

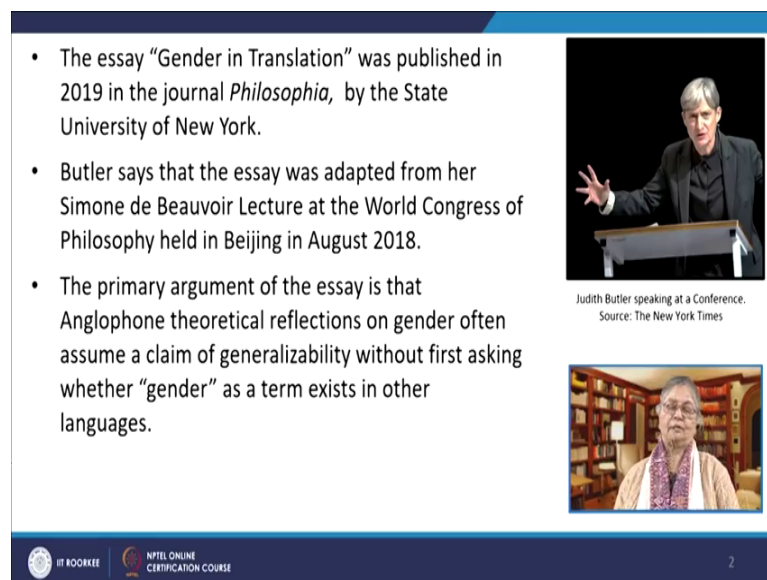
Contextualizing Gender
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Lecture - 32
Gender in Translation

Welcome to this module. In this module, we should look at Butler's crucial and recent essay titled 'Gender in Translation: Beyond Monolingualism' which was published in 2019. In the previous module, we had looked at how speech is an important aspect of affirming subjectivity.

Today we shall discuss another factor influencing language and its reception, which is the element of translation in the context of gender theory. Butler addresses the question of how the term gender enters and engages with languages around the world.

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The slide contains a list of three bullet points on the left and two images on the right. The top image shows Judith Butler speaking at a podium, with a caption below it: "Judith Butler speaking at a Conference. Source: The New York Times". The bottom image shows a portrait of Judith Butler. At the bottom of the slide, there are logos for IIT Roorkee and NPTEL Online Certification Course, along with the number 2.

- The essay "Gender in Translation" was published in 2019 in the journal *Philosophia*, by the State University of New York.
- Butler says that the essay was adapted from her Simone de Beauvoir Lecture at the World Congress of Philosophy held in Beijing in August 2018.
- The primary argument of the essay is that Anglophone theoretical reflections on gender often assume a claim of generalizability without first asking whether "gender" as a term exists in other languages.

Judith Butler speaking at a Conference.
Source: The New York Times

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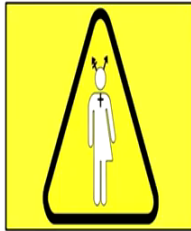
The primary argument of the essay is that Anglophone theoretical reflections on gender often assume a claim of generalizability without first asking whether "gender" as a term

exists in other languages or not. The problem of translatability is something that pervades a discourse of gender as it crosses academic and popular life at a global level. In this essay, Butler dwells on the politics lurking behind the English word 'gender'.


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Gender Ideology and Global Framework

- Some of the opposition to the entry of "gender" as a term into non-Anglophone contexts emerge from a resistance to English.
- Butler says that,
 - There can be no theory of gender without translation and that Anglophone monolingualism too often assumes that English forms a sufficient basis for theoretical claims about gender. (p. 1)
- The syntax and cultural perceptions associated with language change from one region to the other.



Source: GenderIT.org

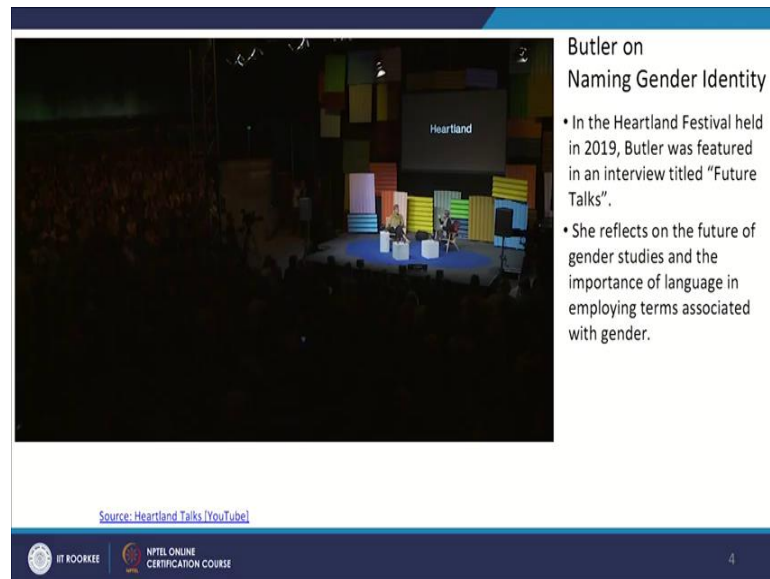


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Some of the oppositions to the entry of "gender" as a term into non-Anglophone context emerge from a resistance to English. Butler says that and I quote "there can be no theory of gender without translation and that Anglophone monolingualism too often assumes that English forms a sufficient basis for theoretical claims about gender" unquote.

