

TRANSLATION AND GENDER. A CONVERSATION WITH LUISE VON FLOTOW

TRADUÇÃO E GÊNERO. CONVERSANDO COM LUISE VON FLOTOW

TRADUCCIÓN Y GÉNERO. UNA CONVERSACIÓN CON LUISE VON FLOTOW



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Abstract: This interview between Luise von Flotow and the guest editors was carried out online in March 2022. Flotow was the keynote speaker at the 9th IATIS Regional Workshop “Perspectives on Translation, Feminisms and Gender from Latin America,” held online in La Plata, Argentina, in 2020. This event, which gathered scholars mostly from Argentina and Brazil, aimed at engaging in fruitful dialogues between established and emerging paradigms in the field of feminist translation studies. It particularly intended to explore transnational perspectives within the field of feminist translation (studies). This conversation with Flotow, a founding and leading figure of the field, aims at pursuing this agenda further by disseminating her views on gender issues and translation, feminist translation, queer approaches to translation, transnational dialogues, and methodological insights.

Keywords: Interview. Luise von Flotow. Feminist Translation Studies. Translation. Gender.

Resumo: Esta entrevista entre Luise von Flotow e as editoras convidadas foi realizada online em março de 2022. Flotow proferiu a conferência de abertura do 9º Workshop Regional do IATIS “Perspectivas latino-americanas sobre tradução, feminismos e gênero”, realizado online em La Plata, Argentina, em 2020. Este evento, que reuniu pesquisadores e pesquisadoras principalmente da Argentina e do Brasil, teve por objetivo estabelecer diálogos frutíferos entre paradigmas estabelecidos e emergentes no campo dos estudos feministas da tradução. Pretendia particularmente explorar as perspectivas transnacionais dos estudos da tradução feminista. Esta conversa com



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Flotow, uma figura fundadora e expoente da área, visa avançar essa proposta, compartilhando seus pontos de vista sobre questões de gênero e tradução, tradução feminista, abordagens queer à tradução, diálogos transnacionais e aspectos metodológicos.

Palavras-chave: Entrevista. Luise von Flotow. Estudos Feministas de Tradução. Tradução. Gênero.

Resumen: Esta entrevista entre Luise von Flotow y las editoras invitadas se llevó a cabo en línea en marzo de 2022. Flotow fue la oradora principal del 9th IATIS Regional Workshop “Perspectivas latinoamericanas sobre traducción, feminismos y género”, que tuvo lugar de manera virtual en la ciudad de La Plata, Argentina, en diciembre de 2020. Este foro, que reunió a especialistas principalmente de Argentina y Brasil, buscó instituir diálogos fructíferos entre paradigmas establecidos y emergentes en el campo de la traducción y de la traductología feministas. En particular, el coloquio buscó explorar perspectivas transnacionales en los ámbitos de la traducción feminista. Esta conversación con Flotow, una figura fundadora y referente del campo, se propone avanzar en esta agenda mediante la difusión de sus reflexiones sobre cuestiones de género y traducción, traducción feminista, enfoques queer de la traducción, diálogos transnacionales y aspectos metodológicos.

Palabras clave: Entrevista. Luise von Flotow. Traductología feminista. Traducción. Género.

2 **I**. In *Translation and Gender*, you pointed out the lack of intersection between gender studies and translation studies, your purpose being “to bring these two disciplines together” (Flotow, 1997, p. 2). Many years later, in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender*, together with Hala Kamal you have stressed the need for more productive conversation among gender studies, feminist theory and translation studies (Flotow & Kamal 2020, p. 1). Which are, in your opinion, possible research avenues leading to effective transdisciplinary communication?

Actually, in 2016, I co-published an article with Joan W. Scott precisely on the question of how our disciplines — translation studies and gender studies — can/should intersect. In that article we presented various avenues of research where such work would be most useful and argued that these “two transdisciplines are structurally similar — both with universal, international aspects but also with strong local systems and applications where the struggle over meaning and the power to determine meaning are constants.” Communications and interactions between these areas of study have, in fact, been improving visibly and steadily over the past twenty years. There are now many more publications that link gender studies and translation studies, and much more interest in feminism and gender-politics as applied to the *pragmatics* of translation — the selection, translation and dissemination of texts in their contexts. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, gender diversity was beginning to feature as an academic topic and feminism was deemed by some to be old-fashioned and almost retrograde, but we know today that **all** gender-related topics are socio-political events that impact communications and **all** communications can be studied from gender-specific perspectives. One interesting complicating factor is that as anglophone globalization has taken hold of the

internet, to some extent standardizing mediated communication systems, gender-focused interest in the pragmatics of translation is becoming more urgent, demanding more culture-specific and language-specific work. There is much to be done.

