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The Hegemony of the English Language in the Academy:
The Damaging Impact of the Sociocultural and Linguistic Barriers on the Development of Feminist Sociological Knowledge, Theories and Strategies

As a francophone sociologist and activist feminist living in a bilingual country, I intend in this article to address questions that arise from my analysis of current feminist debates and practices in the academy. More specifically, my article deals with the issue of the hegemony of English-speaking scholarship over the definition of feminist sociological knowledge and feminism itself as well as the danger of dilution, homogenization and theoretical and strategic misrepresentation and silencing (Winter, 1997) that are likely to occur when one cultural and linguistic voice is given as dominant, and all other voices end up being identified, if they are indeed identified or recognized at all, as 'others'.

The issue of language in feminist studies or more globally in sociology raises the question of the relations between centre and peripheries in a context where the preoccupations, theoretical and methodological frameworks and solutions considered at the centre have a greater chance of being judged important and universal than those that emerge at the margins, which are, more often than not, considered as particular, culturally related and secondary.

But before going on with this discussion, I think it would be helpful to put my thoughts into perspective, to present briefly some information concerning important factors that have contributed to the evolution of feminist

studies in Québec and given its particular traits to the sociointellectual milieu in which I have evolved as a francophone feminist sociologist.

Women's studies timidly appeared on the academic scene in francophone Québec in the early 1970s and have, since then, increasingly succeeded in imposing themselves as a pluridisciplinary academic field. In Québec universities, as elsewhere in Canada, the relationship that has developed over the years between sociology and feminist studies still has some ambiguities. My personal assessment is that Québec feminist scholars do indeed enjoy name recognition and, though certain forms of indifference towards their epistemological and political preoccupations have not totally disappeared, it is possible to say that feminist studies now represent a recognized field and have indeed contributed to a substantial transformation of research approaches and models of interpretation in many academic disciplines or fields of research., including sociology.

For the sake of the present discussion, it is important to realize that the evolution of Québec feminist studies and research, like other fields of sociology, has taken advantage of their unique position at the crossroads of French and Canado-American feminist and sociological cultures and has been largely tied to the sociopolitical environment in which they have emerged and expanded. This specific situation, in a social context where women's groups played an important part in the modernization and nationalist dynamic of Québec society, has indeed given Québec feminist studies their distinct orientation, which has produced a *modèle québécois* that represents an original synthesis between the pragmatic approach of the American and the more theoretically oriented options of French feminist scholars; whereas from the Anglo-Canadian experience, we have retained the notion of political agenda.

This situation has helped francophone feminist scholars to realize the theoretical and strategic power of concepts and schools of thought and adhere, at the same time, to a conception of feminist research oriented towards action as an integral part of the women's movement (Lamoureux, 1986; Dagenais, 1996, 1999; Descarries, 1998). For example, the two most important francophone women's teaching and research centres in Québec, l'Institut de recherches et d'études féministes de l'UQAM (IREF) and le Groupe de recherches et d'études multidisciplinaires féministes (GREMF) have chosen for strategic and semantic reasons to list their programmes under the heading 'feminist studies' rather than women's studies. In so doing, they wanted to make the political label more explicit and work in a more inclusive transformative perspective or *problématique* applicable to all subject areas and social processes, rather than limited to a specific subject area: women.

At the same time, the particular context in which Québec feminist scholars have evolved has prompted them to stay in touch with women's groups' preoccupations and practices, thus reducing the cleavage that often

exists between scholars and militants. It has also made them conscious of the necessity to explore different research approaches and methodologies in order to reduce tensions between theory and practice and adequately respond to women's demands and needs. Moreover, it has led them to keep closer links with other social movements and to diversify the scope of their observations and interventions to take into account the different practices and points of view expressed, as well as the complexity of the historical and cultural mediations that determine the interrelation of *les rapports de sexe* (gender relations) with other systems of identification and social division.

But this unique situation at the crossroads of francophone and anglophone sociologist feminist cultures has not only influenced the nature of research and teaching practices, it has also given Québec scholars the unique opportunity of being in constant contact with two major schools of thought. Personally, it has put me and some of my colleagues (Dagenais, 1999) in a position to see how few contacts there were between the two academic worlds. In particular, how little many English-speaking feminists knew about feminist literature written in French and how they have ignored its major intellectual contributions since the 1970s on important issues such as *la reproduction sociale, le mode de production domestique, la division sexuelle du travail, le système patriarcal, la transversalité des rapports de sexe, la consubstantialité des rapports*.