The syntax and cultural perceptions associated with language change from one region to the other. In this quotation, Butler questions whether the English language can become a scholarly foundation for gender theory on a global scale. This problematizes a universal use of the term gender in the English language, especially considering the consequences it can have in non-English speaking countries. Apart from the academia, language plays a crucial role in the process of identifying and naming one's gender character which Butler reflects on in the following video.

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Butler on Naming Gender Identity

- In the Heartland Festival held in 2019, Butler was featured in an interview titled “Future Talks”.
- She reflects on the future of gender studies and the importance of language in employing terms associated with gender.

Source: [Heartland Talks | YouTube](#)

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In the Heartland Festival held in 2019, Butler was featured in an interview titled “Future Talks.” Butler here reflects on the future of gender studies and the importance of language in employing terms associated with gender.

“So, my question really is how do any of us at whatever age we are, and I still have these questions at my age, how do any of us move and breathe in the world without fear of being discriminated against or being an object of violence? How many of us are able to move in and out of institutions whether it is the workplace or the school or religious institutions and feel that the way in which we live our gender is not just permissible, but affirmed?

And the truth is that of course, we belong to communities we belong to any number of institutions where we want to be able to be accepted, to live in a way without fear and without shame and without guilt, simply for appearing as we do or loving as we do. Why should it be that if somebody walks a certain way they are discriminated against? Well boys do not walk that way or girls do not walk that way or if somebody appears in clothing that does not conform to their gender assignment; why would that be a problem?

Why cannot this that be a small and beautiful space of freedom right? Why would not we want that for our children? Like, let us say we accept a basic claim about democracy that all people should be treated equally, regardless of where they come from, what religion they practice, what gender they are or what sexuality they have.

If we then say not all people are treated equally look, here are these marginalized groups that are not being treated equally were accused of identity politics. But why are we being accused of being people who want radical equality for everyone, right. I mean the point is to struggle for equality it is not just to assert an identity, one asserts an identity because it has been disparaged and because one suffers a lack of freedom and a lack of equality and one is searching for freedom, one is searching for equality, one is searching for belonging and recognition as all other people are.

So, we are trying to break into the universal. The universal has not included us, we have to name our identities in order to achieve our freedom our equality our justice.”

We can note that in this interview which was held in 2019, Butler is consistent with her approach to gender ideology propounded earlier. She echoes the arguments she had made 30 years ago in ‘Gender Trouble’, but this time with an increased focus on language in translation.

She says that her approach on gender was always focused on the discrimination against people in terms of gender expressions especially on the elements of fear, freedom and justice. To be affirmative of one’s gender, one has to adapt to the progress made in gender studies and language should not become a hindrance to halting this process .

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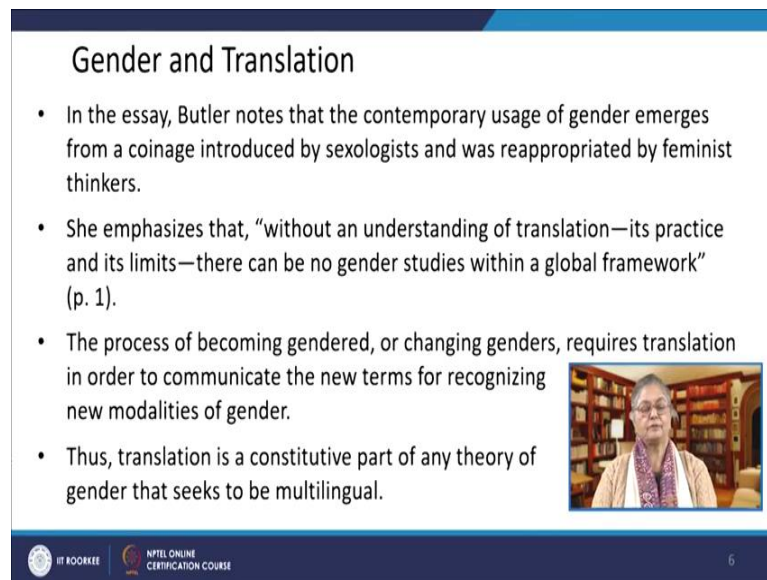
- People should be able to live their gender without shame, and this space of freedom is desired by young children and adults alike.
- Democratic principles like universal equality are always plagued by identity politics.
- Striving for equality and belongingness is a struggle to reach a universal right which is already existing legally, according to Butler.
- But the language involved should incorporate better clarity, which will be inclusive of all gender minorities.

