

S(m)other Tongue?: Feminism, Academic Discourse, Translation

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Langue maternelle possessive: féminisme, discours académique, traduction

Cet essai répond à Jane Casey qui se plaint dans l'éditorial CV 2 présentant Tessera 4 de ce qu' 'une langue très spécialisée' dans bien des articles 'exclut le dialogue' parmi les lecteurs et lectrices féministes. Selon Banting, un vocabulaire théorique ne peut être traduit en une langue moins théorique et cette demande d' 'accessibilité' maintient en fait une hiérarchie traditionnelle entre la théorie et la pratique, l'académique et le populaire. Elle se demande si l'on peut établir un vrai dialogue lorsque l'on demande à l'un des groupes d' interlocuteurs de ne parler ni d' écrire la langue dans laquelle ses membres vivent et travaillent. La langue des femmes est toujours double, maternelle et différente qui, bien que distincte, constitue le système linguistique intermédiaire entre les langues de départ et d'arrivée. On ne peut pas raisonnablement s'attendre à ce que les féministes qui traduisent déjà diverses langues indigènes en une langue étrangère inconnue de faire l'inverse simultanément. Cela donne une langue maternelle possessive, une répression du dialogisme polyphonique au nom du dialogue en tant que communication unilatérale. Banting suggère d'abandonner le modèle du dialogue et d'emprunter à la théorie de la traduction afin de fonder un modèle de collaboration féministe.

Academic discourse is discouraged. If this statement is removed from its original context, it is difficult to tell what kind of an utterance it is. Is it a proclamation? A headline? A sigh of regret? A triumphant declaration? A tautology? A prohibition? How are we to translate this simple sentence?

Restored to the context of the call for papers for *Tessera 6*, the meaning becomes clearer: it is an incitement and invitation to experiment. 'All forms of writing are welcome: essays, poems, fictions, transla-

tions. Academic discourse is discouraged.' In her CV 2 editorial to *Tessera* 4, Jane Casey hears 'a hint of redress' in this problematical statement. Worried about how 'theory and activism can work together' Jane expresses her reservations about the tenor of many of the articles published in that issue. She says: 'My concern is not so much that they are too intellectual or too theoretical, but rather that the highly specialized language they use precludes the possibility for dialogue among a wide base of feminist readers. And that is unfortunate' (8). Jane's assumption is that the vocabulary of theory can always be translated into less complex, less exclusionary, less educated, less theoretical terms. But what, we might ask, is the nature of this purportedly more accommodating, more popular, less elitist language that feminist theory should be adequately translated into with minimal loss? What is this, to use Jane's word, 'authentic' target language into and through which the, by implication, inauthentic source language of theoretical research should be translated and disseminated?¹

While few would dispute that standard academic discourse has a wide range of undesirable, even intolerable, attributes (footnotes used as armour, strictly linear argumentation, pomposity, aggression, the substitution of rhetoric for the personal, an air of neutrality, reluctance to commit oneself, etc.), still it is important to consider exactly which academic attributes are being discouraged and which alternate virtues encouraged. In terms of censoring or suppressing women's writing, the call for accessibility invokes dangers similar to those typically associated with academic discourse. Janice Williamson, responding in a letter to the editors of (*f*)lip magazine regarding the use of the word 'accessible' in the description of the magazine, writes: 'How will the criteria of "accessibility" affect your editing of my piece? Will you edit out words like "overdetermination" which are not "accessible" to my interested mother who would perhaps be moved to look it up in a reference book? Isn't that part of what feminist "innovative" writing should do? Propel readers to exceed themselves" (22).

My own relationship to the academy and its discourse has been a stormy, on-again-off-again affair, negotiated along a zigzag path that is only being traversed through a combination of supportive and compensatory circumstances, most importantly, by my involvement in both the literary and academic communities at once (the positive

qualities of each taking turns buffering the deficiencies of the other), by friendships with feminist students and professors (including a few male professors), and by the act of writing. However, despite my sometimes ambivalent relation to the institution I disagree with the suggestion that discourses produced within the university cannot be shared, comprehended, interpreted, or responded to from without. I am not convinced that theory cannot and does not take place outside the walls of the institution. My purpose here then is to add another cautionary note regarding the automatic equation of academic discourse with abstruse and elitist language and to open up questions pertaining to the nature of this imagined, alternative, accessible, target language into which academic or theoretical language is supposed to be translated.²

I must confess right away that I do have a certain fetish for impossible discourse, or texts of bliss. However, I can trace this predilection less to the university, I think, than to much earlier circumstances. I was born and grew up in a remote village where books were a rare item. As a pre-school child, I had only a couple of children's books, of which I have no recollection. However, on Sunday mornings my Dad and I would get up while my Mom slept in, and Dad would read the Saturday colored comics to me while I sat on his knee. Having read me the comics cover to cover more than once, however, he could not persuade me to get down off his knee, and, if he wanted to read the rest of the paper for himself, he had to read it out loud to me too. While kids growing up in towns and cities were probably thoroughly familiar with the characters of Little Noddy and the Cat in the Hat, the characters whose adventures I followed were Blondie and Dagwood, Lil Orphan Annie, Krushev, Dick Tracy, and Diefenbaker.