Over the years, this observation has made me wonder how one specific, narrow – and I would not hesitate to add – erroneous definition of French feminism could prevail to the almost total exclusion of others. What can explain such a selective appropriation and questionable re-elaboration by certain American scholars of French feminist theories? For example, and apart from a few notable exceptions, how could important works of French materialist feminists such as Colette Guillaumin, Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Danièle Kergoat, to name but a few, be ignored? How could their innovative approach in exposing the economic and social dynamic of sexual domination and women's social limitations be wrongly confused by some with essentialism, when their intellectual contribution, while giving way to different scientific interpretations, has been, on the contrary, to inscribe a different vision, '*une vision autre*', of social relations at the very heart of feminist theories, a vision that is of a divided and hierarchical society between men and women, one that refuses the illusion of '*le neutre*' (Varikas, 1993)? How easily, thereafter, has French feminism been equated in most of the anglophone literature with a marginal literary and philosophical venture that has, at the very least, lost contact with the political realities of women and the transformative objectives of feminism?

Finally, how has anglophone literature almost entirely limited its scope of investigation over the last decades to the work of a few academics, namely Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, whose connection with

feminism, with the exception of the first named, is, as Bronwyn Winter observes, 'at best highly questionable' and 'whose compatibility of approaches needs, at the very least, to be shown' (Varikas, 1993: 64)?¹ On that issue, I totally agree with Eleni Varikas (1993: 63)² when she rightfully points out in an article titled '*Féminisme, modernité, postmodernisme: pour un dialogue des deux côtés de l'océan*', 'that to reduce French feminism to certain theoretical positions is not only to obscure the fact that the major part of feminist debates took place outside and sometimes against these positions; it is also to conceal the theoretical contributions most influential in feminist thought in France and in other francophone countries; it consequently prevents a productive dialogue on the conditions under which these multiple *problématiques* emerged' and, I would add, on their heuristic, strategic and subversive potential in developing feminist theories grounded in women's multiple and diverse experiences.

This having been said, let us go back to my initial question: how universal or culturally determined are the feminist notions, categories or concepts we use? In reflecting on this question, I want to illustrate how the use or abuse of anglophone literature as the main – if not the only – reference in women's studies can result in the imposition of concepts, topics, methodologies and practices that belong to the sociocultural context and environment of the western English-speaking academy. Apart from my frustration with what English-speaking feminists have done with French feminism, I raise this question because I strongly believe that one neglected problem that is seriously threatening the epistemological and strategic development of feminist studies and networking is both the hierarchical relationship and the cleavage that exist among different national feminisms in the construction of theoretical frameworks and practices. I am specifically referring to the damaging impact of the sociocultural and linguistic barriers that generate theoretical and strategic blindness or misappropriation as a result of not knowing about the plural and diversified nature and level of development of feminist perspectives in non-English-speaking countries.³ Strangely enough, no matter how many international meetings I attend or papers I read, I have seldom seen the question of the development of knowledge or communication discussed in this light. Yet, every sociologist can relate to the idea that the language of communication necessarily imposes restrictions and constraints on our ways of saying and seeing things.

Communication, as we all know, largely consists in understanding each other's language, but understanding each other's language is by no means sufficient to establish real lines of communication or exchanges between intellectuals and academics. The notions we use are strongly linked with specific cultural, historical and political environments. Concepts and paradigms used in one language do not necessarily refer to the same *problématique* or reality in another language or might not even be part of the 'other's' intellectual and

social horizons. Don't we all know, at least since the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing) in 1995 or the World March of Women in 2000, that feminist issues relating to *le droit des femmes à l'autodétermination sur leur corps* or to the basic goal of equality do not necessarily refer to comparable experiences or call for similar strategies in the minds and lives of African, Asian, Arabic or Occidental women?

