



Bonnie Mann and Martina Ferrari (eds.), *“On ne naît pas femme: On le devient”*: *The Life of a Sentence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 362 págs.

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When thinking of a discipline in which exactitude in meaning is essential, Philosophy comes to mind first. Its need for exactitude applies on a two-tiered level. Not only does Philosophy aim to transfer the conceptual knowledge associated to the human definition of the human world into humanist scientific discourse, which is a cross-generic, discursive boundary to tackle when in search of exactitude. Additionally, an intrageneric boundary needs to be dealt with, one based on the fact that the community of philosophers actually comes from different international backgrounds where different natural languages are spoken. Thus, when philosophers read one another, in order to do it exactly they must either know the language in which the source text was written so as to read the original text or read a good translation, which is often the only way for the individual philosopher to respond to linguistic diversity. Whatever the case may be, the philosopher must make sure that the philosophical meanings and propositions postulated in a colleague's work are accessible to him / her.

Though this second boundary, cross-linguistic search for exactitude in meaning, has been problematized in literary criticism and commentary in terms of the so-called “intentional fallacy,” philosophical discussion of the hermeneutics of textual interpretation has brought some completion to the “intentional fallacy” paradoxical argument that we can never really access the originally intended meaning of a text. For philological hermeneutics it is the (trans-linguistic) community formed by the profession that eventually settles the arguments on those intended textual, propositional and word meanings in a philosopher's work that are to prevail. The profession community thus acts as the institutional gate-keeping agency that sanctions the acceptability vs. unacceptability of the possible interpretations attached to a philosophical work.

Thus, communication among the members of a discipline and profession internationally practised must depend either on the multilingualism of the individual philosopher or on the existence of intermediary texts (translations) facilitating the monolingual philosopher's access to texts originally written in a language other than his / her own.

These translations, whose authors may or may not be philosophers themselves, stand as interposed texts whose alterity will condition the professional reader's degree of understanding and misunderstanding of another philosopher's thought. Successful understanding will depend to a great extent on the quality of the translation used, as it combines with other particular factors.

Translators of philosophical texts who have not been trained in philosophy will necessarily find their task difficult since they must face the additional need to tackle the highly complex conceptual content characteristic by highly specialized philosophical discourse before they can consider giving it a translated form. The most desirable hypothetical case then would be to find a philosopher-translator able to do the critical reading and translation of a philosophical work. This would be a way to ensure the quality of the translated text by reducing to a minimum the epistemic distance between the authors of the translation, on one hand, and of the original philosophical text on the other.

There are the cases of some philosophical works that have been widely circulated within the community of philosophers in the form of a defective translated version. The translation has eventually supplanted the original by the sheer force of its pervasive use throughout decades of time – the result being that the translation errors present in this kind of official translation eventually grow rooted in the community of specialized readers who have acquainted themselves with the given philosophical text only through translation.

One relevant example of how a problematic translation is bound to cause a lasting negative impact on the overall reception of the philosopher is Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949) as it has been analyzed in a quite recent publication, the 2017 book edited by Bonnie Mann and Martina Ferrari that is the object of the present review. Their coedited book is a collection of essays within which we find the best-known experts on Beauvoir arguing on the dangerous effects of (mis)translation on the critical reception of Beauvoir among feminist thinkers. The experts specifically focus on the history of the (mis)translation of a single sentence, Beauvoir's (1949: II.13) "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient" as "one is not born: one becomes (a) woman," and the effects the English translations have had on the (mis)understanding of her particular brand of feminism. The book relies on its contributors' interdisciplinary and meticulous analysis of this single sentence for its originality and interest.

Throughout its nineteen chapters the collection exhaustively tackles this specific issue as well as a number of concomitant relevant themes and it does so both from several perspectives and according to different disciplinary interests. It has four sections: “Intellectual History” (7-54), “History of a Scandal” (55-136), “The Philosopher’s Debate” (137-274) and “The Labor of Translation” (275-354). The four sections include articles on the sex / gender debate, see for instance Karen Offen (11-36), Bonnie Mann (37-53), Toril Moi (71-102; 103-114) and Meagan Burke (159-174). Since it is impossible to do justice to the breadth and wealth of this collection of articles in the present short review, I have chosen to focus specifically upon the sections in the book devoted to discuss the task of the translator.

