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# A Posthuman Feminist Inquiry into the Gendering Dynamics of Interpreting Technologies<sup>1</sup>

*Una investigación feminista poshumanista sobre las dinámicas de género de las tecnologías de interpretación*

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**ABSTRACT:** Adopting a posthuman feminist perspective, this paper examines how interpreting technologies development and use are shaped by, and shape, gender ideologies. Arguing that the gender-neutral portrayal of technologies in Interpreting Studies overlooks their socio-political implications, the paper sheds light on the mechanisms that reproduce their associated gender binary ideologies. By questioning these dynamics, the paper offers new ways to conceptualize it, moving beyond deterministic views of technology in the field of interpreting. Three case studies illustrate this: machine interpreting reinforcing the reason/emotion divide; machine translation perpetuating oppression of asylum-seeking women; and remote interpreting favouring masculinist biases. The paper concludes by calling for a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, linguistic, and political implications of interpreting-related technologies, urging a shift from genderless theorizations to acknowledging their gendered effects.

**KEYWORDS:** posthumanism; feminism; gender; technology; interpreting; machine translation.

**RESUMEN:** Adoptando una perspectiva feminista poshumanista, este artículo examina cómo el desarrollo y uso de las tecnologías de la interpretación están condicionados por ideologías de género. Argumentando que el retrato neutro de las tecnologías en los

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estudios de interpretación pasa por alto sus implicaciones sociopolíticas, el artículo recalca los mecanismos que reproducen la ideología de género binaria propia de estas herramientas. Al cuestionar estas dinámicas, el artículo anima a superar las visiones deterministas de la tecnología en la interpretación, apoyándose en tres estudios de caso sobre cómo la interpretación automática refuerza la división razón/emoción, cómo la traducción automática perpetúa la opresión de mujeres solicitantes de asilo, y cómo la interpretación a distancia favorece los prejuicios machistas. El trabajo concluye pidiendo una comprensión más profunda de las implicaciones sociales, culturales, lingüísticas y políticas de las tecnologías de interpretación, e insta a pasar de teorizaciones sin género a reconocer sus efectos de género.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poshumanismo; feminismo; género; tecnología; interpretación; traducción automática.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights a significant oversight in interpreting studies: the absence of critical feminist discussions concerning the gendered implications of technologies in the field. Despite the robust development of feminist translation studies, both gender issues in interpreting at large, as well as the gendered aspects of technological advancements in interpreting, remain largely unexplored (von Flotow [1998] 2016; Castro and Ergun 2018; Susam-Saraeva et al. 2023). This consideration serves as a pivotal starting point for addressing these gaps and advancing feminist epistemology within interpreting studies. The paper aims to uncover how interpreting technologies perpetuate dominant gender ideologies, specifically the gender binary, which rigidly categorizes individuals into male/female or masculinity/femininity (Irigaray 1980). In so doing, this paper aims to contribute to the evolving feminist discourse within the field, with particular attention to its techno-material implications.

Through a critical examination of the gender binary and its relations to interpreting technologies, I highlight three examples: the gendering of machine interpreting through the split of emotion/reason, the influence of remote interpreting on interpreters' employment experiences, and the socio-political implications of using machine translation in women's asylum-seeking claims. As a posthuman practice theorist and feminist, I emphasize these examples because the a-feminist background of interpreting studies essentializes developments of artificial intelligence, machine translation/interpreting, and remote ways of performing interpretations as gender-neutral. This has serious implications because it overlooks the biases, deterministic meanings, and binary-gendered modes of signification of technology in a variety of communicative, labour, and institutional contexts. Thus, I aim to unite a theorization of materiality and its gendered and gendering capacities with this representation of selected interpreting technologies.