The resulting omnipresence of the concept of gender in feminist studies, without sufficient theoretical justifications as to its interest and strategic significance in different linguistic settings, is yet another example of the drawback that results from the predominance given by western English-speaking academics to one specific set of concepts and approaches. This question led Paola Melchiori (2000), president of the Women's Free University of Milan, to assert, and I quote in a free translation: 'Now that the concept of gender has succeeded in imposing itself everywhere in the American academy and in developing agencies of the Third World, we can start measuring the extent of the high cost of analytical richness lost. Didn't we realize that through this homogenization of approaches, of language, we were losing explanatory power and giving up certain radical political practices that were implied in the notion of *les rapports de sexe*.' A statement that I make mine and that I would like to elaborate on by saying that, contrary to the notion of gender, the concept '*rapports de sexe*' has a more radical origin and transformative potential since it puts emphasis on the relation of power, as well as on the division and hierarchy reconstructed by patriarchy in its interdependence with neo-capitalism.

Such a shift, one can assume, explains why in many universities theoretical feminism is reduced to an intellectual project of understanding women in their individuality or specificity, rather than as a group or as a socio-political class. Such a shift in perspective can only accentuate fragmentation and cleavage among women and put women's studies 'increasingly at risk of losing touch with the movement to which it owes its existence' (Winter, 1997: 211). It is, as a matter of fact, easy to see how such a shift runs the risk of isolating, even more than in the past, the experiences and theories developed by feminists in the South, by Afro-Americans, by lesbians or by women doubly or triply discriminated. It is also easy to see that this actual trend in feminist studies, or should I say post-feminist studies, tends to leave room only for the will of 'empowerment' of white middle-class women in an era where post-patriarchy has not yet occurred and where it would be totally irresponsible to let go of Christine Delphy's (1998) or bell hooks' (2000) definition of feminism as a social movement to end sexist exploitation and oppression.

That is why I feel so strongly the need to advocate that concepts too rarely encountered today in mainstream English-speaking feminist discussions be brought back into feminist discourse so as to take into account the

absence of resources and powers, let alone liberty, that still characterizes the situation of so many women around the world. It is my belief that the concept of 'equality', which was at the origin of second wave feminists' *prise de conscience* and activism, and that of 'identity', which is at the centre of current differentialist feminism, are, though necessary, in no way sufficient to comprehend women's diverse oppressive situations. The evocation of events in ex-Yugoslavia, or the violence and restrictions that have been imposed on Algerian or Afghan women in recent years, or the evocation of the capitalist exploitation of the women's labour force in the maquiladoras of Mexico, dramatically emphasize the fact that many women have yet to gain access to freedom, respect and a minimum of economic resources. I borrow Geneviève Fraisse's (1995: 391) words to say that '*la menace sur la liberté [des femmes] devient pour l'heure plus grave que les manquements à l'égalité*'. Accordingly, it seems to me that concentrating on women's identity and words inadvertently encourages conservative statements and political approaches. Not only does it return to women the entire responsibility of their liberation, depriving them of the necessary benefits of solidarity and collective actions, but it also denies the relevance of reconsidering women's experience of sexual differentiation and division of labour in their interdependence with the power relations embedded in the instrumental and constantly reconstructed interaction between patriarchy and capitalism. In line with these first reflections, I keep wondering if we can foresee ways of establishing a better interlinguistic communication in feminist studies in order to encompass our historical, cultural, spatial and linguistic ways of being feminists and thinking feminism, alleviate the tensions of a privileged linguistic hegemony and leave room for the absence of consensus while remaining in complete solidarity.

I do not believe that I have to say much more to make my point. It is a basic sociological fact that a large part of communication, either between schools of thought or between scholars, is hampered by misunderstandings of a political, historical and cultural nature. As a matter of fact, true communication can only be established if a person is willing to open a dialogue with others and is ready to challenge her or his own interpretation from their political, historical and cultural experiences and references. It is thus imperative that we ask ourselves not only the traditional question: 'Where does the other speak from?' but also and more importantly 'Where do I – or where do we – speak from?'

In the daily life of a feminist sociologist working from the periphery, what are the immediate consequences of the privileged situation of the English language? From my experience and analysis, I had to come to the unfortunate conclusion that among well-intentioned feminists, even those living in a bilingual country like Canada, we have not succeeded in developing a real intellectual network where we could have learned from each other's

experiences and built an integrated body of knowledge inclusive of each other's intellectual perspectives and understandings. And may I add, replicating here the words spoken by former International Sociological Association president Immanuel Wallerstein (1998), 'that unfortunately some of our American colleagues, as well as many of our British, Canadian and Australian colleagues, are often victims of their privileged linguistic situation, because they are unable to or become uninterested in knowing and understanding different cultural traditions and perspectives'. It is my personal assumption that paradigms and conceptualizations developed in feminist sociology are, implicitly or explicitly, undermined by this ethnocentric approach.

