

Translating Gender

Published in Nora: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies 1998 (2)

Karin Widerberg, University of Oslo
karin.widerberg@sosiologi.uio.no



Department of Sociology and Human Geography
University of Oslo

P.O.Box 1096 Blindern

N-0317 OSLO Norway

Telephone: + 47 22855257

Fax: + 47 22855253

Internet: <http://www.iss.uio.no>

Translating Gender

Abstract

Translating understandings of gender implies eliminating some contextual understandings and concept that can be expressed in one's native language, in favour of the foreign language and its concepts, which may express other (contextual) understandings. "Going international" changes the voice as well as the story. In this article, a case of translation is used to illustrate the kinds of issues, dilemmas and problems encountered but also to indicate some solutions and insights that can be gained to further our development of understandings of gender. Can the US domination - which has made feminists in other countries use their descriptions, tools, concepts and "challenges" as "ours" - be fruitfully confronted by "miming" - that is, placing *them* in the position the "others"? And the hidden (US) position of positioning - how can that be problematized so as to allow for global feminist research and politics? Perhaps foreigners be allowed to invent English words and concepts so as to be able to express other ways of organising and understanding gender?

Translating Gender

Introduction

In front of me are two articles on understandings of gender: one in Danish, with the title "Køn og samfund" (1996) and the other in English with the title "Gender and society"(forthcoming). I am the author of both. The English article is supposed to be a translation of the Danish one, which in its turn is a translation of the original Swedish one. But, when we go deeper, we will see that translating understandings of gender from one culture and language to another also implies eliminating certain concepts and contextual understandings expressed in the one language and instead introducing, in the other language, concepts expressing other (contextual) understandings. "Going international", wanting to participate and be understood in the international feminist debate, thus implies changing the *voice* as well as the *story*. However frustrating this may be when experienced in the midst of the process of translation, there are always insights to be gained, not least about the "positioning" of understandings of gender.

That, then, is the point of this article. Through reference to the translation process of the articles mentioned above, I hope to exemplify the kinds of issues, dilemmas and problems that arise, as well as their solutions. In other words, I wish to present some reflections that can further our development of understandings of gender. So, in translating that article, what did I encounter?

"Køn" is not Gender !

Already in the title of the article - as well as in the title of this article here - I had to subordinate the understandings expressed in the Scandinavian word(s) for sex/gender, that is *køn* (Danish), *kjønn* (Norwegian) and *kön* (Swedish), to that expressed in English through the concept of "gender". English has, of course, two words for this: "sex" and "gender". Gender, previously a concept used primarily in grammatical and literary contexts, was taken over by American feminists in the 1970s to define sex in a social sense. Gender as a concept signalled that "one was not born a woman" (Simone de Beauvoir). However, this conceptualization of gender versus sex meant introducing a separation between the biological and the social (sex). As social, gender is the "unnatural", the "un-natured" sex, while sex is the "natural", the "natured" gender. However, this also means that sex is just as socially constructed as gender: what is nature or not nature is decided beforehand - a fact which this very dichotomy makes invisible. As a dichotomy, the two terms give each other meaning: gender is understood as not-sex, and sex as not-gender.

Although all this has been debated and critiqued for quite some time now (by Haraway as early as in 1991), I cannot see that there has been any change of praxis. The term "gender" is still used in feminist writing in English and - thanks to the expansion of feminist research - to such an extent, that it has become an institution. So what can a foreigner do?

In countries where English is not the native language, and where there might be one (as for example within the Scandinavian languages), several or no words for gender, different strategies have been chosen. These reflect both the US influence as well as reactions to it, in the sense of holding on to one's own cultural understandings of gender. In Scandinavia, for example, attempts at introducing the equivalent of

