘mass media’ has been recently challenged. In this article this term is used in a wider sense, that is, to refer to both ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ sources of information, such as newspapers, magazines, television, Internet video-sharing websites, social media platforms, etc.

methodological contribution. It has already been pointed out that this approach is interdisciplinary and intersectional and that this suits well the semiotic nature of the programs examined.⁵ In section 1 we referred to the range of disciplines with which AVT is prone to interconnect due to their hybrid nature, in particular Film Studies and Linguistics. There is a branch of Linguistics – Discourse Analysis – which may prove particularly functional to AVT. One of the concerns raised in *Audiovisual Translation through a Gender Lens* is that many positive social and political changes in favour of gender equality have occurred, but that these achievements are not always reflected in the use of language. Discourse Analysis helps establishing links between discursive changes and social changes and, in fact, has already turned out to be useful in the study of gender (Litosseliti 2006), as well as in that of gender in the media (Kosetzi 2008). Therefore, it is not difficult to also identify a kinship between Discourse Analysis, gender and AVT.

The concept of intersectionality has been at the heart of the debates centered around equality policies, and has been proposed as an approach to address the complex nature of discrimination. In this way, it has been used in disciplines and contexts where gender issues are at stake. Audiovisual communication is certainly one of these contexts. In this respect, we can benefit from the insight offered by Pellegrino (2009) who considers an intersectional approach to be the way towards the overthrow of the stereotypical representations offered in the mass media. She stresses the etymological meanings that the term ‘communication’ has: (1) sharing common worlds, (2) exchanging and (3) overcoming and reinforcing barriers. Among these, the third one is the meaning which the mass media seem more prone to display, with their “strong normative and normalizing functions with reference to individual and collective identities” (95). In order to recover the positive value of communication, she advocates studying gender and communication transversally as this problematizes “how power structures are linked together preserving social, political and economic inequalities” (94). In the end, an intersectional approach helps disclose the heterogeneity of gender identity, and this heterogeneity is also reflected in the diversity of the current societies that the mass media constantly pervade and represent.

Although Pellegrino does not talk about AVT, in some way her insights fit well with the argumentation built up in *Audiovisual Translation through a Gender Lens*. Both scholars

⁵ Intersectionality is a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1991) and initially defined as “the various ways race and gender interact to shape multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experiences, moving away from what was perceived as a mono-focus approach on white middle-class women’s interests” (Bagilhole 2009, 51).

layer the analysis of gender in order to bring to the surface the distinctive features of its complex nature. They both believe in the power of verbal and audiovisual communication to challenge the stereotypical way in which people talk about gender, and the way in which gender is represented through the mass media. However, Pellegrino sees in the emerging forms of communication (such as blogging and online activism) an alternative tool to challenge the gender-biased models embedded in traditional mass media. Instead, De Marco sees an alternative with a wider scope in the way audiovisual programs are translated, as AVT leaves room for articulating gender discourse within the tridimensional dimension of audiovisual texts and through multilingual mediation.

From the discussion carried out so far, it seems that ‘intersectional’ and ‘interdisciplinary’ are the key words for those scholars who intend to deepen the gender/AVT relationship. The advantages of these approaches have been widely stressed, but they could appear too abstract in the present context in which AVT is facing new technological challenges, mainly in the field of accessibility. As a result, it might be suggested that prominence should be given to more practical and urgent social needs. Integrating gender issues in the study of AVT from an intersectional/interdisciplinary perspective does not mean straying from the reality. On the contrary, it means drawing this field (AVT) nearer to some of the actual needs of modern societies, as gender is a cross-cutting theme which affects everyone, all spheres of life and, although to a different extent, most disciplines and professions. This explains the rationale behind the title of this article. It is not accidental that the expression ‘engendering approach’ has been preferred to the more common ‘gender approach’ widely used in the last few years. The verb ‘to engender’ means to cause, to raise/originate something, but recently it has increasingly been used in sociological studies and economic development studies to stress the centrality of gender concerns in our societies. As a matter of fact, ‘engender’ features in the titles of many projects which target gender equality principles. The ‘engendering approach’ endorsed in De Marco (2012) and reiterated in the present article, keeps both nuances: that of raising awareness about gender issues in an unconventional territory (AVT), and that of making gender issues an integral dimension of the duties of both professionals and scholars who run through that territory. Engendering AVT means not only to talk about gender in translated audiovisual programs, but also to use these programs as a privileged point to ascertain how gender unbalances are activated, and how they can be challenged and eventually reversed.

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