Source: Heartland Festival 2019

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People should be able to live their gender without shame, and this space of freedom is desired by young children and adults alike. Democratic principles like universal equality are always plagued by identity politics. Striving for equality and belongingness is a struggle to reach a universal right, which is already existing legally, according to Butler. But the language involved should incorporate better clarity, which will be inclusive of all gender minorities. In other words, Butler finds that we have to name our identities in order to achieve freedom, equality, and representation in terms of gender.

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Gender and Translation

- In the essay, Butler notes that the contemporary usage of gender emerges from a coinage introduced by sexologists and was reappropriated by feminist thinkers.
- She emphasizes that, “without an understanding of translation—its practice and its limits—there can be no gender studies within a global framework” (p. 1).
- The process of becoming gendered, or changing genders, requires translation in order to communicate the new terms for recognizing new modalities of gender.
- Thus, translation is a constitutive part of any theory of gender that seeks to be multilingual.

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Butler notes in this essay that the contemporary usage of gender emerges from a coinage introduced by sexologists and reappropriated by feminist thinkers. She emphasizes that, “without an understanding of translation - its practice and its limits - there can be no gender studies within a global framework”.

The process of becoming gendered or changing genders requires translation in order to communicate the new terms for recognizing new modalities of gender. Thus, translation is a constitutive part of any theory of gender that seeks to be multilingual. By being multilingual, translation can accept the historically dynamic character of languages.

This framework can also help to facilitate a way of recognizing different genders and different accounts of gender identity. Without translation and historical coinage there is no way to understand the lively and changing category of gender and the resistance it now encounters.

In certain parts of the world, Butler notes, that there is an increase in opposition to the idea of gender precisely because it is felt that gender is a foreign word. People perceive it as a hostile American import and believe that it has the potential to challenge existing linguistic terms in other languages for designating the differences between men and women.

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- The opponents of “gender ideology”, according to Butler, maintain that it contradicts traditional morality -- like religious/Biblical teachings -- by opening up the possibility of new gender arrangements such as transgender, queer kinship and sexual freedom.
- Even in the history of feminist philosophy, gender appears as a recent phenomenon. It was limited to Euro-Atlantic debate for decades and now it is slowly taking the status of a global issue.
- Butler notes that Simone de Beauvoir did not use the word “gender”. It would have been a foreign term to use at that time in the French language.



Source: William Eerdmans Publishing





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The opponents of “gender ideology,” according to Butler, maintain that it contradicts traditional morality - like religious or biblical teachings by opening up the possibility of new gender arrangements such as transgender, queer kinship and sexual freedom. Even in the history of feminist philosophy, gender in its contemporary connotation appears as a recent phenomenon. It was limited to Euro-Atlantic debate for decades and now it is slowly taking the status of a global issue.

Butler notes that Simone de Beauvoir did not use the word “gender”. It would have been a foreign term to use at that time in the French language. However, Beauvoir’s contributions and writings paved the way towards the development of many major discussions on the philosophy of gender.

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- In the case of *The Second Sex*, American publisher Knopf commissioned an English translation from the zoologist Howard Parshley.
 - His translation had substantial cuts from Beauvoir's original two-volume text. Beauvoir herself wished to have a new translation - more complete and more faithful - in a 1985 interview. A new translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier has been published in November 2009.
- Nevertheless, the translation which appeared in 1952 enabled a significant transmission of ideas to a generation of Anglophone women readers and critics.
- This includes famous thinkers such as Kate Millet, Juliet Mitchell, Betty Friedan and Germain Greer, all of whom who took up Beauvoir's philosophy from the 1960s.



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'The Second Sex', was originally written and published in French in 1949, in the case of this book American publisher Knopf commissioned an English translation from the zoologist Howard Parshley. Howard Parshley was not familiar with the philosophical terms Simone de Beauvoir had used and was also asked by the publisher to cut short certain portions or to delete certain portions from the original manuscript.


Beauvoir herself was not satisfied with this translation and in a 1985 interview has wished that there could have been a new translation more complete and more faithful to quote her. A new translation has also come in November, 2009. However, this translation too has come into certain criticism.

Nevertheless, the translation which appeared in 1952 enabled a significant transmission of ideas to a generation of Anglophone women readers and critics. These include famous thinkers such as Kate Millet, Juliet Mitchell, Betty Friedan and Germain Greer, all of whom took up Beauvoir's philosophy from the 1960s often without acknowledging her contribution.