"gender", the Latin word "genus" (also that originally a grammatical concept), have not proven particularly successful. Here the one Scandinavian word for the English "gender" and "sex" , "køn", is still used and is seen as fruitful exactly because it does not force any distinctions between the biological and the social. As such that aspect will always be open to contextual interpretation. And in France, the concept of "difference" is often used instead of "gender", signalling a further non-distinction as to other generated differences, such as class or race. It is the differentiating processes and structures that are focused upon here, resulting in gender-race-class. Translating, whether into English or into other languages, research work from countries such as ours might accordingly prove highly problematic. Which word should you choose - gender or sex - when you do not in fact believe in this distinction and cannot subscribe to its implicit understandings of gender? Indeed, it would seem that the specific understandings of gender within most cultures cannot be properly translated; they get made into something else, into the understandings of gender that are implicit in the English language. This is something some of us feel to the quick, even though it is hard to transmit. Yet it is of major importance for all of us to be aware of, working as we are in an international context where gender is so variably organised and understood, but expressed through the dominant language of gender, and its gender of language.

To further this awareness, the strategy for us foreigners should perhaps be to stick to our native concepts even when writing in English, hereby making *our* understandings visible to a broader public. Or perhaps we should invent an English word, something that can better convey the kinds of understandings we want to express ! Continuing to translate "køn" - or similar concepts -by the word "gender" has the contrary effect: differences in understandings of gender are made invisible, we all sing the same song, the American tune, so familiar to us all. A clearer

awareness of "positionality", though, should further a chorus where all of our different registers can come into play.

Their position as ours, and ours as "other"

My next dilemma was how to handle the position from which I had written the history of the development of understandings of gender. After all, I had originally been writing for Scandinavian readers, and my aim had been to contextualize - historically, politically and scientifically - the development of understanding of "*køn*" from the late 1960s up till today. The illustrations and references provided came from international as well as Scandinavian research. When this was to be translated into English, the express request from the English publisher - transmitted via the editors - was to eliminate all the Scandinavian references, so as to make it "more general". My first, spontaneous reaction to this was : But of course! We were "special", weren't we? the deviation from the "norm"? The others, particularly the Americans, were the "general", the norm for any story within feminist research. Accordingly, I ought to highlight only those aspects that I knew to be general - and that meant valid for the US. After a while, however, this view provoked several reflections.

First of all, I saw, when rereading my Danish article, how influenced we Scandinavians have been by the debates and research in the US. Through the internationalisation of knowledge and the dominance of the English language as its mediator, we have been made to share understandings to a higher degree than we have been made to share actual social arrangements. We might live in countries and cultures that are quite differently organised, but our intellectual tools are very much

the same. The US feminist critique has been read as *the* feminist critique and been applied to Scandinavian research. Somehow the positionality of the (American) feminist critique of (American) feminist research as white, middle-class and Western got interpreted as a *general* critique of feminist research valid for us all. So when "we", in the 1980s, were criticised for not highlighting the differences among women but instead producing an image of women as one and the same, we took this to our hearts and bowed our heads in shame. If we instead had looked inward and scrutinised our own research, we could have seen that this was simply not true for Scandinavian feminist research. In Norway for example, where there is a long political tradition of highlighting and valuing local differences and where the concepts of "periphery" and "centre" have been deemed "improper" and have been replaced by the concept of "local society", feminist research has long focused on the variety of and in women's lives. The fisherwoman, the woman in forestry, the care-farmer (women who combine farming with care-work) etc. have been in focus just like the nurse, the teacher and so forth. These empirical differences have been the foundation for the ongoing debate of today: the value of the concept of "køn" and woman. And yet, under the influence of feminist research from US, how easily have we been led to believe that the deconstruction of Woman (as a category), is news when that is what we've been doing all the time!. Here we must bear in mind that even European post-structuralist thinking comes to us from the US. As a rule, it is not until European theorising has made a hit in the US, that we in Scandinavia get translations into English or (more rarely) into our native languages. So the US influence decides which European influences are to be valid. But, as feminists, we should evaluate the approaches in understandings of "*køn*" locally - from our own national or cultural positions, in order to decide what is useful to us, here and now. And that brings me to the next reflection.

