

Language Is Not Neutral: The Construction of Knowledge in the Social Sciences and Humanities

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Considering the theme of this symposium from my position as a French-speaking Québécoise feminist academic, I will draw on an analytical piece I presented several years ago (Descarries 2003). I believe it is important that we return to the question of the dissemination of feminist knowledge that has been produced in French because the hierarchical relationship and cleavage characterizing national and linguistic communication channels persists and, indeed, increasingly constitutes an impediment to the growth of women's studies internationally.

As everyone knows, the social system of scholarship, in both the natural and social sciences, is driven by publication, not only as a tool of knowledge transmission but also as a formal evaluation indicator of the productivity of researchers and national scientific communities. In academia, publishing is the normative expectation for researchers. The number of articles published in indexed journals, the ranking of these journals in citation indexes controlled mainly by Americans, and the calculation of citations constitute the material basis for establishing researchers' performance, credibility, and reputation.

The resulting dynamic can be summarized by the saying "publish or perish." In the context of neoliberal globalization, the saying should be updated to "publish in English or perish," whatever the linguistic, cultural, disciplinary, and geographic conditions shaping knowledge production may be. There are at least two angles from which to discuss the effects of this precept. The first is that of resource concentration. The second is the English language's imposition of itself as the language of science.

Resource concentration refers to the relationships between the center and the periphery, between voices that impose themselves as dominant and voices that are identified (if they are identified at all) as other, specific, or culturally distinct. Today, in the field of women's studies, as elsewhere, Anglo-Saxon countries exert a virtual monopoly on knowledge dissemination and its evaluation. This hegemony leads to the marginalization of large segments of feminist thought worldwide and also reinforces the isolation of researchers on the national or linguistic periphery by limiting their capacity to enter into a dialogue with the center or to advance their ideas. A side effect of this is the increased dependence of French-language

feminist researchers on structures outside their social framework.¹ Also ensuing from this linguistic one-way flow of scholarship is a concentration of gatekeeping activity in English-speaking countries, vesting English-language women's studies and its researchers with additional control over the form and content of articles deemed acceptable for publication, as well as the issues and themes comprising "mainstream" feminist thinking. In short, it is a relationship of cause and effect: the more a paper is published in an indexed and highly ranked journal, the greater the chances of its being read and cited; the more it is cited, the greater its visibility; the greater its visibility, the more valued it is. Likewise, the more a journal publishes abundantly cited articles, the more its ranking improves; the higher its ranking, the greater its influence. In other words, success breeds success.

The concentration of resources can be quantified. For instance, out of the thirty-eight periodicals grouped under the category of Women's Studies by the 2011 Journal Citation Report, only two French-language journals appear, and then in the bottom third of the list: in twenty-sixth place, with an impact factor of 0.300, was *Travail, Genre et Sociétés* (Work, gender, and society; published in France), and in last place, with an impact factor of zero for the reference year, was *Revue Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (a French-Swiss journal).² Similarly, the sole French-language entry under the category of Gender Studies ranked by the SCImago Journal and Country Rank, again for journals indexed in 2011, is *Travail Genre et Sociétés*, indexed forty-fourth out of seventy-one.³ Finally, 191 of the 203 "core" and "priority" academic journals indexed by Women's Studies International in 2012 require English as the language of publication.⁴ Apart from four Canadian journals and one Lebanese journal that accept articles written in French, the only French-language entry is *Recherches féministes* from Quebec. Given the linguistic concentration of journals and gatekeeping mechanisms, it is obvious that the language of scholarly discourse will merge almost entirely with that of the language of the English-speaking science and scholarship.

¹ The same type of analysis could be applied to other minority linguistic fields.

² See the 2011 Journal Citation Report (Social Sciences Edition), ISI Web of Knowledge, Thompson-Reuters, 2012, http://wokinfo.com/products_tools/analytical/jcr/. In the same year, the impact factor of the highest-ranked journal was 2.414.

³ SCImago Journal and Country Rank, SCImago Lab, <http://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php>.

⁴ Women's Studies International database, EBSCO Host, 2012, <http://www.ebscohost.com/academic/womens-studies-international>.

At least two ways of conceiving the resulting hegemony are outlined in the literature. The first evokes the need to develop a common language, or lingua franca, to enable the transnationalization of knowledge. The use of English today would seem to be the most efficient and economical way to be heard and read. At the very least, this presumes that the majority of feminists around the world can read English. The second one, underlying the blind adherence to using English as the language of scholarly discourse, is the presumption that English speakers' unilingualism and the primacy accorded their communication channels relieves them of any obligation to know about others' work.

Also underlying the blind adherence to using English as the language of scholarly discourse is the perception of language as a code, where languages are deemed to be equivalent and interchangeable, with no loss of expressiveness or semantic quality (Durand 2001). Yet language is much more than a code. It is at once a reference system and a cultural vehicle that represents reality and what we have to say in a singular and symbolic way. While translation makes it possible to disseminate ideas to a certain extent, there are nevertheless few concepts or models of interpretation that can be shared among different cultures in a completely analogous fashion.