This shows that despite the inadequacy of the original translation by Parshley, it was the translation the fact of translation which enabled the global propagation of this epoch-making critical work which was originally written in French.

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- In 1994, Toril Moi wrote,
 - “If we are to escape from current political and theoretical dead ends, feminism in the 1990s cannot afford to ignore Beauvoir’s pioneering insights” (Moi, 1994).
- Furthermore, both Judith Butler and Monique Wittig developed Beauvoir’s famous distinction between sex and gender in radical new directions.
- Wittig went on to write influential essay titled “One Is Not Born a Woman” in 1981 where she argues the political categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ should be abolished.




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In 1994, Toril Moi wrote, “if we are to escape from current political and theoretical dead ends feminism in the 1990s cannot afford to ignore Beauvoir’s pioneering insights”. Furthermore, both Judith Butler and Monique Wittig developed Beauvoir’s famous distinction between sex and gender in radical new directions. Wittig went on to write an influential essay titled “One Is Not Born a Woman” in 1981 where she argues the political categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ should be abolished.

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- The interdisciplinary approach of *The Second Sex* showed that a category such as “woman” was established through political, social, and psychological influences.
- The scholars of Beauvoir, such as Alice Schwarzer (2000) and Toril Moi (2008), insist that the category of woman was surely more important to Beauvoir than any potential idea of gender.
- But it was Monique Wittig (1992) who posed a radical lesbian challenge disputing the category of woman itself.



Alice Schwarzer Toril Moi




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The interdisciplinary approach of ‘The Second Sex’ showed that a category such as “women” was established through political, social and psychological influences. Beauvoir’s scholars, such as Alice Schwarzer in 2000 and Toril Moi in 2008 publications insist that the category of women was surely more important to Beauvoir than any potential idea of gender.

But it was Monique Wittig who posed a radical lesbian challenge disputing the category of woman itself. Butler believes that Wittig too followed the ideas of Beauvoir to arrive at this approach; however, it had caused attention among the followers of Simone de Beauvoir. Butler argues that Beauvoir did not consider the trans identity which entails breaking with a gender assignment in order to lay claim to new terms to correspond to the lived reality of gender.

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- Butler shows that despite gender being a foreign term for Beauvoir, she initiated a debate among the English speaking critics on the distinction between sex and gender.
- Sex, understood as biological, is always in a dynamic and mutually constitutive relation to its social and cultural forms of appearance.
- She says,
 - If we take sex for granted, then we take for granted a specific version of sex, within the language we speak, or within a certain set of social and scientific presuppositions. (Butler, 2019, p. 5)



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Butler also shows that despite gender being a foreign term for Beauvoir, she initiated a debate among the English-speaking critics on the distinction between sex and gender. Understood as biological, sex is always in a dynamic and mutually constitutive relation to its social and cultural forms of appearance. And she says, I quote if we take sex for granted then we take for granted a specific version of sex, within the language we speak, or within a certain set of social and scientific presuppositions unquote.


Butler is attempting to understand what happens when we consider gender to be the linguistic articulation of sex in a multilingual context. Sex is established differently in

different languages and this prompts a problem of linguistic designation. Butler finds that sex cannot be fully separated from the linguistic formation which establishes it as a fact and therefore, gender only arise in any language as a result of a difficult translation. It never quite carries the same meaning in different languages. That is why through this essay Butler claims that translation is a necessary condition to envision gender theory on an international level.


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Translation and Monolingualism

- In this part of the essay, Butler looks at the question whether the challenges associated with the term 'gender' are syntactical, i.e. linguistic disruption.
- She asks, what kind of disturbance does the entrance of a foreign word into a native language produce?
- She says, "when the term "gender" enters into another language, English itself enters" (p. 6). This is further complicated when a new word is devised in the second language to approximate the term gender.
- She attempts to decode the presumptions of monolingualism in the context of gender studies.



Source: Timetoast.com



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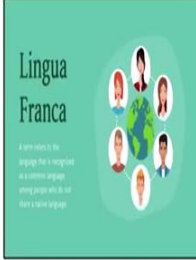
In this part of the essay, Butler looks at the question whether the challenges associated with the term 'gender' are syntactical, that is linguistic disruption. She asks, what kind of disturbance does the entrance of a foreign word into a native language produce? She says, "When the term "gender" enters into another language, English itself enters".

This is further complicated when a new word is devised in the second language to approximate the term gender. She attempts to decode the presumptions of monolingualism in the context of gender studies.