About avenues of research: they can be activated by one simple question, and that is how do contemporary “western” uses of the term “gender” play out in translation on a transnational scale? This question generates many more, including work on the intersections of a supposedly universal concept such as “gender” and the local conditions where it is put to use. It can also provide for descriptions of how this often imported concept affects the regulation of social and political life, which every society/culture seems to structure around human sexual differences (i.e. gender issues).

Given the fact that globalization (Anglo-Americanization — as in the concept “gender”) has both broadened and narrowed our fields of inquiry, such research will require considerable work. In my view, the local aspects of feminism, gender-politics and translation should now be the focus. This may mitigate the effects that the power of English-language globalization and academia have created, namely in diminishing the importance of the local, affecting not only *what* is studied and communicated but also *how* this is done. In the work that Hala Kamal and I did as editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender* (2020) we found that for many translation studies scholars “feminism” and “gender” were indeed foreign (mainly Anglo-American) terms, developed and theorized elsewhere, which they needed to apply to local contexts. They were not indigenous, local concepts. I think it is time to ask what the local ideas in regard to concepts of gender and gender-politics are. How have they been portrayed, made manifest or undermined and downplayed in local communications? How has translation played a role in these communications, over time and presently? And how are they now being translated into other languages and cultures?

The main avenue of research that I might suggest, therefore, is the development of local approaches to these issues. Research on indigenous feminisms and questions of gender diversity as well as analyses of their presence in transnational — translational — communications are essential. One excellent example of such work comes from the Sri Lankan scholar, Kanchuka Dharmasiri (2017, pp. 175–193), who shows how the 2500-year-old writings of Buddhist nuns in the *Therīgāthā* resonate with and reflect feminist ideas of today. While the more contemporary versions of these ideas (Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir, hooks, Mohanty, Butler, et al.) may be deemed too “western” and therefore inappropriate and unwelcome in the current ethno-nationalist Sri Lankan context, Dharmasiri points to more than

two thousand years of indigenous ideas that are, in fact, “feminist” though they have only today acquired that label. She then devises ways to make pedagogical use of this parallelism in an ideologically hostile environment.

2. *More recently, a number of translation scholars have introduced queer perspectives into their reflections on translation and the practice of translation. How does this emerging field of study relate to feminist translation studies?*

For me, the most interesting application of queer studies to translation studies is the notion that translation “queers” a text, rendering every version of it different from the preceding or the following one. “Queer” is changeable, “queer” is indefinable, “queer” is dynamic, and cannot be fixed or rendered static. It escapes definition and regulation. To think of translation as “queering” a text is to finally rid ourselves of the useless, and indeed harmful, questions around “faithful” translation.

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At a broader level, I see feminist translation studies and queer perspectives in/on translation as quite closely related, the latter actually deriving from the former, but equally valid and valuable: both focus on the politics of gender. Where feminist approaches have been concerned with the dearth of women authors available in translation, the mis-translation of women-related topics/ideas/terms, the culturally and politically skewed rendering of women’s discourse in translation and the patriarchal features of conventional discourse, publishing, and reading practices, queer perspectives in the field address similar questions: the representation of queer characters, the censorship (through non-translation) of queer authors, the meaningfulness of queer terminology/language and its translation into other cultures, and so on. The main difference is perhaps that over the years identity politics, the subjective, cultural, and intersectional definition of self in society, has become a much more important factor than it was in the early years of feminist translation studies. And so, very personal questions of identity have become increasingly public, politicized, and a factor to be considered and studied in communications/translation.

3. *In December 2020, you were the keynote speaker of the 9th IATIS Regional Workshop “Perspectives on Translation, Feminisms and Gender from Latin America,” held in La Plata, Argentina^a. This event, which gathered scholars mostly from Argentina and Brazil, aimed at engaging in-fruitful dialogues between established and emerging paradigms in the field of feminist translation studies. It particularly intended to explore transnational perspectives*

within the field of feminist translation (studies). How do you see the development of this subdiscipline?

