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Brand new translation, same old story? The perpetuation of female and racial stereotypes in (re)translation

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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to address covert sexism and racism in the (re)translations of literary classics as a result of unconscious biases on the part of the translators, which in turn may result in the perpetuation of gender and racial prejudices in the readers of their translations.

The central claim put forward is that translation decisions may have a serious impact on the way in which female characters in fiction and Black people in non-fiction are portrayed, and consequently on the way readers will perceive them. The aim of the studies was to uncover the influence that translators have in terms of maintaining, countering or reinforcing negative female and racial stereotypes, even if the differences between the translation and the original are seemingly minor.

To this purpose, close readings were conducted on the American 20th century classics *The Great Gatsby* and *The Fire Next Time* and their Dutch translations and retranslations, comparing the linguistic cues pertaining to female and racial stereotypes, respectively. Following an outline of the context in which the respective (re)translations were made, the close readings focused on the translator's textually manifested "voice" in the translation itself (as opposed to, for example, prefaces, footnotes, or translator's notes). In other words, the close readings focused on the translator's individual and unique translation choices, whether made consciously or unconsciously – choices that usually remain unnoticed unless the translation is compared to the original or another translation of the same text. A reader reception study was conducted on *The Great Gatsby*, using a reader response survey in which non-professional readers were presented with fragments from the Dutch first translation and retranslation and were asked to assess the personality traits of the novel's main female character.

The analysis in the close reading study 'A beautiful little fool? Retranslating Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*', which used Culpeper's model for characterization (Zeven & Dorst, 2020), showed that both Dutch translations of *The Great Gatsby*, but the older translation in particular, paint a more negative picture of Daisy Buchanan than Scott Fitzgerald's subtle portrayal of this female main character in the original: Daisy is rendered as more callous and indifferent, more manipulative and more helpless and weaker in the 1948 translation than in the 1985 translation. The analysis of the linguistic cues thus support the claim that translator decisions can contribute to the perpetuation of negative female stereotypes.

To measure the impact of the differences found in the close reading study, a reception study entitled ‘Characterizing Daisy Buchanan in retranslations of *The Great Gatsby*: Translator behaviour and reader reception’ (Zeven & Dorst, 2022) was conducted, using an online reader response survey to gauge the way in which readers judge the female protagonist’s character and behaviour. The statistical analysis made of the answers given in the survey confirmed the expectations that, for the larger part, the 1948 translation results in readers taking a more negative view of the female protagonist than the 1985 retranslation. It should be noted that only one of the findings of the reader response study was statistically significant: readers of the 1948 translation saw Daisy as more helpless, a description that reflects the negative stereotype of the “childlike” woman, an image of a girlish rather than a mature person, ‘reflecting social constructions of women as weak, passive and helpless’ (Cermele et al, 2001). Given the fact that readers of the 1985 retranslation described Daisy as cynical rather than helpless, the finding supports the claims that translation choices affect characterization, that they cause women to be portrayed in a more negative manner and that these choices have an effect on how real readers perceive these female characters.

Aiming to expand on the findings regarding female stereotyping presented in the studies of *The Great Gatsby*, two close readings of James Baldwin’s seminal essays ‘My Dungeon Shook’ and ‘Down at the Cross’ contained in *The Fire Next Time* were conducted in order to investigate the possibility that translation choices made by the translators of the Dutch translations would show signs of unconscious bias resulting in white-on-black stereotyping.

The first study ‘It’s Not All Black and White: Dutch Translations of *The Fire Next Time*’ is a close-reading of ‘My Dungeon Shook’ and its 1963 and 2018 Dutch translations (Zeven, forthcoming 2025). This paper provided support for the claim that some of the choices made by the Dutch translators negatively impact the way Black people are portrayed and that others mitigate or erase the accountability of white people for what has been and is being done to Black communities – thus reflecting a lack of awareness on the part of the translators. One of the findings was that a more recent translation does not necessarily make for a more sensitive approach to racial stereotypes.

