

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK (1942-)

“The Politics of Translation”

Keywords:

feminism, gendering, politics, subaltern, translation

### 1. Author information

A philosopher, feminist, literary critic and theoretician, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in Calcutta in 1942, graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1959, and left for the United States. She obtained her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa. In 1967, she began working on translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Her best known article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (in: Nelson, C., Grossberg, L. (eds) 1988. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago: Illinois University Press), concerns unsuccessful communication and lack of understanding between western and eastern women, particularly feminists. She calls herself “practical Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist,” and has devoted her life to those marginalized by the western culture, as well as terrorism in the recent days.

Most of her work focuses on excluded subaltern, especially women, who are still being marginalized despite majority groups’ claims of democracy. Thus translation is not her main field of interest. In the article concerned, however, she seems to acknowledge the importance of translation in intercultural communication. She is a translator herself. In Poland, she seems to be associated with left-wing thinking and feminist movement; a perception which does not do justice to her attitude as a syncretic academic.

### 2. Abstract

The text is arranged into four parts. Apart from the introduction, all have subtitles. Groups within the parts are cohesive and coherent. The subsequent paragraphs are interconnected,

even if not closely. There are, however, some digressions and metaphors that make the text more difficult to understand.

At the beginning, the author makes clear her understanding of language and its connection with cultural identity. The second part (“Translation as reading”) mentions three levels of the notion of language (rhetoric, logic and silence) and their importance in the translation process. The need for intimacy with the text before translating is stressed, and the consequences of the lack of it are illustrated by the example of diverse feminists translators’ works. Then, the author expresses the need for translator to be constantly improving and aware of cultural differences. She also advises against idealizing any culture, and encourages a sober, yet well-founded, critical approach to translating its texts. Learning the other person’s mother tongue is suggested as a way of truly understanding and grasping differences between people — a language is treated as a means of the expression of self.

In the next part (“Translation in general”) the author gives examples of “cultural translation”, in which the rhetoric of a particular culture plays the greatest role. The last part (“Reading as translation”) attempts to answer the question of the sublime. It also looks at the process of reading as translation.

### 3. Terminology

Source text term	Meaning	Term in Polish
deconstructionism	theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words	dekonstrukcjonizm
feminism	movements aimed at establishing and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal	feminizm

	opportunities for women	
politics	public or social ethics, that branch of moral philosophy dealing with the state or social organism as a whole	polityka
rhetoric (of a language)	artistic and persuasive values of a language, specific to it	retoryka języka
translatese	the style of language supposed to be characteristic of (bad) translations; unidiomatic language in a translation	tłumaczenie na rybkę ?

#### 4. Methodology

The author speaks mainly of her own experience, proposes her own theory, and attempts to prove it using examples of translations conforming with the theory and ones that do not conform with it. The article is rather an essay on linguistics, cultural studies and sociology with strong sound of discrimination and egocentrism criticism.

#### 5. Links with other publications on the subject

Mooney, A. et al. 2011. *Language, Society and Power, An Introduction*. Taylor & Francis eLibrary.

Spivak, G. Ch. 1988. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. London. New York: Routledge.

-----, Harasym, S. (eds.) 1990. *The Post-Colonial Critic*. London. New York: Routledge.

----- 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*. London: Harvard University Press.

## 6. Critical commentary

At first, the article seemed absolutely incomprehensible due to a rich, rather philosophical, style, an abundance of metaphors, a depth of thoughts and strangeness of the author's culture. After familiarizing myself with it, I still deem it by no means easy. However, I managed to find many reasons why even someone as uninitiated as I should read it regardless of its numerous references to the feminist movement (which some may find tiring) and examples so foreign as to be daunting. Firstly, the author does great work for the quality of translation in general; she persuades the reader to be open to foreign cultures as she deems it the only way of conveying more than just the meaning and doing a translation of the highest quality. She does not only provide a theory but supports it with examples, also of her own, which makes her trustworthy as a practising translator (even more so in the recent years). Still, there are many places in the text that require great knowledge, as the author moves swiftly between her arguments and observations making it difficult to follow her. Nevertheless (and secondly), the stake of the difficulty of the text is double. It enlightens translators who consider themselves fully formed, thus are overconfident, makes those less erudite want to catch up and direct thoughts of both groups towards the only sentence we can pronounce of ourselves: *scio me nihil scire*.

## 7. Quotation to remember the text by

“Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate” (Spivak 2000: 398).

“The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay” (Spivak 2000: 398).

## 8. References

Spivak, G. Ch. 2000. “The Politics of Translation”, in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*. London. New York: Routledge.

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