Two of the sections are particularly important for Translation Studies, one is the first section, “History of a Scandal”, which focuses on translation by tracing the history and function of the first translation of Beauvoir's 1949 *Le Deuxième sexe* (volumes I and II), transferred from French into English as *The Second Sex* in a version already accessible as a finished manuscript in 1951 but published only in 1953. The other more relevant section, called the “Labor of Translation”, is particularly interesting for its close exploration of the challenges faced by the German, Finnish, Serbo-Croat, and Spanish translations as these are analyzed in Baumeister's chapter on German (297-314), Ruonakoski's chapter on Finnish (331-354), Bogiç's on Serbo-Croat (315-330), and López Sáenz's on Spanish (175-200). The contribution by López Sáenz stands out as the best example of the conceptual depth and definition a philosopher like the author herself can bring to the analysis of a translation.

As can be seen, both sections focus on translation *per se* while offering glimpses into the politics of translation. The former includes the articles by Toril Moi (71-102; 103-114), Margaret Simons (59-70), and Nancy Bauer (115-126), who offer diverse philosophical interpretations of Beauvoir, as well as concrete and convincing demonstrations of how the passages poorly translated from French into English really promoted long-standing misunderstandings of the original text. By concretely comparing and parsing passages between the French original, Beauvoir's 1949 *Le Deuxième sexe*, against its two existing English versions: Parshley's 1953 translation, and the new English translation by Borde and Malovany-Chevalier published in 2011—both titled *The Second Sex*—book contributors like Simons, Bauer, and Moi provide irrefutable evidence as to how meanings may get misconstrued in the process of transfer from one language into another and how such misconstrual may subsist unless subsequent translations manage

to correct it. Simons' article (59-70, a reprint from 1983) notes that 10% of the French original text was deleted in Parshley's 1953 English translation. The omitted passages were specifically on the history of women's movements, on women writers and other exceptional women. Thus, according to the authors, the earlier English translation seems to suffer from a sexist bias on the translator's side. On the other hand, as most references to socialism and socialist feminism were excised from this 1953 translation, it could also be added some ideological censorship seems also to be evidenced in it. Perhaps more troubling is Parshley's failure to capture Beauvoir's philosophic jargon, which may respond to the fact that the translator, being a zoologist, must have lacked fundamental training in philosophy. As a result, he misconstrues meaning both in relation to Beauvoir's and other relevant philosophers' thought, for instance, when mistranslating existential and specifically Heideggerian concepts like human reality, *Dasein*, as the human condition of man.

More complete comparisons of the French original and its English translated meanings were produced in the late 90s and after (by Simons, 1999 and Fallaize, 2002), a fact which Toril Moi acknowledges so as to scrupulously produce additional reasons and examples as to why a re-translation was in order by that time and later. Moi's meticulously contrastive readings reveal the presence in the first English translation of not only bungled philosophic meanings (rendering Hegel invisible, mistranslating Marx's concept of alienation) but also of serious deletions that altered the tone of Beauvoir's French text. Omitting women's voices from the section on women's lived experience and removing examples of exceptional women, Parshley fueled the now common perception that Beauvoir is male-identified and not basically interested in women. Moi attributes Drucilla Cornell's (1998) essentializing Beauvoir's anti-maternal stance to Parshley's omissions and botched translation. Moi also shares her appeal to Vintage / Knopf for a new translation (cataloguing errors and serious omissions) and their response.