In daily academic life, this cleavage means that whenever I consult a feminist article or a book written in French and whenever I read, through translations, works written in languages other than English, it strikes me that these works often not only contain references to texts written in English, but also take into account the contributions of theories developed outside the English-speaking circle. In contrast, I seldom come across the same overture or preoccupations in anglophone literature. The absence of bibliographical references to materials produced or translated into languages other than English is clear evidence to this effect. Let me give you but just one significant example. In the bibliography of a book called *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Canadian Women's Movement* (Adamson et al., 1988) published by Oxford University Press, out of the 429 titles carefully selected by the authors to cover: (1) 'The Contemporary Canadian Women's Movement', (2) 'The First Wave', (3) 'The Women's Movement in Western Europe and the United States' and (4) 'Other' sources cited, only six titles were in French, barely more than 1 percent, and none in any other language, even though one section covered Western Europe's women's movement.⁴

One very immediate effect of this type of exclusion is the difficulty that one encounters in getting libraries, even university libraries, to stock publications that provide access to alternative sociolinguistic voices, and, in doing so, to alternative analytical and methodological models and 'other' realities. This given pre-eminence constantly reduces the necessity for English-speaking people to learn other languages and thus to open themselves to other cultures and frameworks of interpretation. More globally, it also means that English-speaking journals that are already dominant in the scientific community are given additional visibility and recognition through the citation analysis or abstracting processes. The situation is well documented. Not only does it reinforce their already strong control over dissemination of ideas and results, it also enables a concentration of evaluation and gate-keeping activities in the English-speaking countries which, in turn, gives their researchers additional power over the content and type of articles acceptable for publication (Durand, 2001).

Finally, it is common knowledge that when a person has to use a language

that is not her or his first language to communicate with a larger audience or wants to engage in an intellectual dialogue, in most cases it probably means that she or he does not control the second language with the same subtlety and precision, or may not speak it in the same fluent and dynamic manner. This situation disadvantages many of us and does not allow us to participate in intellectual matches or scientific debates on equal terms with the person or persons we are speaking to.

All of us, of course, recognize the power structures and relations that are at work in such practices. Not only are books or papers published in English more widely read and quoted than others, as well as being too rapidly identified as feminist productions, but also the absence of interaction with the rest of the world is a clear obstacle to the production of better and more original scientific knowledge as well as being an obstacle for feminists or sociologists, let alone societies, to understand each other. Some analysts of the scientific world have observed, however, and I would tend to agree with them, that even if translations were readily available,⁵ notwithstanding the distortions and conceptual transformations this can induce (de Lotbinière-Harwood, 1991), or even if all texts were written in English, it would not de facto eliminate the power structures that are embedded in centre-periphery relations. Neither would it eliminate the distortion brought about by the omission of preoccupations formulated at the margins since the early 1960s by dissident feminists, lesbians, Afro-Americans, aboriginal women or activists from Africa and Latin America, to name but a few of the more active alternative voices that did not wait for the reprimands of the 'postmoderns' before speaking loudly of their differences, their everyday experiences and their need to inscribe 'their claims in a local, national and international strategy, while insisting on the particular impact of social factors such as race, class, caste or international division of work, and their different weight on the individuals' (Sow, 1999: 433).⁶

I am inclined to say that such disparity, or intellectual blindness, probably exists because the English-speaking feminist field is *l'Un* (the One), to paraphrase the expression put forward by Simone de Beauvoir, and that the other feminist fields are *l'Autre* (or rather here, *les Autres* or the Others). As we know, *l'Un*, being the One, does not have to define himself or question himself, whereas *l'Autre* (the Other) is always defined or questioned in relation to *l'Un* (the One). It is *l'Autre* (the Other) that is both trying to keep in touch with its own specificity and historical dynamic, and to catch up with *l'Un*, the One. This leads the peripheral feminist fields to model their experiences on that of the centre. They remain captives of a hierarchical dichotomous relation, even though their own historicity, political representations and feminist struggles carry their own weight and direction and call for other channels of communication.