The second study ‘The devil is in the detail: doing justice to James Baldwin’s message’ (Zeven, under review) comprises a close reading of ‘Down at the Cross’ and its Dutch 2018 retranslation. This second close reading study aimed to provide

additional evidence to support the claims made in the first one. Both studies posited that the translation choices reflect misreadings of the original essay as the – ironic – result of the translator’s own unconscious bias and his lack of awareness regarding the systemic nature of racism and the disavowal of racism by well-meaning white people. The second study, however, approached these assertions from a particular perspective, putting forward an additional claim: it argued that the risk management strategies employed by the 2018 translator had the opposite effect from what he intended – which was to produce a new translation that would resonate with contemporary readers. In other words, the translator’s attempt to increase clarity for the contemporary readers and to provide a text that would convince 21st century readers of the relevance of Baldwin’s essays today turned out to be counterproductive. The study posited that, in turn, such a translation may lead to a perpetuation of white innocence and structural racism. This final claim at the same time exposes one of the shortcomings of this thesis in that a reader response survey has yet to be conducted on the retranslation of *The Fire Next Time*. At present, such a survey is being set up following a small-scale pilot survey.

To conclude, this thesis has shown how preconceived ideas about women and Black people are reflected in translations. It has shown that unconscious bias in translators affects their translation decisions, and that these choices – however small the textual details they affect – can lead to translations that perpetuate and occasionally even enhance negative female and racial stereotypes. Support has been found for the claim that instances of negative female stereotypes in translation have an effect on readers. The thesis hypothesizes that negative racial stereotypes and white innocence displayed in translation may likewise have an effect on readers; a reception study still has to be conducted. The conclusion that the risk management strategies adopted to produce a retranslation of *The Fire Next Time* that would be understandable and relevant to contemporary readers may have the opposite effect is still tentative. However, evidence was found for the suggestion that a more recent translation does not necessarily mean a greater sensitivity regarding issues of stereotyping.

Needless to say, the research in this thesis has its fair share of limitations. First of all, qualitative research, which constitutes the larger part of this thesis, does not easily allow for generalizations. It also goes without saying that the very small number of case studies into no more than two original texts and two translations each (and in the case of the novel focusing on a single female character), covering merely one language pair, means that the conclusions of the thesis are in no way

representative for translation practices in general terms. A selection of other texts, other genres and other authors might have led to different findings and conclusions.

The chosen framework of retranslation, too, presents limitations. Of course, one of these is that what may be true for retranslations does not necessarily apply to one-off translations, which constitutes the majority of translations. Another potential obstacle when it comes to retranslation research in particular concerns the validity of the findings of reader reception studies whose participants are contemporary readers giving their opinion on non-contemporary translations. This is more likely to be the case for retranslations into Dutch, given the fact that the interval between the first Dutch translation and a later Dutch translation is usually at least half a century. It is thus more likely that some readers participating in the reader response study may not be familiar with the certain words and idioms occurring in less recent texts. A lack of knowledge of words and idioms used in a first – older – translation may affect readers' perceptions of that text, influence their answers, and consequently cause difficulties in interpreting the responses regarding characterization and stereotypes. Frequently, research on retranslations in other languages than Dutch has the benefit of being able to compare more than one *contemporary* retranslation of a classic, making for one less variable that might influence responses and thus impact findings.

There are more limitations to using reader response surveys as a methodology in general. There is the recurring question to what degree the participants are representative of the type of reader who would be reading the (re)translation. Moreover, a total of 103 participants can hardly be labelled a large-scale survey, albeit that such a number of participants is not considered too small for a reception study in the field of Translation Studies. It is abundantly clear that reader response surveys (especially those that involve scoring) are inherently limited. Even though the survey produced for this thesis included an additional part where participants were invited to share spontaneous responses to support or dismiss observations made on the basis of the scoring, surveys like these do not allow for in-depth discussions. As stated above, spontaneous responses, while contributing to insights into readers' perceptions, tend to yield 'messy' data that are at times hard to interpret. All in all, the methodology employed in the reception study presents a number of important limitations.