Butler provides an example for monolingualism. In countries such as the US or the UK or Australia we approach gender as a category or a concept and we tend to set aside the fact that we are referencing an English usage. So, naturally debates on gender and its conceptualizations in such countries assume that we already are operating within a monolingual field.

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- Butler argues that when we debate about what gender is or what it should be, we rarely ask whether the terms we are using are translatable.
- She says, “Anglophones invite everyone into English as the established contemporary linguistic frame or *lingua franca*” (p. 8).
- The very possibility of establishing a conceptual equivalence depends upon such a term existing in those other languages.
- Therefore, in order to establish the communicability of our theories across languages, translation or translatability is a precondition.



Source: West English Center



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Butler argues that when we debate about what gender is or what it should be, we rarely ask whether the terms we are using are translatable, because the structure of the language does not necessarily correspond to the structure of cultures. She says, “Anglophones invite everyone into English as the established contemporary linguistic frame or *lingua franca*”. The very possibility of establishing a conceptual equivalence depends upon such a term existing in those other languages.

Therefore, in order to establish the communicability of our theories across languages, translation or translatability is a precondition. From Butler’s findings, we can assert that the way we apply generalizability shows an inherent bias or misbelief that new theoretical terms are universally appropriate. Embracing translation works against this bias effectively.


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Derrida and Monolingual Obstinacy

- Butler turns her attention to Jacques Derrida, who introduced the term “monolingual obstinacy” to describe the resistance to translation.
 - Derrida introduced this concept in his monograph *Monolingualism of the Other* published in 1996.
- There he explains the presence of a conviction and a confidence that one gets when they enter into one’s own language to argue a point or to hone a description.
- Interpreting Derrida’s concept, Butler remarks, “So I not only speak this language, but this language is my way of inhabiting the world and the very essence of who I am, and the very condition of the sense I make of the world and, hence, of the sense of the world itself” (Butler, 2019, p. 9).



Jacques Derrida
Source: Betty Rojzman



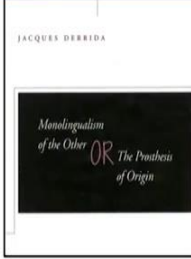
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To elucidate her ideas further Butler turns towards Jacques Derrida who had introduced the phrase “monolingual obstinacy” to describe the resistance to translation. Derrida had introduced this concept in his monograph, ‘Monolingualism of the Other,’ which was published in 1996. There he explains the presence of a conviction and a confidence that one gets when they enter into one’s own language to argue a point or to hone a description.


Interpreting Derrida’s concept, Butler remarks, and I quote “So I not only speak this language, but this language is my way of inhabiting the world and the very essence of who I am, and the very condition of the sense I make of the world, and hence, of the sense of the world itself” unquote. Derrida points to a bias where one inhabits a particular language as one inhabits one’s own home and becomes convinced that only in that language one can confidently communicate the true sense and interpretation of things.

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- Derrida deconstructs this conviction by claiming that one's language is never really one's own, but they originate from "a sphere of non-belonging" (p. 9).
- Unlike the common belief, one's own language has no element of 'possession'.
- Language has its life before we utter any word, and it always precedes us, arriving from elsewhere.
- Therefore, this monolingual misconception falsely intensifies the sense that whatever we utter or write in this language is immediately generalizable.



Monolingualism of the Other
Source: Stanford University Press




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Derrida deconstructs this conviction and claims that one's language is never really one's own, but they originate from "a sphere of non-belonging". Unlike the common belief one's own language has no element of 'possession'. Language has its life before we utter any word, and it always precedes us arriving from elsewhere. Therefore, this monolingual misconception falsely intensifies the sense that whatever we utter or write in this language is immediately generalizable.

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- Reflecting on his own linguistic background, Derrida comments:
 - "Not only am I lost, fallen, and condemned outside the French language, I have the feeling of honoring or serving all idioms, of writing the 'most' and the 'best' when I sharpen the resistance of my French, the secret 'purity' of my French . . . hence, its resistance, its relentless resistance to translation; translation into all languages". (Derrida, 1998, 56)