## 2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The upcoming sections are infused with a synthesis of three key streams of posthuman feminism: those articulated by Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen

Barad. These thinkers offer distinctive onto-epistemological visions, each pertinent to the topics of this paper's exploration. Haraway's posthumanism, epitomized in her concept of «the cyborg», blurs the boundaries between organic and technological, challenging essentialist notions of human nature and binary gender roles (Haraway 1985, 1992). Braidotti's posthumanism centres on nomadic subjectivity, emphasizing fluidity and constant change beyond traditional categories, including the gender binary (Braidotti 2013, 2021). Barad's agential realism posits matter as an active participant, viewing the world as shaped by material-discursive practices and dynamic intra-actions rather than predetermined structures (Barad 2007).

Engaging with these theoretical frameworks is purposeful, as they collectively resist rigid and essentialist understandings of gender, particularly in relation to technology. They prompt us to perceive technology as an active agent in shaping the material-discursive reality of gender, challenging binary categorizations. This perspective holds significant theoretical implications, suggesting that interpreting and technology use are sociomaterial practices that perpetuate existing gender biases within communicative contexts. In other words, as Teresa de Lauretis argues, gender is also shaped by representations, discourses, and practices transmitted through technologies, regulating experiences of femininity and masculinity (or «en-gendering», de Lauretis 1987). By bridging interpreting studies and posthuman feminist theories, this approach offers novel avenues for theoretical inquiry and practice. It prompts critical questions about the affordances of feminist interpreting, the beneficiaries of marginalized knowledge streams, and the implications of interpreting technology on gender dynamics.

In the following sections, I briefly examine three analytical examples that illustrate how interpreting technology influences and perpetuates gender binaries, offering insights into the complex dynamics at play. The three examples are drawn from empirical data and online narratives, and offered as resources to advance understanding at the intersection of interpreting studies and posthumanism studies (see Bruni and Gherardi 2003). By engaging in this experimental encounter, readers are invited to explore new ways of discussing technology in interpreting discourse that transcend binary frameworks.

### 3. ANALYTICAL EXAMPLES

#### 3.1. *Gendered Bias in and of Remote Interpreting*

The first analytical example regards remote interpreting technology and practices that reflect gender-binary biases in design and purpose. Sociomaterial perspectives help us to shed light on how such gender binaries manifest in remote interpreting tools and practices (Barad 2007; Braidotti 2021; Haraway 1985, 1997). From one side, the examination of gender bias in remote interpreting reveals a masculinist undertone ingrained in both technology and practice. Wajcman (2010) highlights the historical association of men with machinery, resulting in a gender-masculine understanding of technology. Similarly, Haraway (1997) discusses how technological innovation and

efficiency have been traditionally linked with masculinity. Despite women outnumbering men in interpreting services, the design and implementation of interpreting technologies remain largely controlled by men (ATA Chronicle 2020).

From the other side, remote interpreting platforms and tools, characterized by optimization and efficiency, perpetuate masculine ideals, potentially exacerbating gender disparities. Studies also indicate that traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as flexibility and multitasking, persist in remote interpreting roles (Mahyub Rayaa and Martin 2022). Discourses around remote interpreting technologies often assume that women benefit from the flexibility they offer, yet evidence reveals how these technologies perpetuate gendered expectations and constraints, particularly in terms of work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities. For example, women's experiences of work-life balance and job satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the constraining gendered expectations imposed by remote interpreting technologies (Kitanovska-Kimovaska 2022; Boéri and Giustini 2024). Additionally, the private spaces, such as homes, where remote interpreting occurs are not inherently gender-neutral; women may face challenges in finding suitable workspaces due to caregiving and domestic responsibilities (United Nations Department of Global Communications 2021; De Meulder et al. 2021).

Therefore, the ideological portrayal of remote interpreting as offering independence and flexibility can reinforce gender stereotypes and perpetuate gendered divisions of labour, particularly if female interpreters are depicted as benefiting primarily from said flexibility due to family responsibilities (Giustini 2021, 2022). Balancing emancipatory metaphors with an understanding of the material realities of technology production and use is essential to address the complex interplay between technology, gender, and identity in remote interpreting.

