

THE SECOND TEXT: FEMINIST APPROACHES TO TRANSLATION

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Sixty years after its initial publication, *The Second Sex* is still as eye-opening and pertinent as ever.

Participants were treated to a fascinating and informative presentation at RMIT University on 17th November 2011 entitled ‘The Second Text: Feminist approaches to Translation’. The speakers were Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier and Caroline Norma. The event was chaired by Elaine Lewis, and hosted by Translating and Interpreting Studies, the Language Discipline and the EU Centre at RMIT.

Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier are the translators of the new, first ever unabridged and complete edition in English of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, written by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949. From 9–28 November Constance and Sheila toured five Australian cities, speaking at more than ten events, and giving several media interviews, including ABC Radio National and SBS French Radio.¹ The tour was coordinated by Associate Professor Bronwyn Winter of the Department of French Studies at the University of Sydney, and RMIT is proud and delighted to have been part of this tour.

The original English translation of *The Second Sex* done in 1953 by H.M. Parshley, an American zoologist, has long been criticised for its mistranslations and missing text (up to one fifth of the original French version). Although the publishers Alfred A. Knopf, Inc were aware of the problems with the English translation, it was not until 2005 that they allowed a new one to be undertaken, even though Simone de Beauvoir herself explicitly requested one in a 1985 interview: ‘I would like very much for another translation of *The Second Sex* to be done, one that is much more faithful; more complete and more

¹ Podcasts available at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/translating-the-second-sex/3674356> and <http://www.sbs.com.au/yourlanguage/french/highlight/page/id/194327/t/Simone-de-Beauvoir-The-Second-Sex> respectively.

faithful' (Simons 1999, 93–94). Sixty years to the month after the publication of the original French version, this was achieved with Borde and Malovany-Chevalier's new translation (*The Second Sex*, Random House, 2009) as they have restored the sections of missing text and corrected many of its mistakes.

The first part of the presentation dealt with the importance of Simone de Beauvoir's 800 page masterpiece, which weaves together history, philosophy, economics, literature, biology, and a host of other disciplines to analyse the Western notion of 'woman' and to explore the power of gender and feminism. Originally a philosophical essay on the condition of being a woman, and the woman as 'other' in society, *Le Deuxième Sexe* was de Beauvoir's *tour de force*. The impact of this book continues to be felt today. As Constance says, 'this was the book that launched the second wave of feminism in the West, and this is the book that changed forever the way women thought, saw, and talked about themselves, and it had repercussions all over the world. It is the keystone of women's recent history'. Constance situates *Le Deuxième Sexe* in relation to other feminist works such as *The Kinsey Reports* by Alfred Kinsley, 1948 and 1953, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, 1963, and *In a Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan, 1982. She charts de Beauvoir's personal discovery of the dominance of masculinity in society, the difference between men and women, and her deconstruction of the writings of certain male literary figures.

The second part of the presentation dealt with the process of translating this great tome. Over four years, Constance and Sheila painstakingly researched the myriad of citations and references in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, undertaking lengthy correspondence with various parties to ensure this would be the most thorough and true translation possible. In the words of Sheila, 'this translation has been a splendid learning experience for us in so many ways, and this monumental work entered our personal lives and the way we see the world'.

On the topic of gender, the speakers quoted studies which have compared their translation to the original, and which reveal the differences in style and conclude that Parshley's version shows a 'patriarchal bias'. They demonstrated this by showing extracts from the original French alongside Parshley's and their own translations, the latter of which clearly remain faithful to the original text. The authors explained that they had made a determined choice not to alter de Beauvoir's language by making it gender sensitive, but instead retained the original forms where appropriate, such as not changing the pronoun *he* to *he/she* or the neutral *they*, where the correct grammatical form was masculine in the original French. Sheila also explained their choices

in translating *la femme* variously as *the woman, wife, women* or *Woman* (as a construct), and the reasons for their departure from Parshley's translation of '*On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*' as '*One is not born, but rather becomes a woman*' to their own '*One is not born, but rather becomes Woman*'.

The final part of the presentation was given by Dr Caroline Norma who currently researches translation studies and gender problems arising in the practice of community interpreting in Australia. Caroline spoke about feminist approaches to translation and how the task of translation can be examined from a socially constructivist viewpoint, i.e. as a task which has social implications for the translator, the reader and broader society, and how significant translation has been to the feminist movement worldwide.

Caroline gave a comprehensive outline of seven ways in which translation can be discussed from a feminist perspective, namely:

1) the history of women translators (historically most translators were women translating texts written by men in an era where women were excluded from writing);

2) the related continuum of fidelity versus autonomy of the translation (whether the translation is in subordination to or an equal partner to the original text);

3) critiquing and challenging the social subordination of translation and translators by feminist theorists today;

4) strategies to enhance translator visibility by these feminist theorists (such as one translator who not only placed her name alongside the original author's on the cover of the book, but placed a lengthy preface inside the book, wrote two articles about the author's life, and even went so far as to replace the three instances of the author's name in one of the original poems with her own name!);

5) retranslating texts and critiquing existing translations of works authored by women (on the basis of their failure to properly reflect the feminist perspective of the original text as understood by the critic);

6) the feminist view of translation as a critical activity in the building of a community which is necessary for women to become free (e.g. the ability to choose what to translate or what not to translate);

7) the feminist criticism of male translated texts which they perceive as seeking to further male dominant interests (such as gendered language).

Caroline did not fail to acknowledge the role of Borde and Malovany-Chevalier's new translation *The Second Sex* in the area of feminist translation studies, not only through the retranslation of one of the world's most significant feminist texts, but by the translators' preface and the fact that Constance and Sheila tour the world talking about their work. Caroline explained that this is an important contribution towards reconnecting translation with women's movements around the world and is significant from a feminist perspective, as it has allowed women to reclaim *The Second Sex* as one of their own texts, and in doing so, has 'returned de Beauvoir to women'.

It should be apparent how difficult it is to do justice in so few words to the depth of discussion and analysis listeners were treated to at this presentation by all of the speakers—expertly chaired and coordinated by Elaine Lewis. For those of us lucky enough to have been present, we can now truly appreciate the enormity of Constance and Sheila's achievement, and the importance of both de Beauvoir's original work and this new translation to the area of feminist approaches to translation.

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Notes on the speakers

Sheila Malovany-Chevallier and Constance Borde graduated from Rutgers University in New Jersey in the 1960s and have been friends and working

partners ever since. They have lived in France since 1964, teaching literature and American civilisation, and their many publications include translations from French to English in the areas of social science, art, and feminist writings.

Dr Caroline Norma is Lecturer in the Translation and Interpreting Studies discipline of the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT University. She is an accredited Japanese-English translator, and is currently translating the publications of the Japanese Anti-Pornography and Prostitution Research Group.