Writing and Difference
[in French]
Source: Le Seuil



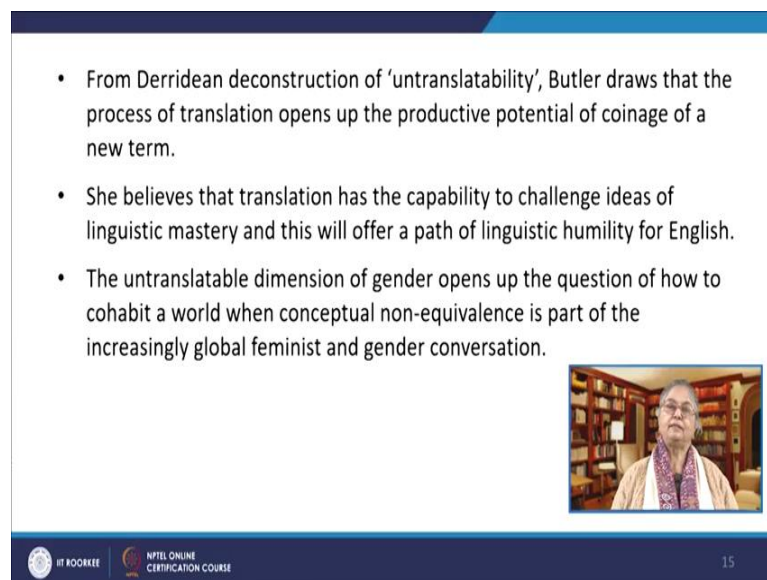
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Reflecting on his own linguistic background, Derrida comments and I quote “Not only am I lost, fallen, and condemned outside the French language, I have the feeling of honoring or serving all idioms, of writing the ‘most’ and the ‘best’ when I sharpen the resistance of my French, the secret ‘purity’ of my French; hence, its resistance, its relentless resistance to translation; translation into all languages” unquote.

Derrida has always preferred the French language to write his philosophical work and his influential texts like ‘Of Grammatology’ were translated into English by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak.

Since this book has been translated by a critic of the same significance the questions which were raised about Parsley’s translation of Beauvoir’s ‘The Second Sex’ were not raised luckily. Translation threatens a monolingualist with a loss of place and property in language, but paradoxically this disposition has always taken place and was in fact the condition of both speaking and writing according to Derrida.

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- From Derridean deconstruction of ‘untranslatability’, Butler draws that the process of translation opens up the productive potential of coinage of a new term.
- She believes that translation has the capability to challenge ideas of linguistic mastery and this will offer a path of linguistic humility for English.
- The untranslatable dimension of gender opens up the question of how to cohabit a world when conceptual non-equivalence is part of the increasingly global feminist and gender conversation.

From Derridean deconstruction of ‘untranslatability’, Butler draws that the process of translation opens up the productive potential of coinage of a new term. She believes that translation has the capability to challenge ideas of linguistic mastery and this will offer a path of linguistic humility for English. The untranslatable dimension of gender opens up the question of how to cohabit a world when conceptual non-equivalence is part of the increasingly global feminist and gender conversation.

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Global Debates on Gender

- Butler starts this section by sharing a personal experience of visiting France for an academic debate on Gender. She was of the belief that she will be discussing various areas like sexual difference, its relation to language, gender and post-structuralism, the status of universal claims and so on.
- The English word 'gender' is translated into French as *genre*.
- "Genre" in French can also refer to types of literary writing or as a function of definite and indefinite articles.
- So, the term had to be "stretched to accommodate a new set of meanings", particularly the ones Butler was familiar with from the American academic circle, for the debates to even begin.




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Butler starts a section on global debates on gender by sharing a personal experience of visiting France for an academic debate on Gender. She was of the belief that she will be discussing various areas like sexual difference, its relation to language, gender and post structuralism, the status of universal claims etcetera.

The English word 'gender' is translated into French as 'genre'. Which is the French which also refers to different types of literary writing or is a function of definite and indefinite articles. So, the term had to be "stretched to accommodate a new set of meanings", particularly the ones Butler was familiar with from the American academic circle, for the debates to even begin.

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- In France, the term “gender ideology” or “*la theorie du genre*” can cover a wide range of topics ranging from issues of migration, race, debates on religion, family, homosexuality and queer kinship.
- So, in French, the popular use of the word “gender” is abbreviated for various types of social practices and freedoms.
- Butler from her experience in France finds that, as she was struggling to debate in French, she came to understand that the political and cultural situation has a bigger role in untranslatability than grammar and semantics.
- Therefore, she states that the willingness to adopt new usage, especially from English, cannot be taken for granted.



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In France, the term “gender ideology” can cover a wide range of topics ranging from issues of migration, race, debates on religion, family, homosexuality and queer kinship. So, in French, the popular use of the word “gender” is abbreviated for various types of social practices and freedoms.

From her experience in France, Butler finds that as she was struggling to debate in French, she came to understand that the cultural and political situations have a bigger role in untranslatability than grammar and semantics. Therefore, she states that the willingness to adopt new usage especially from English, cannot be taken for granted. Because of the foreignness of the term ‘gender,’ it has been resisted and relegated in several instances.


For example, the French president Nicholas Sarkozy in pre-poll debates had argued that the theory of gender should not be taught in schools. More recently we have similar sentiments in Polish political debates. Similarly, Pope Francis who famously made efforts to make the church more inclusive said that gender is a diabolical ideology.