A transnational approach to studies in feminist and gender-political work in translation studies opens the field to many different sets of languages/cultures, and moves the discipline beyond the “Anglo-American Eurozone” that has dominated it for the past decades. It is not only interesting, but important, to study and explore the effects of translation between Argentinian or Chilean Spanish and Luso-Brazilian, or between the English of Guyana and the Portuguese of neighbouring Brazil, or of any other combination of the multiple languages spoken in South America. Scholars in Brazil have been hard at work, developing research in this field^b, and it is good to see it flourish.

Transnational work, which seems to effectively mean a focus on non-European/Anglophone cultures’ interactions, is vital for the so-called South to South, South to North and East to West dialogues that have been suffocated or simply neglected because of the dominance of the Anglo-American Eurozone in our discipline. The development of this aspect of translation studies can provide rich and valuable information — translation, after all, occurs everywhere — but publications in this vein will, paradoxically, need to deploy international systems of communication in order to find readers and resonance. This means either translation, or use of the infamous lingua franca — English — in order to disseminate the results. How else can the academic reading public learn of Tamil women’s work in Galician translation (Reimóndez, 2017)?

One recent example of such transnational work is the article “Volga as an international agent of feminist translation” by Rajkumar Eligedi (2020, pp. 17–31) which traces and explains the ideological and political context of the prolific translator, Volga, who singlehandedly brought 20th century feminist ideas into circulation in the Telugu language, translating from various European and American sources from the 1980s to the early 2000s. While Volga was working from “West to East” to use today’s abbreviation, the article, written in Saudi Arabia, works from “East to West,” and sheds considerable light on Volga’s work, its effects and the opposition she faced and countered. It is part of the history of feminist translation practice and politics.

In regard to the problem of dissemination, an issue of *Mutatis Mutandis* (2020, Volume 13 (1)) published at University of Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia has taken a step in a similar direction, first issuing a call for transnational work in feminist translation studies, then publishing peer-reviewed submissions in Spanish, Portuguese and English, and providing

abstracts in all three languages^c. By making available the abstracts of the articles in various languages, always including English, the journal invites many more readers to its pages, and thus makes materials transnationally accessible. Scholars who are interested in the topic of a particular article can always choose to translate it, as needed. In such a scenario, the lingua franca — English — becomes a useful tool for making the local transnational. It serves a useful communicative purpose. It is good to note here that this journal produced another special issue in the field: on “women and translation in Latin America and the Caribbean” which includes studies of literary translations but also addresses pragmatic questions such as the work of women translators of financial texts^d.

6 One of the more serious issues that efforts in transnational feminist/gender-aware translation studies can encounter is deliberate censorship through the silencing or removal of materials from databases, a rather nefarious practice, given the importance of digital resources today. One such case has been noted in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database where bibliometric studies on the impact of feminist translation studies have shown that certain Chinese scholars working and publishing in the field simply do not show up, nor does their published work (Su, 2019). This type of censorship underlies a certain academic politics that feminist scholars need to continue to address and combat, with perseverance, humour and intelligence.

4. One of the principles of transnational feminist translation (studies) is the forging of strategic cross-border alliances that may contribute to social justice at a global scale, translation being instrumental in those endeavors. What alliances has transnational feminist translation enabled so far? Have those alliances challenged the North-South/ West-East vectors of circulation of feminist authors, texts, theories and ideas? What kind of feminisms and academic cultures are more often represented in such initiatives?

It would take some research to provide a coherent, full answer to this question. I can only respond from personal experience and contacts, and from work that my students/collaborators have produced. But it seems that a significant transnational reach has developed in recent years. An entire new generation of scholars, working worldwide, is interested in questions that center on gender/feminist politics, ideas and identities, and translation. And interestingly, these scholars are not only from the Anglo-American/Eurozone, but hail from India and China, from the Middle East, from East-Central Europe and South America, and they are productive. The Routledge *Handbook* is evidence of such development

as is the three-year research project on Feminist Translation initiated at the University of Glasgow and carried out in collaboration with seven other universities worldwide (Bracke et al., 2022). Recent initiatives such as the 9th IATIS Workshop in Argentina and the flourishing series of conferences and research projects in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Chile are most promising.

