

Gender and Sign Language Interpretation

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Research on gender within the perspectives of cultural studies and/or translation studies has contributed to the broad discussion of how language reveals one's identity, cultural values, and beliefs. Considering the issues of gender equality and professional development, this chapter presents research on gender traits in the simultaneous interpretation of Brazilian Sign Language (BSL).

Traditionally, interpretation is recognized as a linguistic and communicative manifestation of a specific social, historical, and cultural discursive event. Aspects such as neutrality and impartiality (within the translator/interpreter's code of ethics), for instance, refer to the content, the message in the discursive event, and not to the translator's performance, which conveys issues of gender and new kinds of expectations (Nicoloso, 2010).

Feminist translator Barbara Godard's study on feminist literature shows that women's publications have longer prefaces, more footnotes, and more appendices than do men's (in Baumgartem, 2002; Campello, Hanciau & Santos, 2001). Thus, we decided to determine whether interpretation in BSL also conveys gender traits and influences discourse.

In Brazil, there is today little information on interpretation in sign language, especially in relation to the interpreters and their work. Thus, further investigation is needed so that, as professionals, interpreters may advance in terms of their social, legal, political, and educational development and also contribute with reflections on their performance.

It is well known that sign language interpreters interact in different environments and act as linguistic and cultural mediators between deaf and nondeaf communities. Cultural and social representations between men and women reverberate in the act of interpretation, and therefore they are also important factors to consider (Nicoloso, 2010).

In this chapter we first briefly discuss theoretical perspectives on translation and interpretation of sign language, aspects of gender, and modalities of translation and then discuss our study.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON INTERPRETERS AND INTERPRETATION/TRANSLATION

Nowadays translation and interpretation in sign language have become the object of study in different theoretical and converging perspectives within the humanities and social sciences, such as cultural studies, deaf studies, discourse analysis, and/or translation studies (e.g., Metzger & Bahan, 2001; Roy, 2000; Lima, 2006; Santos, 2006; Vieira, 2007; Nicoloso, 2010). These studies present a variety of concerns and emphasize the importance of the work of interpreters.

Cultural studies, as an interdisciplinary field that explores culture and society, including everyday cultural forms and social practices, “insists upon the constitutive role of culture in sustaining and changing the power relations enacted around issues of gender, sexuality, social class, race and ethnicity, colonialism and its legacies, and the geopolitics of space and place within globalization” (Lister & Wells, 2001, p. 62). As Lister and Wells (2001, p. 61) also point out, “Cultural studies centers on the study of the forms and practices of culture (not only its texts and artifacts), their relationships to social groups and the power relations between those groups as they are constructed and mediated by forms of culture.”

In terms of sign language translation and interpretation, cultural studies has contributed to the advancement of studies that investigate cultural spaces and relations of power in cultural processes, especially due to its nonadherence to preestablished cultural paradigms. From the perspective of cultural studies, all forms of culture are valued, and in terms of sign language translation and interpretation or within deaf studies, we can refer to analyses by Santos (2006), Lopes (2007), Rosa (2005), and Vieira (2007).

The environment in which the translator or interpreter works is replete with cultural and identity differences and relations of power; in other words, in such settings social relations between deaf and nondeaf individuals frequently occur and are mediated by the translator or interpreter. When translators or interpreters participate in the social interactions of deaf people with each other, they witness the Deaf community’s experiences and values. Very often they are influenced by and incorporate the deaf individuals’ worldviews and adapt their own views in terms of citizenship and professional development. There is, therefore, a demand related to the development of specific skills and

strategies, mainly regarding visual attention, perception, and spatial orientation (Nicoloso, 2010).

Regarding the complexity of skills involved in sign language interpretation, whether as source or as target language, Quadros (2004, p. 27) states the following:

The act of interpretation involves highly complex processes. S/he [the interpreter] processes the given information in the source language and makes lexical, structural, semantic and pragmatic choices which have to be as close and adequate as possible to the information provided in the source language.