When Butler was writing this essay in 2019, there was a strong opposition against the teaching of gender in the schools as part of a state approved curriculum in countries like Brazil and Italy. Butler says that whatever the term gender might once have meant is for the most part quite transformed through translation and it becomes a specter, a threat to be fought and defeated.


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Gender Was Always Foreign

- Butler argues that even in English, gender is a relatively recent term – with regard to its present-day connotations.
 - It was used in the 1950s within the current usage.
- In the United States, the term “gender” was introduced by sexologists who were interested in regulating bodies that did not fit into the category of male or female.
- The term started to acquire its contemporary meaning with the publication of John Money’s Harvard dissertation on hermaphrodites in the late 1940s.



John Money
Source: John Hopkins
Medicine



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Butler argues that even in English, gender is relatively a recent term - particularly with regard to its present-day connotations. It was used in the 1950s for the first time within the current usage. In the US, the term “gender” was introduced by sexologists who were interested in regulating bodies that did not fit into the category of male or female.

The term started to acquire its contemporary meaning with the publication of John Money’s Harvard dissertation on hermaphrodites in the late 1940s. John Money was a New Zealand psychologist and sexologist known for his research into sexual identity and biology of gender. He was one of the first researchers to publish theories on the influence of societal constructs of gender and on individual formation of gender identity.


Money introduced the terms ‘gender identity’, ‘gender role’ and ‘sexual orientation’ in his writings. His dissertation on hermaphrodites in the late 1940s is crucial in this context. In reproductive biology, a hermaphrodite is an organism that has both male and female sex organs or sexual characteristics. Money was researching on behavioral techniques and surgeries that would bring intersex children into conformity with existing gender forms.

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- Money used the term “gender” to describe what a person is, considering it as an ontological status accorded to infants.
- So questions such as “What gender are you?” or “What gender is the infant?” were not really possible in English until later in the 1950s.
- In the view of sexologists, intersex children constitute “a disturbance” to be “managed” in order to realize a normal developmental trajectory for the child.
- John Money’s normative task was to remake bodies so that they fit the stereotypical norms of either male or female.



Source: Northvale Publishing



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He used the term “gender” to describe what a person is considering it is an ontological status accorded to infants. So, questions such as “What gender are you?” or “What gender is the infant?” were not really possible in English language until later in the 1950s.

In the view of sexologists, intersex children constitute “a disturbance” to be “managed” in order to realize a normal developmental trajectory for the child. Money’s normative task was to remake bodies. So, that they fit the stereotypical norms of either male or female.

Butler notes that Money never asked any questions about whether the norms were wrong or the norms were too restrictive, whether they were a source of damage, whether intersex children could come to assume a gender or a trans identity. So, according to Butler the notion of gender was first brought about in the context of a perceived failure to conform an intersex infant to the dictates of social norms.

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- In the earlier context, “gender named a problem, an errancy or deviation, a failure to actualize the developmental norm in time” (Butler, 2019, p. 14).
- The origin of the contemporary use of “gender” in the work of John Money was intervened by feminist anthropologists from the 1960s onwards.
- Their argument was that the cultural and historical process by which a sexed infant becomes a gendered being is variable. It depends on language, culture, history, and kinship.
- Feminists took up the term in order to refuse the dictum that biology was destiny.
- The motivation was political and not medical, and it troubled the normative male/female dichotomy.



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In the earlier context, “gender named a problem, an errancy or deviation, a failure to actualize the developmental norm in time”. The origin of the contemporary use of “gender” in the work of Money was intervened by feminist anthropologists from the 1960s onwards. Their argument was that the cultural and historical process by which a sexed infant becomes a gendered being is variable. It depends on language, culture, history, and kinship.

Feminists took up the term in order to refuse the dictum that biology was destiny. The motivation was political and not medical, and it troubled the normative male female dichotomy. Both Marxist Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir’s existential phenomenological feminism concurred on this view.

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Towards Livability

- Butler believes that no single language has the exclusive power to define gender or to regulate its grammatical usage.
- Every way of referring to gender has a certain contingency. She says,
 - If we understand our gender to be part of who we are, and if we seek to refine the language of who we are in a monolingual context ... to specify the identity, translation becomes all the more difficult. (p. 17)
- Therefore, both translation and identity recognition struggle in a monolingual frame.




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Butler believes that no single language has the exclusive power to define language or to regulate its grammatical usage. Every way of referring to gender has a certain contingency. And she says that, if we understand our gender to be part of who we are, and if we seek to refine the language of who we are in a monolingual context to specify the identity, translation becomes all the more difficult.

Therefore, both translation and identity recognition struggle in a monolingual frame. Butler investigates how the word ‘gender’ can have a global reach capable of comprehending complex gender relations and expressions.