The position of positioning

Even though the US feminist critique of US feminist research was (partly) positioned, as mentioned above, its remedies or agenda for future feminist research are not. "Our" tasks and approaches are formulated as one and the same. The hidden position of "positioning", "local knowledge" and "local claims of knowledge", all slogans in the US feminist research of today, is not made visible. The political idea and ideal of formal equality are here taken for granted, even though this is not so for the majority of women of the world. And while we stress the sovereignty of locality, capitalism is global to a higher extent than ever, exploiting women's labour power and sexuality worldwide. Anyone who has ever attended a truly *international* (that is, with women from most countries and cultures) feminist research conference, has probably and hopefully felt embarrassed when the challenges for future feminist research have been presented as (the positionless positioning of) local knowledge - after, say, another delegate's speech on genital mutilation or repressive fundamentalist practices.

Besides, how dare we be so arrogant, "up here" in the so called first world? Can't we see that our future liberation - as a minority - is in fact dependent on the liberation of our sisters "down there" in the so called third world or developing countries- as the majority? And can't we see that our equality is being threatened daily? And that sexual assaults "up here" are more similar to than different from those "down there"? Surely, it must be in "our" self-interest to contribute to "their" liberation. Solidarity in the development of understandings of "*køn*" is probably just as important to "us" as to "them". This perspective makes it just as important to stress the similarities, connections and relations between women as the differences. Differences, just like similarities, are *social* constructions: we are not born different or similar, but are

made different or similar. The choice of perspective is a political one, where whichever perspective can contribute to liberation - at a given time in history - should be preferred. Perhaps it is time for similarity again, locally founded but internationally related? And perhaps it is also time to stress that the different lives we live as women call for different theories to express our different understandings and ways to liberation? The stress on difference has, paradoxically enough, resulted in a (falsely) positioned similarity: we are in no need of theories that specify what a woman is or can be. But this is a position not true for the majority of women. Even within a society at any given time in history, women belonging to different generations will read and confront the "shared" structural and symbolic organisation of "*køn*" in different ways.. Accordingly, different theories and understandings of "*køn*" will make sense and prove fruitful to them. "*Køn*" is not perceived as negotiable and flexible to all of us - maybe only to a few of us. What we need, therefore, are theories that can make visible these differences and explore them, as well as theories that can explain how these differences among women are socially constructed and made "profitable". That can, in turn, enable us to look for and construct connections and similarities aimed towards liberation.

The reflections above - on how heavily influenced we Scandinavian feminists are by US feminist research, which, in turn, is not positioned or problematized in a global perspective - provoked by an editor's request to eliminate the Scandinavian context, were not the only ones, however. Removing the Scandinavian illustrations and references, to make it appear more like a general story valid to us all, also meant removing our differences, making *our* specific contributions invisible. Not only that: it also implied eliminating possible means for reflecting on the differing understandings of gender within the reader. If, instead, a Scandinavian position were what was taken for granted, then the foreigner's position as an "other" would be

made clear: *she* would be made into the different one instead of *us*. Rereading my article, I saw not only how influenced we had been by US feminist research, but also how "foreign" we were. Could I - and, as a foreigner, did I have the right to - take this Americanised position when telling "the" history of the development of understandings of gender? Indeed, *should* I, if I believed in the importance of the contextualization of such story-telling? And was I willing to say nothing of the Scandinavian contributions to understandings of gender?

My solution to these dilemmas was a kind of compromise. I stated my position as a history-teller, as a Scandinavian under the influence of US feminist thought. I then explained that I wanted to focus on those aspects which women, under formal equality, are likely to share, and noted that I would be giving examples from the Scandinavian context so as to contribute to new insights and reflections. A different strategy, and a more courageous one, would of course have been to write the Scandinavian history as the one and only, with the implicit aim of provoking the kinds of reflections I have stated here. But such a position would, most likely, not result in publication, whether in a textbook such as the one I was writing for, or in a journal. And yet, I am sure that if such stories were written and published, they would serve to further the development of understandings of gender.