To the more recent (Borde and Malovany-Chevalier) translation, Moi and Bauer respond disapprovingly, whereas Simons and Altman are more forgiving of its errors. Sadly, an annotated edition was not produced, which would have helped readers make sense of Beauvoir's referents, often local and idiosyncratic; nor was an accomplished translator (from French to English) selected. After relevant translation errors were spotted in the 2010 version, corrections were made in the ensuing 2011 edition. In preserving the original structure and literalness

of meaning, Borde and Malovany-Chevalier, “sacrifice readability and clarity in favor of a highly unidiomatic word-by-word literalism that hampers the flow of the Beauvoir’s prose and often obfuscates its meaning”, in Bauer’s words (116). In contrast, Altman (127-135) supports the 2011 translation as reliable. “The slight estrangement induced by the text” (134), she argues, is preferable to Parshley’s translation, which domesticated its foreignness to please the American audience.

The latter mentioned section in the book, “The Labor of Translation”, is as highly relevant to translators as to philosophers. It includes Carmen López Sáenz’s article “The Phenomenal Body is Not Born; It Comes to Be a Body-Subject. Interpreting the Second Sex” (175-199), which is an outstanding contribution to the study of feminism and Beauvoir from a philosophical phenomenological vantage point. López Sáenz acknowledges both the fundamental linguistic nature of experience as recalled in the source French text and the essential role that has been played by the English translation when interpreting *The Second Sex*. According to López Sáenz “the English translations on which [Beauvoir’s] critics have in their majority relied, have suppressed or erroneously translated her philosophical concepts, thus diminishing the vigour of her work” (175-176). López Sáenz then goes on to recuperate some of these neglected philosophical concepts, especially the concept of woman as a human being open to the meaning of multiple diverse dimensions of existence. That women would be inferior to men in 1949 only really means that their position in the sexual hierarchy opened fewer possibilities for them than for men. The Spanish translation from the French of the English-translated sentence “One is not born woman: one arrives at being it” is “No se nace mujer: se llega a serlo.” (Beauvoir, 2002: 13). As a translation, the Spanish version is closer to the French original than the English one, which allows the Spanish reader and critic to better understand Beauvoir. It is no wonder then that the widespread notion that Beauvoir perceives the feminine body negatively, maintaining a masculine point of view from which to become woman would be to distance oneself from consciousness and live in the flesh, is not accurate. But what Beauvoir actually does is describe the age-old feminine situation relative to the masculine absolute. This description takes place from Beauvoir’s own situation, denouncing the domination of women and stressing that woman’s being persists in her becoming someone with

an eye toward her own liberation, so that the so-called “feminine reality” is only a negative passive introjection of what has been made of women.

López Sáenz’s highly accurate innovative reading of Beauvoir’s phenomenological stance on the issue of gender and women’s reality can be seen in her definition of the woman’s body as lived body. The lived body is both natural and cultural. Being human, like being woman, is not a given, but rather a becoming. To become woman is not to acquire a gender, it is to make oneself a human being, conscious of one’s situations and one’s multiple powers for critical meaning-making. To become woman is to transcend oppression, encouraging nondiscriminatory differences, universalizing those that make the world more human by letting others be free. To become woman is to become conscious of our singular and constant stylization in order to take up only the aspects of that style of being that would be valuable for the human project. As long as these styles of relating to the world are not described as deficient with respect to a standard ideal, it will be possible to develop a phenomenology of incarnate feminine existence that is not solely a negation of the masculine, as some inaccurately would accuse Beauvoir of doing. This article is a fundamental achievement of Carmen López Sáenz’s, whose long-standing research on phenomenology allows her to define Beauvoir’s concepts in depth, thus validating them within the fields of philosophy and feminism. Compared to the rest of the contributions to the book under review, it can be said that López Sáenz’s stands out as one of the pieces in the volume to offer unique readings of a central sentence in Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième sexe*, and more generally in Beauvoir’s philosophic project, thus attesting to the significance of translation, as well as providing thoughtful interventions in feminist theory, past and present.

The book is a must-read for those interested in Beauvoir’s ideas, in phenomenology, in a critical engagement with the various turns in feminist theory and in translation.

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