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- Butler notes that in languages like Japanese, Chinese, and Korean, there is no noun-form for gender.
- There are words for women and for men, but not for the concept of gender itself.
- Furthermore, the words used for addressing men and women are inflected by social class, educational background, cultural conventions, and, even, the relation to the one who is addressed.
- Therefore, the transmission of noun-forms for gender and sexual identity raises specific problems for translation.




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Butler also notes that in languages like Japanese, Chinese and Korean there is no noun form for gender. There are words for women and for men, but not for the concept of gender itself. Furthermore, the words used for addressing men and women are inflected by social class, educational background, cultural conventions, and, even, the relation to the one who is addressed.

Therefore, the transmission of noun-forms for gender in sexual identity raises specific problems for translation. Butler believes that where gender cannot enter, it is coined, it remains a coinage and becomes an approximation of translation.

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- Certain feminists and gender theorists have debated whether there can be genders that go beyond man and woman – whether it is possible to transcend the concept of gender altogether and live in a world without gender categories at all.
- On this debate, Butler believes that:
 - We should seek to bring about a world that is more livable for the many relations to gender that exist, the many languages for gender, and the many ways of doing or living a gendered reality. (p. 18)
- There are people who ask for new lexicons, or for new ways of living outside the category of gender binary.




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Certain feminist and gender theorists have debated whether there can be genders that go beyond man and woman, whether it is possible to transcend the concept of gender altogether and live in a world without gender categories at all. On this debate, Butler believes that: we should seek to bring about a world that is more livable for the many relations to gender that exist, the many languages for gender, and the many ways of doing or living a gendered reality.

There are people who ask for new lexicons, or for new ways of living outside the gender binary. She takes the example of trans-people who may exist forcefully by appropriating their gender identity to either male or female, for them newer and different gender vocabularies are required for inhabiting the world.

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- The performative act in language by which gender is claimed, communicates the conditions of livability for the one who claims it.
- The critics of Deconstruction argue that what we call our language is not our own. The terms by which we seize ourselves may or may not be translatable, even to ourselves.
- The untranslatable may cause a break in language that calls us to attend ethically to one another across languages.
- This act of getting dispossessed together help us fathom gender with better clarity across cultures.




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The performative act in language by which gender is claimed communicates the conditions of livability for the one who claims it. The critics of deconstruction argue that what we call our language is not our own. The terms by which we seize ourselves may or may not be translatable even to ourselves. The untranslatable may cause a break in language that calls us to attend ethically to one another across languages. This act of getting dispossessed together helps us fathom gender with better clarity across cultures.

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- Thus, Butler feels that Gender introduces a problem of translation under the best of circumstances, but it can also become the source of skepticism for those who fear another imperial invasion of English.
- The issue of translation is not merely linguistic, but also political and philosophical – it is a matter of contested meanings that can exceed the boundaries of stable control and coherence.
- Translation helps us affirm the contingency of the languages we speak.
- The entry of a foreign word into one's language can destabilize many assumptions like monolingualism.



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Thus, Butler feels that ‘Gender’ introduces a problem of translation under the best of circumstances, and it can also become the source of skepticism for those who fear another imperial invasion of English. The issue of translation is not merely linguistic, but also political and philosophical - it is a matter of contested meanings that can exceed the boundaries of stable control and coherence.

Translation helps us affirm the contingencies of the languages that we speak. The entry of a foreign word into one’s language can destabilize many assumptions like monolingualism. New coinages and translation difficulties are ongoing predicaments of gender theory and telling this story of how gender enters and how it is appropriated within various linguistic contexts provides scope for new debates in gender studies.

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- Experimenting with grammar and fiddling with foreign words allow ourselves to live in a world of shared grammatical and syntactical assumptions.
- If we insist that we can only be who we are in the primary language in which we speak, then we will become defined by a resistance to translation.
- This way, we will find ourselves increasingly unable to communicate who we are across different languages.
- Butler concludes that one has to acknowledge the limitations of translation, identify the power structures and resist monolingualism to imagine a broader world which is multi-syntactical and multilingual.


Experimenting with grammar and fiddling with foreign words allow ourselves to live in a world of shared grammatical and syntactical assumptions. If we insist that we can only be what we are in the primary language in which we speak, then we will become defined by a resistance to translation. This way, we will find ourselves increasingly unable to communicate who we are across different languages.

Butler thus concludes that one has to acknowledge the limitations of translation, identify the power structures, and resist monolingualism to imagine a broader world which is multi-syntactical and multilingual. So, today we have reviewed Butler’s essay ‘Gender in Translation’. In the next module we will look critically at Butler’s major critical work

undoing gender. We will analyze how certain stereotypical notions of gender can be undone by decoding the use of language employed by the subject.

Thank you.

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