Sign language interpretation requires visual and spatial skills because it involves the use of hands, as well as facial and corporal expressions, which are visually perceived. Furthermore, the interpreter needs to have a well-developed auditive memory, powers of concentration, attention span, and knowledge of the topic being interpreted and to be able to retrieve received information. These skills are necessary because interpreters are committed to being successful in their interpretation in both languages involved, that is, from spoken language to sign language and vice versa. Sign language interpreters also need to be familiar with the present-day discussions on Deaf communities, understand the discursive practices within these communities, and actively participate in them.

Sign language interpreters are situated in a hybrid space between deaf and nondeaf—at the cultural and linguistic frontier, so to speak—in the act of interpretation. Thus, these professionals not only need to develop visual skills, as already pointed out, but must also be closely related to the cultural and linguistic skills of deaf people and linked to a variety of social, cultural, historical, and political factors. In this sense, sign language interpretation is also a topic of study in translation studies inasmuch as it is concerned with institutionalized resources for qualified professional development and entry into the job market.

Translation studies also aims at theorizing on translation and interpretation practice by proposing fundamental questions about the performance of these practices. Note that translation and interpretation are treated as “sister areas” since the basic concepts are common to both of these translational practices. The nature of translation studies is based on the perception that theorizing is part of the observation of practice and of the institutionalization of the profession. Aubert (1994) explains that translation involves at least two kinds of competencies: linguistic and

referential. Even though his reflections are directly related to translation per se, they can be extended to interpretation since these skills are common to both practices.

A well-known concept that serves as a category to define the quality of work in translation and interpretation is fidelity. This term is related to the understanding of translators' and interpreters' autonomy in terms of their theoretical concepts and reality. In this sense, Bassnett (2005) argues that the translator should consider autonomy and communication, and any theory of equivalence should take both of these aspects into account. Bassnett also says that equivalence does not correspond to equality.

Arrojo (1986) also problematizes the concept of fidelity, questions the possibility of a translation to be entirely faithful to the "original text," and then proposes a redefinition of the concept. Discussing the process of meaning making, this author shows that a word does not have one single fixed meaning that can be immediately decipherable by anyone: "there is no language which is capable of neutralizing ambiguities, double meanings, variations in interpretation, changes brought about by time or context" (p. 17).

Both Aubert (1994) and Arrojo (1986) state that translators and interpreters inevitably construct images of reality that represent what they imagine are the expectations and needs of the target public and produce a suitable text in view of that context.

Regarding an empirical approach to fidelity, Gile (1995) explains that fidelity is the most common concept used to evaluate translations and points to the problem of direct correspondence between two languages in terms of their constitutive elements. Besides, there is also the inevitable intervention of translators and interpreters as a consequence of their social, historical, and temporal context.

To conclude this brief discussion of the act of translation and interpretation, we also consider it a process of decision making (Krings, 1986; Vasconcellos & Bartolomei, 2008), which helps translators and interpreters to consciously recognize what they do when translating and interpreting and be able to expose and clearly explain what lies behind their choices. However, translators and interpreters also need to develop the skill of talking about their actions in a systematized way so as to develop their self-knowledge as professionals and accept the responsibility of identifying and providing solutions to the problems encountered in translation and interpretation.

THE SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: GENDER TRAITS

Recent debates on language and gender do not place fixed, binary boundaries between *male* and *female* but situate gender within a continuum that explores the intersection with different and at times contradictory sociocultural and discursive practices. Heberle (2000, p. 301) states the following:

Gender has received several definitions and is seen as a socially constructed category, differentiated from the biological male/female opposition. It is placed in a continuum which intersects with other social variables such as . . . age, educational background, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, occupation, social class, sexual orientation, political and religious affiliation, etc. It can be seen, thus, that the social construction of gender is not monolithic and universal.

Butler (1990), whose work on gender has become canonical, proposes gender as an analytical category but not as a fixed and stable one. She explains, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 33). In other words, our social identities, such as our gender identities, are actualized when we habitually *perform* these identities. And Cameron (1995, p. 17) points out, "the repeated stylizations of the body" may refer to "appearance, dress, demeanour, gesture and gait," as well as to language use.

