

Our Bodies, Ourselves

Translators' Foreword*

When faced with a society full of stigmas and prejudices, we often wonder when all this will end and when we, as humankind, will have total freedom to live and have full control over our decisions and our bodies. What is more, some people believe that society will never change and contribute to perpetuating the same old social hierarchies. However, in face of this disbelief, there are those who are looking for ways to encourage change and foster resistance and, with it, influence the environment that surrounds us. As for social inequalities, especially regarding those affecting women, we know that the process of change is not easy.

Given these initial notes and through this collective text, we aim to describe our experience of translating from English to Portuguese *A Collection of Prefaces from Culturally Adapted Translations of Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS)* and to promote discussions on language and translation, including topics involving the rights of our bodies, as women's bodies.

Certainly, more and more in Brazil and in the world, women are promoting different ways of creating bonds of solidarity and establishing critical debates about women's rights and their demands. And it is through this collective preface, which deals with the different translations of prefaces included in editions of OBOS published worldwide, that we intend to highlight the similarities and differences between the different versions regarding these critical debates. We will discuss

some of our experiences with the translation process, raise questions and offer reflections about the decisions made for this collection of prefaces. What are the interpretation effects stirred up by the decisions made during the translation process into Brazilian Portuguese? How do women experience womanhood in different cultures? Are they shared and/or dissonant experiences? We hope to clarify these and some other issues in this text.

Language and Translation

When dealing with language, especially during a translation process, we have to constantly question ourselves about how the text we are working with is being studied and translated, how it is understood by the society that will receive it and which discourse has been created and reinforced through it.

If that is truly taken into consideration, then we can easily realize that language, which allows to expose and work dialectically on so many issues, collaborates to the development of collective thinking and allows for freedom. However, it also reinforces attitudes and limiting actions that have been present among us for a long time, which ends up making it difficult for women to “fly on their own”, especially those in non-privileged positions. These political and linguistic reflections pervade our translated prefaces and could not help but appear here, in our collective text.

* This preface, included in the adaptation of the e-book *Our Bodies, Ourselves Transformado Mundialmente* and published in 2020, was originally written in Portuguese. Available in: <https://www.iel.unicamp.br/br/content/ebook>. Translated from Portuguese to English by Ana Carolina Bofo and Dhafinny da Silva. Revised by Samira Spolidoro and Janine Pimentel.

During the translation of these texts, we had to reflect upon what kind of language we wanted to create, which words and terms to use and how we could make the female figure constantly present in all parts of our work, all while we tried to maintain the idea that originated the work developed by the authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

We felt it was necessary to show the public, especially women, the difficulties faced by women of different cultures, and that is why we decided to translate these prefaces in the first place – because we were hoping to enable the development of knowledge and critical thinking about different societies and their organizations. However, working with Brazilian Portuguese raises several questions relevant to our translation process.

The Portuguese language is architected in a way, in which, in general, the masculine grammatical gender is marked as neutral (professor, aluno, etc.), while the feminine gender would be used to make a specific characteristic explicit, i.e. "aluna" that can only represent a female student. Ana Lucia Pessotto dos Santos, in her article *Língua para todes: um olhar formal sobre a expressão do gênero gramatical no Português e a demanda pela língua(gem) inclusiva*, explains that:

Therefore, the letter '- o' in words like 'aluno' (student) do not mark gender but are thematic vowels. The masculine is not marked, that is, the opposition 'aluno' - 'aluna' is not given by the opposition between '- a' and '- o', but between '- a' and a null morpheme 'Æ' for grammatical gender, since there is no masculine gender marking: the final '- o' would be a thematic vowel. (SANTOS, 2019, p. 163)¹

What we have, then, is that the gender marking occurs by the use of "-a" and that words such as "médicos, parceiros, alunos (doctors, partners, students)" would represent, at the same time, a plural of masculine and feminine, while "médicas, parceiras, alunas" would necessarily represent only the plural for feminine forms. The unmarked gender (represented by the use of the "-

o"), when generalizing, automatically restricts the "- a" marking, placing the "feminine form as a 'subspecies' of the masculine" (SANTOS, 2019, p.163).

In face of this situation, we, as female translators, observe that language is a tool that reinforces various social and ideological problems that interfere with the construction of the subject and their thinking. Therefore, in an attempt to encourage critical thinking about the issues presented in these prefaces, as well as about the use of language, we had to develop a greater awareness about the way we were using language so as not to reinforce patterns and fall into traps.