Later when I started school, I read the newspaper for myself. One of my favorite sections was 'Dear Ann, Dear Abby,' which I read daily, perhaps savoring the personal voice, the narratives of disaster and recuperation of loss, and the mystery and incomplete comprehensibility of it all. I read these columns for at least two years before finally one morning, at age eight, reading the paper at the kitchen counter while putting on my parka, mitts and scarf to leave for school, I asked my Dad what the word 'p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t' meant. I had been reading this word, around which all catastrophe and doom seemed to revolve, since learning to read but, because it seemed to be the key to everything, I thought that the meaning would eventually become clear from

the context. And because there was an aura of shame and degradation attached to the word, I had hesitated to ask. Moreover, it seemed as if the worst things happened to girls who were 'easy' or 'accessible.' 'Dear Ann Dear Abby' first inculcated me with a taste for texts which featured difficulty, complications and the questionable subject-in-process.³

Variables such as total accessibility, clarity, and age- or grade-specific reading levels in schools can just as easily become fetishes as can difficulty or complexity. What I want to ask is, in whose name is the plea for accessibility being made? On whose behalf?⁴ It is unfortunate that, despite her plea that 'We need to scrutinize our academic associations very carefully' in order not to stifle opportunities for 'dialogue' (9), Jane Casey chooses not, at least within her brief editorial, to scrutinize her own position in relation either to the university or to those on whose behalf she is pleading. Ironically, what emerges from her argument for the unidirectional translation of theory into some other discourse is a privileging and preservation of the traditional hierarchies between theory and practice, academic and popular. When calls for accessibility come from academic women such as Jane Casey herself, what is actually being called for? And can a true dialogue take place when one group of interlocutors is required in advance *not* to speak or write the language of its members' lives and work?⁵

Too, one must speculate as to what other matters come into play in terms of extending this much-touted dialogue to a broader base of feminist readers. Matters also needing scrutiny include the funding, marketing and distribution of Canadian journals and magazines, the general devaluation of intellectual research and artistic practice, the relative lack of informed discussion in the media, and the influence of television on reading habits. Surely it is imposing a large burden on feminist projects to insist that 'accessible' language compensate for all these and other important cultural factors.

Susan Knutson also addresses the issue of accessible discourse and places her concerns about it within a concise summary of the feminist language project as a whole. She writes:

Women's language, including that of the feminist critic, is characteristically double, inevitably complicit with the patriarchal language and culture in which we are spoken at the same

time that it participates in the creation of a culture of resistance, generating codes of subversion and manifesting semiotic flight from the *nom du pere*. Complexity is a condition of our engagement with a web of re-reading which, as Luce Irigaray has shown, stretches back at least as far as Plato and through which we participate in the deconstruction of western metaphysical discourse. There is not, and we should not expect to see, any singular, simple or particularly 'accessible' reading of writing in the feminine in Canada. In any case singular and accessible meaning has fallen under the suspicion of being nothing more or less than the reappearance of a previously successful (patriarchal / phallogocentric) fiction. If we are attached to such fictions it is perhaps because of the pleasure we derive from the comforting and the familiar. However, feminist experimental writing can and does offer other pleasures: pleasures of utopic vision, pleasures of breaking silence, pleasures of women's body writing itself, pleasures of lesbian sexuality daring to speak its name (23).

Women's language is always double, always both complicit and illicit. Or, in terms of translation theory, women's language is and is not a native language. It is a (m)other tongue which is not the same as our native tongue but not entirely different from the vernacular either.⁶ Women's language is a simultaneous translation between language and the body, between the already spoken and the unspeakable, between the familiar and the un- and / or de-familiarized. Furthermore, this (m)other tongue is not a language that can be simply translated out of or into. No one's mother tongue, it is a language which emerges only in a complex and multivalent act of translation and can only be comprehended in two or more languages at once. The (m)other tongue is an interlanguage, a language which comes into existence only in the process of a second-language learning. An interlanguage is a separate, yet intermediate, linguistic system situated between a source language and a target language and which results from a learner's attempted production of the target language.⁷

What shall I call them? Other writers / theorists / academics / feminists / women cast very specific problems pertaining to feminist issues also in terms of language-learning and translation. Here, for instance, is Alice Jardine questioning how men manage to 'evacuate

questions of *their* sexuality, *their* subjectivity, *their* relationship to language from their sympathetic texts on “feminism,” on “woman,” on “feminine identity”’:

Most difficult of all is that these *few* men, our allies, have learned their lessons well. The actual ‘content’ of their writing is rarely incorrect *per se*. It is almost as if they have learned a new vocabulary perfectly, but have not paid enough attention to syntax or intonation. When they write of us – always of us – their bodies would seem to know nothing of the new language they’ve learned ... (ellipses in original; 56).