Inventing English words and concepts

Having made for myself a position like that described above, I soon encountered new dilemmas in trying to translate the concepts and wordings of Scandinavian feminist research. In Scandinavia, as elsewhere, new concepts or new meanings to old concepts were developed to express the new understandings of "*køn*". In fact,

this reconceptualization was - at least in Norway - what we proudly perceived to be the "Scandinavian profile", our speciality also in international terms (i.e.compared with the US). And now I realised that this reconceptualization could not be translated into English: either these words were non-existent in the English language, or the English equivalents were words and concepts that actually had a different meaning. Let me give a few examples.

Back in the 1970s, Scandinavians took the idea of "making something visible" (or invisible) and introduced the concepts of "visiblizing" and "un-visiblizing", even coining specific verbs, "*synliggjøre*/"*usynliggjøre*". The purpose was to stress that this is an activity, that we are actively contributing to making women visible or invisible. These words did not exist in the Scandinavian languages before, but have through feminist insistence now become more or less everyday language. To "make visible" or "to make invisible", which have direct equivalents in the Scandinavian languages, lack the same power or force. Moreover, the adjectives "visible" and "invisible" give connotations to things as being visible or invisible in themselves, whereas "visiblize" and "un-visiblize" do not. Things are visiblized or un-visiblized, and in this process we are all made responsible. It is a choice, one has to choose, there is no easy escape when it comes to "*køn*". And so, perhaps we foreigners could be allowed to invent such new English words and concepts, if that furthers our understandings of "*køn*"?

Another concept is "horekunder". Directly translated, this would be "whore - customers". Terms like "sex-customers" or even worse "sex-clients" express an understanding in line with the premises of a consumer society. Services - all services - are for sale, we are all customers or clients. (Of course, being a client indicates higher status than being a customer: lawyers and other professionals have clients.)

But to speak of services for sale is to un-visibility the totality, the woman, the whore. The customer simply pays for the services, without having to take responsibility for her as a person or what it does to her. By focusing on the "business relation" of services rendered, rather than the whore, one establishes a distance between the service and the whore, and between the customer and the whore. As well as establishing another very important distance: between sexual services and love !

Concluding remarks

The reflections here presented might seem contradictory. Understood as reactions and ways of relating to dominance, however, they are in fact cohesive, and they do make sense. I have tried to illustrate how I, in translating a text from Danish into English, was made aware of the dominance of the US feminist position. How that awareness can be furthered, so as to break this mental-monopoly - both within us as (more or less)"others" and within you as (more or less) representatives of this position, is a question of the utmost importance. My own solutions are offered merely as examples of areas we need to explore further. And the strategies which I suggest, on the level of writing as an "other" - establishing one's own position as the general one, inventing English words, visibility the "others", etc.- will of course have to be met with corresponding strategies on the publishing level. What can editors and editorial boards do to open up to other realities and other ways of understanding? It is important to visibility differences for their own sake, but also so as to call into question paradigms and ways of thinking we take for granted. Paradoxically enough, this can also be used to question and position the very paradigm of difference as such. Looking for differences must not prevent us from looking for similarities. Which perspective we should choose: the perspective of

difference or the perspective of similarity, is of course dependent on the context as such. Globally, we must explore the differences in order to look for connections, relations and similarities. Locally, the strategy will vary, depending on the topic and the political situation. In this, we all need each other's knowledge and understandings. How this dialogue is to be furthered is a responsibility for us all. Being inventive in relation to the means at your disposal is always a good start !

References

Widerberg, Karin (1996). "Køn og samfund". In Heine Andersen & Lars Bo Kaspersen, eds., *Klassisk og moderne samfundsteori*. Copenhagen : Hans Reitzels forlag.

Widerberg; Karin (forthcoming); "Gender and Society". In Heine Andersen & Lars Bo Kaspersen, eds., *Classic and Modern Social Theory*. London: Macmillan

About the author

Karin Widerberg, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology, University of Oslo, and previously Head of Research at its Centre for Women's Research. She was born in Sweden and was educated there, but has lived and worked in Norway for 15 years. She has published books and articles on feminist theory of science and methodology, understandings of gender, sexual violence and law from a feminist perspective.