It is in the social interactions that the members of a community of practice negotiate rules, behaviors, and discourses that define gender. Heberle, Ostermann, and Figueiredo (2006, p. 9) add this:

Even though we adopt the notion that gender is socially constructed, we recognize that the sociocultural practices which constitute this category, which includes language, are very often the object of resistance or contestation. When men and women participate in social interactions via language, when they produce or consume [written or spoken texts], they align themselves with the gender roles articulated in these linguistic practices in different degrees, at times accepting them thoroughly, at other times partially disagreeing with them or even rejecting them completely.

As the contemporary perspectives on gender and language demonstrate, it seems relevant to rethink concepts related to women's or men's

language and to refer instead to styles produced by men and women in specific sociocultural contexts (Coates & Cameron, 1988). The studies on language and gender briefly discussed here have contributed to the development of our study since they challenge the essentialist binary opposition between male and female forms of talk and open up the possibility of examining gender traits in professional practice, specifically in sign language translation and interpretation.

Translation Modalities

The translation modalities proposed by Aubert (1998) have served as support for the analysis of gender traits in the simultaneous interpretation from the Portuguese language to Brazilian Sign Language. Translation, as has already been seen, is understood as an act of communication that takes place between different cultures, ideologies, and worldviews (Aubert, 1998) and is actualized in texts and discourses (Nicoloso, 2010). Aubert (1998, pp. 4–9) describes these translation modalities as follows:

1. *Omission*. Omission occurs whenever a given segment of the source text and the information it contained cannot be found in the target text.
2. *Transcription*. Transcription, which is the real “zero degree” of translation, includes text segments that either are the common heritage of the two languages involved (e.g., numbers, algebraic formulas) or pertain to neither the source language nor the target language but to a third language and which, in most cases, would be deemed as loanwords or expressions already in the original text (e.g., Latin phrases and aphorisms such as *alea jacta est*).
3. *Loan*. A loan is a segment of the original text that is reproduced in the translated text either with or without specific loanword markers (e.g., quotation marks, italics, boldface type). Proper nouns (including place names) are common loans, as are terms and expressions directly related to specific anthropological and/or ethnological realities.
4. *Calque*. A calque is a word or an expression borrowed from the source language that has undergone certain graphical and/or morphological adaptations to the target language and is not found in recent major dictionaries of the target language.

5. *Literal translation.* Within the descriptive model presented here, *literal translation* is synonymous with *word-for-word translation*, in which, upon comparing the source text and the target text, one finds (1) the same number of words, in (2) the same syntactic order, employing (3) the “same” word classes, and (4) lexical choices that can be contextually described as interlinguistic synonyms.
6. *Transposition.* This modality occurs when at least one of the three first criteria for literal translation is not met (i.e., whenever morphosyntactic rearrangements take place).
7. *Explicitation/Implicitation.* Two sides of the same coin, whereby implicit information contained in the source text is made explicit in the target text (e.g., by a paraphrase or in footnotes); conversely, explicit information contained in the source text is identifiable with a given text segment and is converted to an implicit reference.
8. *Modulation.* Modulation occurs whenever a given text segment is translated in such a manner as to impose an evident shift in the semantic surface structure, albeit retaining the same overall meaning.
9. *Adaptation.* This modality is typically a culturally assimilative procedure (i.e., the translational solution adopted for the given text establishes a partial equivalence of *sense*, deemed sufficient for the purposes of the translation, but abandons any illusion of “perfect” equivalence, including cultural false cognates).
10. *Intersemiotic translation.* In certain instances (especially in the so-called sworn translation mode) figures, illustrations, logos, trademarks, seals, coats of arms, and the like that are found in the source text are rendered in the target text as textual material.
11. *Error.* Only obvious muddles are classified as errors.
12. *Correction.* Not infrequently, the source text contains factual and/or linguistic errors, inadequacies, and blunders.
13. *Addition.* Any textual segment included in the target text by the translators on their own account and not motivated by any explicit or implicit content of the original text is considered an addition.