It is almost as if, according to Jardine, the ‘allies’ have learned a new language via sleep-learning. They seem to have vaulted directly from patriarchal language to feminist language without passing through the vagaries, errors, slippages, transferred syntax, slips of the tongue, and (in)felicities of an interlanguage. Concerned about the possible effects of these athletic, triple-bypass men mastering the language of feminist discourse and ‘jumping on the feminist theory bandwagon’ and about whether what is being staged is men’s appropriation of women’s struggles, Jardine writes to a colleague and friend:

Rosi, how long before it becomes no longer a question but an *answer*, a prescription about how women *should* go about what they’re doing, saying, and writing ... There is then a kind of streamlining of feminism – a suppression of the diversity and disagreement within the movement itself ... (ellipses in original; 57).

Thus it is unreasonable to expect that while feminists are excavating, imagining, (re)inscribing, and speaking this interlanguage – translating between and among our various native languages and an as-yet-undifferentiated, unmarked, unheard foreign tongue – we be asked simultaneously to translate back into the native languages. What Jane Casey and others who hold similar views long for, in effect, is to suppress polyphonic dialogism in the name of an unquestioned valorization of dialogue as an essentially unilateral communication in a single (smothered?) tongue. Moreover, it is not clear from the repetition alone of the word ‘dialogue’ (which occurs so often in CV 2 editorials as to volunteer itself as a blind spot) exactly how dialogue operates as a panacea for the split Jane sees between ‘theory’ and

'activism.' To press, as she does, this requirement of dialogue in what I might call s(m)other tongue is in effect to annul these feminist projects and to censor the work in the very process of its being produced. The aim of feminism is not, or is not only, to create one common language of, by and for women but to multiply the linguistic potentialities, competencies and occasions in which women can speak, write, perform, analyze, and celebrate their difference(s). Mary Russo describes the proliferation of feminist and postmodernist textual work as a 'carnival of theory' including

all manner of textual travesty, 'mimetic rivalry,' semiotic delinquency, parody, teasing, posing, flirting, masquerade, seduction, counterseduction, tight-rope walking, and verbal aerialisms of all kinds. Performances of displacement, double displacements, and more have permeated much feminist writing in our attempts to survive or muscle in on the discourses of Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, avant-garde writing, and postmodernist visual art. It could even be said, with reservation, that in relation to academic institutions, what has come to be called 'theory' has constituted a kind of carnival space. The practice of criticism informed by this theory has taken great license stylistically, and in its posing posed a threat of sorts (221).

Jane Casey's privileging of dialogue represents too, I think, an imposition onto writing of functions that are, if not more properly at least equally, pedagogical, a paradoxical imposition given her stated scepticism regarding the importance of the role of language ('Well, even if some of us don't subscribe to this 100% ...' 8).

While I am not opposed to dialogue as such (obviously translation contains, though is not superceded or wholly absorbed by, the idea of dialogue), what I am suggesting is that if academic discourse and institutions deserve careful scrutiny, and they most definitely do,⁸ so do notions like dialogue. What is needed is a multiplication of tasks and approaches instead of the reduction or subordination of differences in the name of a single, artificially elevated one. In a very thoughtful and challenging essay on the ethics of feminist research, for example, Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman develop the idea of 'friendship' as an acceptable basis for doing theory together.⁹

What I am proposing is that in developing a model for feminist collaboration that includes dialogue but does not threaten to contradict,

contract, ignore, or suppress the work of some possible contributors, it may be helpful to borrow aspects of translation theory. As David Homel and Sherry Simon outline, translation has a number of traditional and brand-new functions that are compatible with feminist projects.¹⁰ Both translation and feminism are tools for a critical understanding of language. Traditionally, the political force of translation has been in redressing the imbalance between dominant and dominated cultures. Translation is a practical and a theoretical issue in the relations between French- and English-speaking feminists in Canada (Homel and Simon 43-44). In the same discussion, Barbara Godard adds that translation is one among many ways of rewriting within literary systems (50).