In line with these reflections, I keep wondering how could we break the

feeling of isolation or alienation that, notwithstanding everyone's good faith, often results from being from the periphery, from a different sociolinguistic background? How could we benefit from each other's analytical traditions and learn from our respective ways of asking questions, putting problems forward, constructing conceptual choices and methodological frameworks, choosing domains of research, discussing contradictions, conceptualizing feminism, and so forth? I hope it is clear that I am not situating this discussion in the context of the linguistic dispute (*contentieux*) between Québec and Canada, nor reducing the problem of communication and collaboration among scholars to a linguistic problem or a visibility problem. As a matter of fact, I do not, in principle, have serious problems with English as an instrument of communication. On the contrary, it is obvious to me that we need a *lingua franca*. In some circumstances, using English may be the only possibility to be heard and read by most people. But my aim is to find ways in which knowledge and practices produced in non-English-speaking literature could be taken into consideration, integrated into the mainstream approaches and theories.

I strongly advocate that we put our sociological imagination to work to find ways to prevent the production and reproduction of a univocal and one-dimensional approach to theories and strategies as well as the exclusion of important contributions on the mere basis of their *lieu d'origine*. It is clear to me that we must get to work and collectively develop an action plan so that linguistic barriers and unilateral bilingualism will no longer be a motive for ignorance, exclusion or, worse, compromise and the artificial homogenization or reproduction of partial and fragmented knowledge. Multilingualism must be promoted, particularly among English-speaking academics who are constantly comforted in their monolingualism by the current practices of scientific journals and international meetings as well as by the willingness of 'the others' to concede to the hegemony and standardization of the English language in the Academy in order to obtain more visibility and recognition.

En terminant, on me permettra de réitérer les quelques principes sociologiques qui sont à l'origine de la réflexion proposée ici, à savoir:

- *Il n'est pas de pensées qui ne soient soudées à une langue. Il n'est pas de structures de pensée ou de modèles théoriques qui ne soient associés à une culture linguistique donnée;*
- *Et il n'est pas de cultures linguistiques qui ne soient tributaires d'un espace géo-politique et de son historicité;*
- *Il n'est pas, non plus, de représentations idéologiques, sociales et politiques du mouvement des femmes qui ne soient liées à leurs conditions particulières de développement;*
- *Il n'est pas de choix de thèmes de recherche, de concepts ou de pratiques*

militantes qui ne soient fortement dépendants d'un environnement socio-culturel donné et de l'interrelation des expériences singulières et collectives des femmes dans cet environnement.

Bref, la langue d'usage en sciences n'est pas neutre. En études féministes, comme dans les autres domaines de la sociologie, elle est porteuse de manières spécifiques de penser et de s'interroger; elle s'inspire d'expériences historiques et quotidiennes particulières.

In summary, there is no thought or frame of reference that is not linked to a language. Language is not neutral. Scientific language in women's studies, as well as in other fields of sociology, carries social representations, specific meanings and questions as well as historical experiences. As sociologists we need to take this dynamic into account and find ways to deal with it, but most importantly to overcome its perverse effects and limitations. It is my conviction as a feminist sociologist that scholars not only need to find ways to acquire better knowledge and understanding of discourses, perspectives and strategies developed in different national and linguistic settings, but that they must also challenge their own approaches and interpretations from these standpoints in order to break away from, or at least minimize, the patriarchal mainstream notions and practices of centre and peripheries. We need to find new ways of dialogue and collaboration among ourselves in order to bring about new strategies for change and take a clear stand against all types of inequalities and injustices.

Notes

- 1 Free translation by the author.
- 2 Free translation by the author.
- 3 Relating to the Australian situation, it is Bronwyn Winter again who observes that 'feminist historians, know infinitely more about Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of Women's Right* (1792) than about Olympe de Gouges' declaration of the same made one year earlier, that is 1791' (Winter, 1997: 213). And this, she adds, in spite of readily available translations.
- 4 To give the full picture, I must add that about 10 additional titles were English translations of papers written by feminist Québécois. A reference to the translation of Simone de Beauvoir *Le Deuxième Sexe* was also present.
- 5 Simultaneous translation, as we all know, is too expensive for most feminist conferences, which undermines the possibility of real and productive exchanges.
- 6 Free translation by the author.

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