Aubert explains that *transcription*, *loan*, *literal translation*, and *transposition* are collectively categorized as direct translation modalities,

while *explicitation*, *implicitation*, *modulation*, *adaptation*, and *intersemiotic translation* refer to indirect translation modalities. In addition, these modalities may occur in either a “pure” or a “hybrid” form (Aubert, 1998). Aubert also points out that the study of these modalities may contribute to a better understanding of similarities and differences between linguistic and cultural pairs and to awareness, which is an aspect of translation theory.

METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative research reported here can be seen as a case study. The data, collected by means of a DVD video recording, comprised the translations of six BSL interpreters (six men and six women) of a written text and subsequently orally narrated in Brazilian Portuguese and then translated into BSL. Aspects of possible gender traits in the six interpretations were analyzed by the ELAN transcription system.

The six interpreters are between 20 and 30 years of age, live in Florianópolis, Brazil, and each one has more than 5 years of experience in university-level interpretation.

In the transcriptions and in the analysis we focused on the details and followed all of the legal procedures for video recordings, which were made at the Laboratory of New Technologies (LANTEC) at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), with the consent of the participants and of the Ethics Committee on Research at UFSC.

Hence, we investigate gender traits in the chosen interpretations and draw on various insights from cultural studies, gender studies, and translation studies to articulate our findings.

The Development of the Study

As previously mentioned, we videotaped the simultaneous interpretation of a text narrated in spoken Brazilian Portuguese into Brazilian Sign Language. The selected text, “A construção da diferença de gênero” [The Construction of Gender Difference], written by journalist Rosely Sayão, was extracted from the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (July 28, 2005).

Before accepting their participation in the study, the three women and three men interpreters of Brazilian Sign Language were informed of the process that would be followed, including the use of their images and real

names in the analyses. So as not to influence their interpretation, we did not share with them either the specific topic we were investigating or the fact that we would be monitoring the signs, expressions, and strategies they used during the recording.

The subjects' participation in the study and their consent to our requirements were crucial for the development of the research and subsequent approval of the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Santa Catarina.

The specific procedures for data collection were as follows:

First, in selecting the text to be interpreted, we applied the following criteria: the chosen text had to (1) refer to the topic under investigation, that is, gender; (2) be satisfactorily and quickly understood; (3) contain few idiomatic expressions and metaphors; (4) be appropriate for simultaneous interpretation at the university level; (5) be appropriate to the interpreters' translational competence and theoretical background; and (6) be relatively short.

The text was also recorded in a DVD-compatible format since it was narrated in spoken Brazilian Portuguese, and the total recording time was 5 minutes and 12 seconds. Later, the data were also transferred to DVDs in a studio at LANTEC.

The next step was to observe and analyze the interpretations so as to locate gender traits in the six interpretations. The selected scenes in which gender traits were identified were then transferred to the ELAN system of sign language for a more detailed analysis and focused segmentation. Following the examination of the selected segments, we drew our conclusions.

Analysis and Description of the Data

Data analysis and description were made possible by the detailed examination of the six interpretations and the selection of the segments for further scrutiny. Here we discuss three text segments that contain linguistic features that required the interpreters to make decisions on gender.

The first scene that shows gender traits concerns the interpretation of the word *gender* from the title of the text, "The Construction of Gender Difference." During the interpretation most of the interpreters used *literal translation* as the translation modality and fingerspelling when referring to this specific word. In the selected example, however, besides fingerspelling

(photos 1–4), the woman interpreter, Leticia, also uses *explicitation* (i.e., contextualizing information) since she complements the information with MAN (photo 5) and WOMAN (photo 6) to illustrate the concept of “gender.” Together with these signs she also used indicators of explicitation and emphasis, such as facial expression, more specifically the raising of her eyebrows and a movement of her head (photos 1–5).



Photo 1

Photo 2

Photo 3

Photo 4



Photo 5. MAN

Photo 6. WOMAN

Note that since BSL does not have a specific sign for the word *gender*, several possible means of translating the word include linguistic loan and fingerspelling or the use of BSL MAN or WOMAN or both of these strategies. In this manner, the interpreters had to very rapidly edit, limit their choices of alternatives, and act.