A translation model would compel us to examine the repertoires of respective systems – both so-called ‘ordinary’ and ‘theoretical’ discourses – rather than simply assume that only unilateral translation from ‘theory’ to ‘practice’ is possible and desirable. Secondly, we might be able to deal with the problematical corollary of that assumption, namely, that theoretical feminists have a monopoly on power through a discursive advantage that non-theoretical feminists lack. Translation concepts such as interlanguages, which I have discussed only very briefly here, system interference, and translation as production rather than reproduction, for example, could be called into play to set up the conditions under which we can engage in ‘a *mutual dialogue* that does not reduce each one of us to instances of the abstraction called “woman”’ (Lugones and Spelman; emphasis added; 581). There is a sense in which continual calls for dialogue between theorists and activists can be construed as an attempt to displace activism into the realm of discourse. I realize that in importing a translation model I am proposing to add yet another discursive strategy to the repertoire of the theoretical system. However, another advantage of translation is that it can operate both orally and in print. Dialogue, on the other hand (at least as Jane Casey valorizes the term), is a concept derived from an oral economy and transplanted into the written. If one of the unanalyzed distinctions between theory and action is that one is primarily a written practice and the other primarily oral (meetings, demonstrations, symbolic gestures, consciousness-raising groups), then translation allows for mediation between these two economies.

What must be avoided is a talking down, a speaking for, instead of,

or in the name of, no matter how scrupulously. As Lugones and Spelman conclude, only friendship can constitute the groundwork of collaboration, or, in their words, for a project of 'joint theory-making.' Theory can and does thrive outside the academy.¹¹ And the academy is not identical with a set of walls. A map is not the territory.¹²

Notes

1. I would like to thank Romita Saha, a graduate student in English at the University of Alberta, for sharing with me an account of some of the discussions concerning the roles of theory and practice in which she participated during her involvement in Indian politics.
2. I must underline that the call for papers in *Tessera* explicitly discouraged 'academic' discourse and not theoretical language. It is in Jane Casey's editorial that theoretical language is equated with academic discourse.
3. In this connection, I should probably also acknowledge the similar influence of 'I am Joe's [sic] Liver,' 'I am Joe's [sic] Pancreas,' 'It Pays to Increase Your Word Power,' and the true life experiences published in the issues of *Readers' Digest* that came out during the sixties.
4. In former centuries, it was the general consensus that women, being possessed of only a weak reason and morals to match, need not be educated, or, if educated, that the women's curriculum ought only to prepare them for the extremely restricted roles they would play in society (consisting primarily of the custodianship of their 'virtue'). Apparently, for example, women who *were* taught how to read, at least during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were not necessarily also taught how to write. As Margaret Patterson Hannay observes, 'Teaching women to read the words of men without teaching them to write their own was one effective means of silencing them' (8). History teaches us that it is necessary to be suspicious of what is perceived to be good for different groups of people.
5. This one-way translation is counter to the meaning of the word 'discourse.' In its etymological roots, 'discourse' refers to a running back and forth, to speaking at length, and to running in different directions. Thus 'discourse' contains the idea not of unilateral but of mutual translation.
6. See Jane Gallop's and Madeleine Gagnon's expansions upon the idea of the (m)other tongue.
7. See Gideon Toury for development of the concept of interlanguages.
8. As Jacques Derrida cautions, the theory that has the arts as its object may be 'just as useful [to the military-industrial complex as is basic scientific research] in ideological warfare as it is in experimentation with variables in all-too-familiar perversions of the referential function.... What is produced in this field can always be used. And even if it should remain useless in its

results, in its productions, it can always serve to keep the masters of discourse busy: the experts, professionals of rhetoric, logic or philosophy who might otherwise be applying their energy elsewhere' (13). Derrida claims that it is precisely the necessarily double gesture of maintaining professional competence even while engaging in the most directly underground thinking about the university institution which 'appears unsituatable and thus unbearable to certain university professionals in every country who join ranks to foreclose or to censure it by all available means, simultaneously denouncing the "professionalism" and the "antiprofessionalism" of those who are calling others to these new possibilities' (17).

9. Lugones and Spelman focus on sociological rather than literary or philosophical research, but their thoughtful article exploring the nuances of the concept of friendship as a basis for a research ethics is well worth considering. See also Kathleen Martindale's critique of their article.
10. See the discussions by Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei, Sherry Simon, David Homel, and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood on how feminist work is transforming the theory and practice of translation itself (Homel and Simon 43-54).
11. There is a new journal for Canadian education activists called *Our Schools, Our Selves* that has just begun publication, of which I have seen only one issue so far, that includes articles by university professors from more than one discipline, former politicians, elementary school teachers, poets, native secondary school students, a secondary school student who is also a mother, labour activists, and others.
12. In 'The(eye)or(y),' *Prairie Fire* 8.2 (1987): 33-39, I addressed a similar tendency, in that instance on the part of certain writers, to blur university buildings with abstract theorizing hostile to indigenous literatures. While it is indeed appalling that many university literature departments, permeated by the colonial mentality, have done very little to acquaint Canadian students with their own literary traditions, what concerns me is that, paradoxically, often those individuals in the academic community who have done the most to defend, to teach and to publish Canadian writing and writers are the ones who are maligned while the rest are left uncriticized.

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