We tried to create a *new meaning* within a language that is marked by gendered words and, as a result, reinforces ideologies through a so-called "neutral speech". Our objective was then to deconstruct patterns and to work towards equity. We feel that our objective is to expand the female space within society, to promote discussions about women's voices and bodies, so we, as a whole, can be really respected.

This way, throughout our translations, we had to pay attention to implied hierarchies reinforced through language that are not noticed by those who do not deal with the language in a critical and systematic way on a daily basis. The main challenge of translating from English into Brazilian Portuguese had to do with the fact that we were translating from a language that does not mark the gender (such as in articles, nouns and adjectives) to one that requires them to be explicitly defined.

As illustrated in the examples above, the words that referred to the collective or a job position — parceiros/ médicos (partners/ doctors) — were always spelled in the masculine grammatical gender and the impact of this on speech is that we, Brazilians, traditionally associate these activities only to men. Therefore, as we translated the text, we sought ways to reinforce the presence of women in these places — using parceiras/ pessoas médicas (partners / medical people). This movement led to a

¹ SANTOS, A. L. P. Língua para todes: um olhar formal sobre a expressão do gênero gramatical no Português e a demanda pela língua(gem) inclusiva. Revista Ártemis, v. 28, n. 1, 17 dez. 2019, p. 160-178.

reflection, as the search for an inclusive language made us realize the urgency in rethinking terms that were inherited from a patriarchal and sexist society, making us remember that the struggle for an egalitarian society is constant and necessary.

Translation process

Translating, more than just a linguistic process, is also a constant effort of understanding. When we come into contact with the text to be translated, we must try to understand not only its language, but the customs and cultures that led to its creation. The translation process is, therefore, delicate and essential. It requires sensitivity to deal with textual and cultural differences. Meanwhile, it is also through the translation process that a text travels distances and crosses barriers. And translating the OBOS prefaces could not be any different. We, as translators, live and reside within the Brazilian reality — even if our experience does not represent that of all women in Brazil — and, therefore, the contact with other realities presented in these prefaces of the most diverse parts of the world was done carefully and with a lot of research.

As we already mentioned earlier, Brazilian Portuguese is a language that requires grammatical gender marking, while English does not. However, this was not the only challenge we encountered throughout our translations. From technical difficulties, such as the names of institutions in the different prefaces translated by our group, to ideological-political issues that, during the translation process, had to become palpable to the Brazilian public. There was an intense research process during the translations of these prefaces so that we could understand and describe in the best possible way what seemed diverse to us.

During this process, we noticed both similarities and differences. We worked with a series of prefaces coming from different places: Poland, Russia, United States, Romania, Japan, among many others, so it was already possible to predict that each text would present a new challenge. Of course, the experiences of women in different cultures are variable and the original prefaces sought, in a way, to explain how the OBOS was adapted

for each country. Our work as translators of these prefaces could not have been done without understanding the subtleties of each approach and the implications of their texts, and making clear, through translation, what had been pointed out in each material.

Interestingly, the linguistics and translation issues of the different versions of OBOS are discussed in some of the prefaces. In Russia, the definition of gender presented a contrast to the US version, as the very word "gender" is related to "social specifics of sexual roles". In the Tibetan version, many terms and medical concepts in English do not have a direct equivalent. Meanwhile in the preface to French-speaking Africa, the authors highlight the language as a problem, as the vast majority of women in Central and West Africa do not speak French but rather a wide variety of regional African languages with no written system.

In many prefaces, there is a clear concern to turn what is "personal into political" and bring issues that would traditionally be associated with the private sphere into the public sphere (for example, sexuality and sex). Versions such as the Hebrew and the Japanese confirm that inequalities are perpetuated by associating women with the space of the home, the private sphere, the emotional issues, while men are connected with political and productive work outside the domestic sphere, i.e. with the public space. The Japanese version, specifically, points out that topics, which should be widely discussed naturally (childbirth, menstruation, sexual pleasure, sexuality), are seen as taboo in Japan up to that point in time. The authors point out that topics such as masturbation, sexuality of elderly and disabled people were seen as novelty and surprise for most of those involved in the elaboration of their versions. However, even with topics considered controversial, the authors of the Japanese version and other prefaces reinforce the importance of sharing these subjects broadly in their writings and fighting these limiting perceptions.