As a methodological approach close reading has frequently been criticized for purportedly ignoring the larger narrative and context. Indeed, by prioritizing the analysis of textual aspects of the originals and (re)translations, close readings leave

less room for studying these in their social, historical and political contexts. Even though this thesis devoted as much attention as possible to the “bigger picture” by discussing the status of the originals, the social context of the publication of the (re) translations, the background of the translators, and the notion of unconscious bias (in the introduction as well as in chapters 2 and 4), the scope of the chapters did not allow for a more extensive discussion of all the paratextual and contextual aspects, nor for a truly systemic approach and more rigorous study into the interplay between the “contextual voice” (including paratextual aspects) and the “textual voice” of the materials. Finally, the fact that the analyses were conducted by a single person – with her own unconscious biases – entails another limitation of this thesis.

Despite the limitations outlined above, the overall conclusion can be drawn that unconscious bias towards women and Black people in translation is an issue that deserves recognition amongst translators, editors and publishers. Given recent UN reports that quantify gender bias worldwide (2023 Gender Social Norms Index) and indexes quantifying racism (e.g. by ENAR, the European anti-racism network) there is no room for complacency when it comes to challenging covert sexism and covert racism – in translations as much as anywhere else. The perpetuation of negative female and racial stereotypes and white innocence is a matter that should be taken seriously by any agent in the translation industry. It is also an area that merits more attention in Translation Studies.

This thesis is a first attempt at highlighting unconscious bias against women, unconscious racism and white innocence in translation. It can be taken as a starting point for more research into this topic. There is a need for more reception studies into the impact of translation choices on readers’ perceptions of gender and racial stereotypes. Notwithstanding the advantages of using the framework of retranslation, such studies need not necessarily involve retranslations. Future studies would ideally involve various language pairs and translation directions, and a large variety of genres and text types, rather than be limited to a single language pair, translation direction, and fiction and (literary) non-fiction. Additionally, future studies would preferably cover a wide range of research designs and data collecting methods that may offer a more complete idea of readers’ perceptions – including surveys, interviews, think-aloud protocols and perhaps even experimental studies assessing cognitive processes. One addition that could strengthen the validity of the findings in any of such studies would be the inclusion of one or more questions regarding reader comprehension.

More case studies confirming the claims made in this thesis might contribute to an increased awareness in translation scholars and other academics of the potentially harmful social implications of translator decisions. If translation scholars – who often teach translation courses as well – become convinced of the fact that implicit gender and racial bias in translation is an issue that universities and other educational institutions need to address in the classroom, they may be encouraged to train students aspiring a career in translation to become aware of their own unconscious biases. The same is true, of course, for academics and students in other disciplines, in that they all read texts – including translations – in which implicit bias may occur.

Increasing awareness in teachers and students (not just those in the field of translation) of the potential impact of individual translator choices is all the more important in the light of the concerns regarding bias in machine translation (MT) and artificial intelligence (AI). The priority currently given to these recent developments means that, at present, too little attention is paid to human bias in translation. Given the fact that human input is essential in terms of attempting to curb harmful AI-generated content, awareness of the impact of translation choices on readers is a matter that ought not to be ignored. Translations of literary texts are – at least for now – still being made by human translators. Similarly, many other genres and text types are still considered to require a human translator or post-editor. As long as this is the case, another challenge lies in the question how to raise awareness in translators, editors and publishers – but in readers, too – of the fact that everyone has their own blind spots.

As for engendering awareness in readers, a participatory research approach (where appropriate, of course) could be considered for future reader reception studies: the involvement of readers in the research process could bring about the desired effect of increased insight into their own unconscious biases – thus killing two birds with one stone, so to speak.

In a way, writing this thesis has achieved this effect where my own awareness is concerned, both as an academic and as an individual reader. Carefully studying negative female and racial stereotyping in translations and retranslations of two popular classics has been an academic as well as a personal journey – one during which I was frequently reminded of a remark made by the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a US Supreme Court Judge who was widely admired for being an advocate for gender equality but who also received criticism for not always being a champion for anti-racism: ‘I think unconscious bias is one of the hardest things to get at.’