Proceeding with our examples, we refer to Tiago’s interpretation of the same segment (i.e., the title of the text, “The Construction of the Gender Difference”). Tiago adopts transposition and excludes the word *gender*, mentioned by the narrator. Instead, he conveys this piece of information directly by signaling DIFFERENT (photo 7), MAN (photo 8), PERSON (photo 9), WOMAN (photo 10), and PERSON (photo 11). In other words, Tiago does not mention the word *gender* in his interpretation but substitutes or, rather, unfolds the term into several sequentialized signs. Tiago’s decision is shown in photos 7 through 10.



Photo 7. DIFFERENT



Photo 8. MAN



Photo 9. PERSON



Photo 10. WOMAN



Photo 11. PERSON

Transposition is a very common discursive strategy in translation and interpretation and serves to create both involvement with the receiver and cultural proximity. In other words, a direct piece of information is conveyed as in a conversation or an informal dialogue so as to raise interest in the topic being discussed (Aubert, 1998).

Our analysis shows that in order to emphasize and clarify the information being orally transmitted, the women interpreters provided more explicit data (e.g., by contextualizing information and details as a translation modality) than did the men interpreters (explicitation). The men interpreters, in contrast, used transposition most frequently. Tiago, for instance, as illustrated earlier, decided to exclude the word *gender* and used transposition in his interpretation, privileging a direct definition with MAN, WOMAN, PERSON, and DIFFERENT.

Contextual information is added by the translator or interpreter either consciously or subconsciously to help the receiver of the message to understand it. From the perspective of translation studies, this is one of the reasons that translated texts tend to be longer than the original texts. In this respect, Aubert (1998) refers to explicitation as a likely universal resource in the linguistic mediation provided by

professional and nonprofessional translators. In our study, we also observed that the time needed for the interpretations was longer than the narrated text.

We would like to emphasize that the duration of the interpretations differed according to the gender of the interpreter. Silvana's and Viviane's interpretations each lasted 5 minutes and 40 seconds, while Leticia's ran 5 minutes and 35 seconds. On the other hand, Tiago's interpretation ran for 5 minutes and 13 seconds, and Marcos's and Filipe's each lasted exactly the same time as the text that was narrated in Brazilian Portuguese: 5 minutes and 12 seconds. Thus, the women used more time making their translations than the men did.

Hence, in our study, time constituted an important factor as a gender trait in Brazilian Sign Language. Note that the time was calculated from the beginning of the interpretation in sign language and there was no simultaneous relation to the narrated text.

The results of our data analysis indicate that the interpreted message varied in length according to the gender of the interpreters, which suggests that this may constitute a gender trait. As Cameron explains (in Heberle, 2000), to become a man or a woman, individuals negotiate and accommodate feminine or masculine styles of talk in different communities and historical moments. In our study the difference in the lengths of the interpretations seems to support this hypothesis.

Nevertheless, even though our results show this difference, further research with empirical evidence is needed to substantiate our findings, as other sociocultural factors also influence our forms of talk and the definitions of masculinity and femininity, as gender studies suggest.

The second fragment chosen for analysis and description of the data is based on the interpretation of proper names (Ana, Paulo, Mariana, and Álvaro), which, according to the text, identify a person as a man or a woman. The relevant text segment is the following:

When a child is born, she or he¹ soon receives a name that almost always identifies her or him in relation to biological sex: feminine or masculine. *Ana, Paulo, Mariana, or Álvaro*, for instance, reveals a person who was born with a specific biological sex, whose characteristics are immutable. (*Folha de São Paulo*, 2005)

1. In the original text in *Folha de São Paulo*, the pronoun used is "she," as in the Portuguese language "child" is a feminine noun.