In addition, different versions of the prefaces addressed the plurality of voices and highlighted the importance of the diversity of women involved and of themes

presented in their books. This is seen in the preface that depicts the situation of the United States and aimed to make room for different types of women, to re-signify the “we” present in the composition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, because this way the material could encompass their true reality and present diverse situations that can contribute to the understanding of the multiple experiences they went through.

Similarly, the Spanish and Hebrew versions highlight the relevance of covering multiple voices. This can be observed in the translation of the Hebrew preface, in which the authors worried about the implication of describing women as “Arab, Jews, Ashkenazi [descendants of Europeans], Asian, with some physical disability, young or old” in contrast to only “women in Israel”. By not reinforcing stereotypes associated with generalizations and by integrating different subgroups of women, in the Hebrew version as well as in so many others, there is a sense of critical and social awareness that seeks to ensure the presence of varied perspectives and to acknowledge everyone’s place of speech.

In addition to the text, the covers depict the cultures and groups of women who are being represented by their respective prefaces. The images symbolize the specificities of women, such as their bodies, their ages, their struggles, their different cultures and languages. When comparing the covers, we notice that all of them have particularities that refer to the countries where they are from, either through photos that depict them in that country, or through illustrations and shapes that refer to the female body or the specific country where they were published. Considering that each image brings a representation of each country and the way women are perceived according to each culture, we realize that the interpretation arising from the translation does not only start from the text, but also from the reinterpretation of the imagery aspect in the covers.

The preface collection cover is, in itself, an attempt to contemplate some of other countries' versions and an initiative to bring them into English. The united covers shaped as a globe highlights the plurality of the project,

the combination of many differences that create something unique.

Our first contact with the prefaces of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* occurred with the illustrated version, in which all the covers are formatted at the beginning of the texts. Thus, our impression and interpretation were guided from the beginning by the images that became essential in our translation. We admit that the presence of these images in the prefaces allows us to fill some gaps about the original cultures and the construction of women in each text.

Construction of a collective text

In 2020, we were surprised by a pandemic that had impacts that will still accompany us for many years. COVID-19 presented us with a scenario that was previously unthinkable. Social isolation made us reflect on ourselves, but also on those who were unable to stay at home, because their work required physical presence. The pandemic was responsible for aggravating social differences and, unfortunately, in Brazil, it was also responsible for increasing the numbers of cases of domestic violence and abuse. The process of translating the prefaces took place in this context and, as a result, it was inevitable to reflect on how debating women issues and their bodies is only more urgent. Access to quality information designed for and by women proved to be even more pressing than it was before the pandemic.

The pandemic also changed how our collective work as translators was carried out. We found ourselves in a situation where the only possible ways of debate and exchange were those made virtually, so we had to adjust to deadlines and schedules despite the anxiety and uncertainties brought by the COVID-19. Our testimony, built from different voices, represents the effort to carry out work that we believe in, at a time when the whole world is changing. Although we face conflicting times worldwide in different political and social spheres, we understand that our practice in this collective work contributes to society. More than ever, in difficult situations, it is necessary to resist and leverage up the multiple voices and experiences of women. By

promoting projects such as OBOS, we contribute to the expansion of access to knowledge and to the stimulation of critical thinking.

The project does not aim to offer closed and definitive answers, but comprehensive and critical reflections that provide different sources of knowledge regarding women's experiences and women's rights. It is absolutely necessary to engage actively in the fight for those rights by raising awareness, promoting dialogue and critical thinking, in order to promote positive future change.

Acknowledgments

This project would not be possible without the persistence of each of the translators involved in this work, who persevered in each conflict, in each doubt and who turned the adversities into stimulus to continue translating, seeking knowledge and, thereby, being an important piece for the propagation of the female voice within society.

We are grateful for the guidance and trust of our professors Érica Lima and Janine Pimentel and our supervisor Samira Spolidorio, for presenting us this significant project opportunity and, thus, giving us space to discuss relevant topics that permeate different social groups. This has contributed directly to the development of our academic and personal lives.

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We are especially grateful to our families and friends for supporting and encouraging us to fight for our dreams and goals. You are our sources of inspiration and love, and without you, all our work would be much harder.

Finally, we can't help but thank you, the person who will accompany us in this book, for participating in this journey with us. We hope you take advantage of the knowledge shared in our translated prefaces.

Feel free to explore this universe!

Alice, Ana Carolina, Beatriz, Dhafinny, Gabrielle, Juliana, Lais, Larissa, Lia, Maria Vitória e Nathalia.

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