



Women as translators, as translation trainers, and as translation scholars



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SYNOPSIS

Over the centuries, women have always played a significant part in translation practice, training, and theoretical reflection. In fact, translation (and interpreting) have often been characterized as a feminine occupation. This chapter looks at these three aspects predominantly from a quantitative perspective. In terms of the profession, it investigates the distribution of male and female translators and interpreters in the United Kingdom and the subject areas they are working in. For women's contribution to the academic discipline of Translation Studies, it investigates the amount of female authors who contributed to the discipline with their publications and asks whether female scholars focus on specific topics. Finally, it investigates leadership roles of women in professional associations. The paper concludes by reflecting on the potential significance of such studies.

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Introduction

In contrast to some other professions, in which women had to fight to be accepted as equals by their male colleagues, translating has always been an activity in which women were actively engaged. Some of these female translators are portrayed in the book *Portraits de traductrices* by Delisle (2002), the companion volume to Delisle and Woodsworth's *Translators through History* (1995). Dow's (2007) book *Translators, Interpreters, Mediators. Women Writers 1700–1900* focuses on a specific historical period, illustrating how women writers as translators mediated across cultural boundaries, thus both breaking new ground and often acquiring a central position in the literary polysystem.

Within Translation Studies, research conducted from the perspective of feminist translation theories has highlighted the previously dominant metaphorical view of translations as 'defective females' (e.g. in the tradition of the 'Belles Infidèles') and as being subordinate, second best to the original text. It has equally exposed a male bias in translation strategies, and, most importantly, by raising awareness of such perceptions and practices, it has inspired a counter-movement to give more visibility to female translators, and to their contribution to translation theory and practice (e.g. Chamberlain, 2004; Flotow,

1997, 2011; Godard, 1990; Simon, 1996). It is also interesting to notice that women translators are given attention in disciplines outside Translation Studies. For example, the 23rd International Congress of History of Science and Technology with the main theme *Ideas and Instruments in Social Context*, held from 28 July till 2 August 2009 in Budapest, Hungary, included a symposium on *Mediators of Sciences. Women Translators of Scientific Texts 1600–1850*. The initial call for papers listed the following among the issues to be addressed at the symposium: Who were these women? Why did they devote themselves to translation? How was their work received and used by the (almost exclusively) male scientific community? How deep did their translation reshape the original text? Was translation a means through which women could find a way to make their voice heard in the masculine *Republique des lettres*? These questions are very similar to those asked within feminist translation studies.

Such an increased research interest can also be interpreted as recognition of the fact that translation and interpreting are indeed feminine occupations. It is often said, although not backed up by empirical evidence, that most translators and interpreters are women, and also that the majority of students on translation and interpreting programmes are women. However, this generally held assumption may not be true for all countries, and definitely not for all periods of time, due to

Table 1

Women translators on the ITI register (accessed in November 2010).

| Language pair | Total number of translators | Men | Women | Percentage of women |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----|-------|---------------------|
| French into English | 346 | 125 | 212 | 61% |
| German into English | 314 | 130 | 184 | 59% |
| Spanish into English | 166 | 54 | 112 | 67% |
| Chinese into English | 15 | 8 | 7 | 47% |
| Arabic into English | 12 | 9 | 3 | 25% |

different social conditions, traditions, and attitudes. The questions this paper wishes to address are as follows: Is it true that translating and interpreting are feminine occupations? Does the dominance of women apply as well to trainers and scholars? If yes, does it matter? For whom and for what? In trying to give answers to these questions, I will adopt a predominantly quantitative approach. I was motivated to do this by a presentation which Gideon Toury gave at a conference in Leuven, Belgium, in August 2009 on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the doctoral programme CETRA and of the journal *Target* (subsequently published in *Target* 2/2009). Toury had conducted a quantitative analysis of papers which had been published in *Target* between 1989 and 2008, arranging them according to authors, countries, and gender. Such a quantitative analysis can also provide very interesting insights into the development of the discipline of Translation Studies and its status in various parts of the world. The quantitative analysis below is meant to build on Toury's work by adding a few additional facts and perspectives, although it is also constrained in its regional coverage.

Women as professional translators and interpreters

There are regular surveys of the translation industry to monitor and predict its development. For example, a survey conducted on behalf of the [European Commission \(2009\)](#) estimated an annual growth rate of 10% for the size of the language industry in the European Union. A comprehensive global market study for 2011 conducted by the US-American market research company Common Sense Advisory concluded as well that the market keeps growing ([Kelly & Stewart, 2011](#)). Women translators are contributing significantly to this growth. But how many women translators are there? What is the percentage of female translators compared to male translators? It seems that no detailed analysis has yet

Table 3

Percentage of female undergraduate students in the UK (1998/99–2008/09).

| Subject type | 1998/99 | 2003/04 | 2008/09 |
|--------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Languages | 69 | 69 | 69 |
| Education | 73 | 74 | 76 |

been conducted into this question. In fact, it is rather difficult to get exact statistical data.

For the purposes of this paper, the website of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI), the professional association in the United Kingdom, has proved useful ([Institute of Translation and Interpreting, 2010](#)). This website lists a register of members, arranged in a very user-friendly way and allowing potential clients to search for language combinations and subject expertise. It would equally be interesting to do a quantitative analysis of language combinations and subject expertise, since these data give a good insight into the market needs of the translation industry. However, since my main interest is in gender distribution, [Table 1](#) only lists the most dominant languages for the UK (French, German, Spanish), and also Chinese and Arabic which without doubt will see substantial growth in the years to come.

According to this 2010 ITI register, there are more women translators in the main European languages, but more men for Chinese and in particular for Arabic. It needs to be added, though, that in particular for European languages, some translators will show up twice in these statistics if they offer two foreign languages. Moreover, ITI members do not necessarily live in the UK. If we look at the ITI register for interpreting, the picture is similar but also slightly more diverse ([Table 2](#)).

Apart from Arabic, women dominate again, and even more so than in translating. For Chinese, the percentage of female interpreters is larger than for translating. When it comes to domains and institutional contexts (although the majority of interpreters work in various areas of the public services), there is no noticeable difference between men and women or between domains. Business interpreting is very prominent, and this is also the area which has the largest percentage of women for the language pair English/Arabic. A cautious conclusion to be drawn from these ITI statistics is that translating and interpreting still seem to be male-dominated professions for Arabic, but there may be various reasons for this situation, not only culture-specific ones.

Table 2

Women interpreters on the ITI register (2010).

| Language pair | Total number/of which women | Conference interpreters | Police and Court | Community | Business |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| English/French | 118 | 21 | 9 | 29 | 59 |
| | 93 women (79%) | 17 women (81%) | 6 women (67%) | 24 women (83%) | 46 women (78%) |
| English/German | 70 | 15 | 4 | 17 | 34 |
| | 49 women (70%) | 9 women (60%) | 4 women (100%) | 14 women (82%) | 22 women (65%) |
| English/Spanish | 100 | 17 | 8 | 27 | 48 |
| | 89 women (89%) | 16 women (94%) | 7 women (87%) | 26 women (96%) | 40 women (83%) |
| English/Chinese (Mandarin) | 31 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 12 |
| | 22 women (71%) | 2 women (50%) | 6 women (86%) | 6 women (75%) | 8 women (67%) |
| English/Arabic | 31 | 1 | 7 | 11 | 12 |
| | 6 women (19%) | 0 women (0%) | 1 woman (14%) | 2 women (18%) | 3 women (25%) |

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