In this episode most of the interpreters decided to use the manual alphabet to spell the proper names in the selected text segment. Nevertheless, Viviane not only spells these names but also emphasizes the information with WOMAN (photo 12) to refer to “Ana” and with MAN (photo 13) to explicitly refer to “Paulo.” The explicitation and emphasis are also marked with facial expressions (raising of the eyebrow and slight movement of her head), as shown in photos 12 and 13.



Photo 12. WOMAN



Photo 13. MAN

Viviane also uses modulation when choosing an adequate substitution for the proper name “Álvaro” with the sign SEVERAL (photo 14), which gives an idea of continuity. Instead of spelling “Álvaro” as the other interpreters did, she chose to use the sign SEVERAL and thus gives the idea of sequentiality.

Concerning the same text segment, Tiago considered it more appropriate to omit the name “Álvaro” in his interpretation. This indicates that the woman interpreter used explicitation and details of information so as to dispel doubts in terms of implicit messages from the text. Furthermore, it



Photo 14. SEVERAL

also suggests that Tiago used omission as a translational modality since he found it irrelevant to mention all of the proper names narrated in the text.

We feel it necessary to explain that, as a narrative, the source text contains mostly sentences in active voice and that all of the interpreters kept the same grammatical category in their interpretations. Besides, the vocabulary used in the source text is formal as it is extracted from a newspaper whose goal is to inform readers of the difficulties of educating boys and girls in society nowadays. As the interpretations maintained the same form of expression, they stimulated close contact with the target public.

Currently, the dichotomies between the way men and women use language can be seen as different discursive strategies that they may choose in their verbal interactions. The present discussion on language, gender, and translation has served to provide data for consideration in these converging areas of study, which are still underrepresented in the Brazilian context.

As a case study, this research did not intend to generalize about the results of the data analysis, but it has allowed us to observe that the women interpreters who participated in the research indeed used more explicitation, contextualized information, details, modulation, and emphasis to complement the information they were translating; that is, they conveyed concepts in a more specific way during their interpretations. Another significant characteristic is that, when compared to the men, the women interpreters spent more time in making their interpretation.

The male interpreters were more direct. They made use of a more literal translation, as well as transposition, which shows their preference for more economical lexicogrammatical choices and text structure. They often used omission and implicitation as translational modalities for what they saw as irrelevant data. As a result, their interpretations were shorter than those of the women interpreters.

We emphasize that, within the perspectives of translation studies and cultural studies, all translation modalities are valid, and the interpreters in our study used several of the modalities and resorted to techniques and resources to provide a clear understanding of the target text.

FINAL REMARKS

Interpreters need to be economical and objective, and interpretation is often seen as a solitary, public, and solidary professional task (Famularo, 1999). It is solitary because the interpreter is the only one responsible

for the decision-making process in terms of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic choices. In other words, interpreters can be seen as artisans, joining their linguistic and cultural knowledge and their cognitive and affective attributes. As a cultural product, interpreters in body and/or vocal materialization are involved in a public task and publicly exposed. They are also solitary figures since, as social actors, they are able to move freely between two languages and cultures to obtain information from both and to serve as cultural mediators with deaf and nondeaf people, a fundamental element in this intercultural relation.

We stress that even though our small-scale study has elicited only few gender traits in the interpretations analyzed, we hope we have helped inspire interest in gender in sign language interpretation. Likewise, we hope that our study will engender future discussions on gender traits in the simultaneous translation and interpretation of Brazilian Sign Language within gender studies, deaf studies, and translation studies. We believe that, by attaining greater visibility in academic circles, interpreters will also acquire greater notice as both professionals and researchers. Within translation studies, we also hope to have furthered discussions on translation and interpretation and on interpreters of Brazilian Sign Language. Although BSL has achieved official and legal status, at times it is still underrepresented in public discursive practices.

As Brazilian Sign Language (and indeed any language) is complex and offers an array of lexical and grammatical resources, some suggestions for further research on gender, sign language, and translation include the use of signaling space, facial and body movements, and syntactic choices.

We conclude by emphasizing that the investigation of gender traits in sign language interpretation is a multifaceted linguistic and sociocultural endeavor that deserves to be further pursued in academic circles.

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