5. *The development of a methodology of its own has probably been one of the greatest challenges in feminist translation studies. In your opinion, which are the most innovative methods introduced in translation studies by feminist translation scholars?*

I am not sure that there can be a specific methodology for research in the field of feminist translation studies. Given the fact that feminist ideas, knowledge, and experiences vary with cultural and political contexts, I think it is wise to keep methodologies flexible and dynamic in these transnational times. And since feminist translation studies can be applied to a wide range of materials and genres, the need for adaptability remains important. Feminist perspectives on audiovisual translation, for example of Hollywood movies or American TV series sold worldwide will, of necessity, be focused differently than research on the translation of women's lyric poetry or literature. Or feminist philosophy (Shread, 2021).

In my view, innovation is most visible in *collaborative* work. My recent experience working with two younger scholars, one from Norway and the other from France, demonstrated how valuable such efforts are as we worked on the English and French translations of *Egalias døtre* (Brantenberg, ([1977] 2013)), a famous text of feminist speculative fiction. Our focus was on the largely linguistic humour in the text, and its translatability. No one person could have addressed the research question "How does this feminist wordplay from the 1980s translate?" not only because of the three languages but for the focus on humour – which is culturally so different (Flotow, Lessinger, & Solberg, 2021). While collaboration often requires more time, it mobilizes more minds – and more language combinations – and can produce not only interesting work but also create steps toward the "community" that transnational feminism seeks. Another such collaborative project, which included focus groups and interviews with political associations, took place in Montreal recently. It concerned the "intersectional" translation into French (for Canada) of four different chapters of the American classic of women's reproductive health *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and involved indigenous, disabled, trans, racialized and established as well as new, young, third-wave women's groups in the process. The American book was thus adapted to current contexts,

current identity politics, current political ideas and needs, and current language issues. It came out as *Corps Accord. Guide de sexualité positive* (Bessaïh et al., 2020), and probably involved fifty collaborators at various levels.

6. *Over the past thirty years, you have become a preeminent figure in the field of feminist translation studies. In your view, what have been the most significant contributions of the field to translation studies, feminisms and/or other fields of knowledge?*

My preeminence is rather debatable. I have just kept at it. I have produced work on a regular basis and not viewed feminist approaches to translation studies as a fashionable moment in academia. Feminist ideas in academic work need to be constantly maintained, developed, repeated, advertised and promoted, otherwise they fade away, are pushed aside and negated, or simply ignored. For example, the Call for Papers for a recently advertised conference on History and Translation, to be held in East-Central Europe in May 2022, offered no category for “gender and translation,” as though fifty years of feminist theorizing and scholarship had never occurred. They accepted my proposal for a panel on the topic and various *Handbook* contributors have agreed to participate. I think it is absolutely necessary to insist on the ongoing importance of “gender” as a “useful category of [academic] analysis” (Scott, 1986) and to ensure that colleagues and students are kept informed. A feminist stance is, after all, a political stance – and requires constant energy.

As for the most significant contributions to the field of translation studies: I think that the work produced in the early days of this particular field, which showed how translators with a feminist orientation could/would and did deliberately make changes in the texts they translated – and marked, celebrated and drew attention to their interventions – was perhaps the most important and interesting. Translation studies has, since then, shown that all texts change in the course of translation (Emmerich, 2017); they must change – for cultural, political, and simply linguistic reasons. However, for translators to proudly demonstrate that they deliberately change a text, and how they deliberately apply their politics to a text, this was absolutely innovative. It worked against the official grain of translation as “faithful” reproduction and translation as some kind of mechanistic copy work. It put politics and personal, subjective feeling straight into the transnational work of communication that is translation. On the scholarly side, work that draws attention to such initiatives, explains and valorizes them, or criticizes them is equally important, for otherwise they might pass unnoticed

– and that would mean silence, and a return to the translator as a quiet little being who can be set aside, ignored, underpaid, and undervalued.

Overall, this valorization of the translator and the translator’s power, utopian as it might seem for the everyday working translator, of which I am one, has had one of the strongest theoretical impacts on translation studies to date, and the feminist translator — as theorized by colleagues such as Barbara Godard or Susanne De Lotbinière-Harwood — has certainly played an important role. I am forever grateful to these two predecessors for pointing me in their direction when I was in my doctoral studies!

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