My ongoing study of the English-language literature has revealed to me the extent—with rare exceptions—of English-speaking feminists' lack of familiarity with and sparse use of feminist writings in French, as well as their ignorance of the theoretical and strategic contributions of concepts as fundamental as *rapports de sexe*, *mode de production domestique*, sexual division of labor, and patriarchy. Let me invoke, for example, the loss of political meaning that occurs when the concept of *rapports de sexe* is translated as *sexual relations* or *gender*. Such a shift, one can assume, explains why in many universities theoretical feminism is reduced to an intellectual project to understand women in their individuality or specificity rather than as a group or as a sociopolitical class. Such a shift in perspective can only put women's studies "increasingly at risk of losing touch with the movement [and political goals] to which it owes its existence" (Winter 1997, 211). The problem, then, is not simply one of translation. It is also one of differing conceptual and contextual structures, as "what can be expressed in one language, cannot necessarily be expressed in another, at least, not in the same way" (Durand 2001; my translation). Also, how many times have misconceptions or omissions in a translated text resulted not only in a different perception or expression but also in an actual failure to see other things (Durand 2001)? Here, I will simply refer to Margaret Simons's (1983) "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir," an illuminating critique of the rendering of Beauvoir's thinking, particularly on femininity (womanhood),

marriage, and domestic work, in the first North American translation of *Le deuxième sexe*.

Another glaring example of this obliteration is the travesty propagated in most of the American literature in recent decades—up until today—through the construction of a French feminism rooted in the analysis of sexual difference, a perspective, according to Claire Moses (1996), that is shared by few French feminists, whether theoreticians or activists. This inaccurate representation, as I have argued elsewhere (Descarries and Dechaufour 2006) imposed a truncated vision of the feminist perspectives that have been developed in non-English-speaking countries and, through ignorance, excluded major contributions by French-speaking feminists in particular. Over the years, this situation made me wonder how or why, with a few notable exceptions, the important contribution of French materialist feminism in exposing the social and economic dynamic of sexual domination and women's limitations could have been denied and obliterated—and even wrongly defined by many as essentialist. In other words, one notes how easily French feminism has been equated in most of the Anglophone literature with a marginal literary and philosophical venture that has, at minimum, lost contact with the political realities of women and the transformative objectives of feminism and, moreover, is almost entirely limited in its scope of investigation to the work of a few academics whose connection with feminism is at best highly problematic and questionable. Years later, the situation has not changed.

Feminist literature that is not written in English is hardly read, barely cited, and poorly indexed. Recent trips to the library offer a vivid example. Among the one hundred pieces collected in the third edition of *Feminist Theory: A Reader* (Kolmar and Bartkowski 2010), which recounts the history of feminist thinking since 1792, only four were by French authors, and these articles had already been translated into English. The authors, of course, were the incontrovertible Beauvoir and the triad of H  l  ne Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig, whose work—apart from Wittig's—has had minor influence on the theoretical ideas advanced in French-language feminist literature. And may I point out that the authors chose 1792 as the initial date in their collection, thereby including an excerpt from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* but excluding Olympe de Gouges's extraordinary 1791 *D  claration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*.

At stake in the issue of language, like that of resource concentration, is the power to appropriate or to conceal, enabling the center to reinforce its privileged position and hegemony. For instance, while the use of a single language significantly diminishes the palette of concepts and experiences

circulating at the international level, it is also true that the theoretical contributions and strategies developed, reappropriated, or revamped by the center are more likely to be judged important than those emerging from sources defined as specific and therefore secondary. Practically speaking, we must ask what the chances are for French-speaking feminists to be heard and to overcome the isolation imposed by linguistic partition.

In the face of this stratification and the regulatory mechanisms that legitimize it, there is ample reason to fear that the feeble likelihood of accessing the center while expressing oneself in French will propel young researchers to invest less in the field of French-language women's studies, align their intellectual path with the dominant models, and adopt the feminist interrogations and demands determined by the center without implanting them in the local context. In an effort to avoid being made invisible, some feminist researchers will take it upon themselves to do the fastidious labor of translating their own work or having someone else translate it into English. In this case, the issue of language raises the problem not only of the limits it imposes on the development of feminist knowledge but also of the resulting constraints on the career trajectories of feminist researchers and students from the periphery. Beyond the fact that mastering English is arduous work for many feminists, and beyond the demands associated with producing an article in another language (including the costs in both money and time), it is clear that women who lack perfect fluency in English are penalized in terms of learning, publication, networking, and recognition. Furthermore, they are often made to feel insecure, even like novices, due to their inability to freely engage in theoretical debate.

Language barriers, it is true, operate in both directions. From this standpoint, lack of translation led French-speaking feminists to be regrettably late in integrating the criticisms and theoretical propositions formulated by feminists from the global South who did not recognize themselves in dominant feminist thinking. However, it must be acknowledged that the discussion of ideas is impeded primarily by the unilingualism of English-speaking feminists, who for the most part do not feel the need to open themselves up to other perspectives and cultural realities. This is especially true because the dominance of the English language removes the need for English-speaking students and academics to learn another language. A corollary to this is that libraries, archives, and bookstores are reluctant to purchase works giving access to other sociolinguistic voices due to the lack of demand or interest. Under the circumstances, it would not be an exaggeration to say that if a text is not published in English, it does not exist.

The dangers of immobility and homogenization that are inherent in such a hegemony contradict the fundamental premise of women's stud-

ies, which is to promote social change, creativity, and critiques of established paradigms. How can we then justify ignoring the power structures underpinning the exclusion of significant feminist contributions just because of their provenance or language?

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