### 3.2. *Machine Interpreting and Gendered Tech Marketing*

The second analytical example discusses automated speech-to-speech translation software, based on artificial intelligence. The discourse surrounding state-of-the-art interpreting technologies reflects and perpetuates binary gender norms, evident in the advertising strategies of platforms like Interprefy Aivia and KUDO AI. These advanced automated speech-to-speech translation software solutions, while offering real-time translation (that is, machine interpreting) capabilities across multiple languages, subtly reinforce stereotypical gender associations. The advertising emphasizes software traits traditionally associated with masculinity, such as efficiency and productivity, while simultaneously portraying femininity in a more subdued manner, linked with emotional engagement and inclusivity through human interpreter-mediated communication. This perpetuates the gendered division of labour and societal expectations, where men are associated with reason and technical proficiency, while women are linked with emotions and communication.

This dichotomy between machine and human interpreting reflects broader societal gender norms and the historical construction of gendered roles within technological contexts. Scholars like Silvia Federici (2004) have highlighted how capitalist discourses

manipulate gender to serve economic interests, reinforcing binary gender representations as a means of maintaining power structures. Additionally, feminist theorists such as Catherine Lutz and Lila Ed Abu-Lughod ([1990] 2017) and Sara Ahmed (2014) have challenged the reason/emotion split, arguing against the hierarchical valuation of male reason over female emotion. In critiquing the gendered implications of machine interpreting, it is essential to reject the exclusionary binary between mind and body, and by extension of male and female, emphasizing instead the inseparability of human action, cognition, and embodiment. This requires recognizing that human communication is inherently imbued with affect, challenging the notion that technology can neutralize or repress emotional aspects of interpretation. Instead, attempts to rationalize machine interpreting while emotionalizing human interpreting perpetuate false dichotomies and reinforce gender binary norms.

### 3.3. *Gender and the Technologisation of Language Aid*

Finally, the third analytical case turns to the gendered challenges faced by female asylum seekers in the UK, and how these are further amplified by the use of machine translation in the asylum-seeking process. A significant body of literature within interpreting and migration studies has addressed the challenges faced by asylum seekers, particularly concerning their interaction with technology, which is often necessary for accessing essential services and navigating the asylum process (Sabie and Ahmed 2019). Female asylum seekers, in particular, confront distinct challenges due to gender inequality, including lower levels of education, financial constraints limiting access to legal services, and reliance on familial support systems that may be exploitative (Liebig and Tronstad 2018).

In the UK, language barriers exacerbate these challenges, with women generally exhibiting lower English proficiency than men (Cheung and Phillimore 2017). Additionally, women often struggle to access language classes due to childcare responsibilities and financial limitations (Morrice et al. 2019). Furthermore, female asylum seekers are disproportionately affected by credibility assessments, which often fail to recognize gender-specific forms of persecution, such as sexual violence and domestic abuse (Stepnitz 2022). Traditionally, interpreting provision has played a crucial role in supporting asylum seekers, particularly women, by ensuring access to culturally and linguistically appropriate services in the UK (UK Home Office 2018). However, recent policy changes by the UK Home Office, such as the introduction of lengthy questionnaires in place of interpreted interviews, have raised concerns (Cuibus et al. 2024). These questionnaires require claimants to respond in English within a limited timeframe, with suggestions to use machine translation or non-professional language brokering services, disregarding the high levels of digital exclusion among female asylum seekers (UN Women 2023). The complexity of legal terminology and the burden of proof placed on claimants further exacerbate the challenges faced by female asylum seekers (York 2023). Machine translation, which is increasingly relied upon in this process, introduces additional risks, including the potential for inaccuracies and biases, particularly regarding gender-sensitive narratives (Prates et al. 2020).

By shifting resources away from interpreting services and toward machine translation-dependent processes, the UK Home Office reinforces the vulnerability of female asylum seekers (Cuibus et al. 2024). This altered sociomateriality of asylum practices sheds light on the intertwined relationship between technology and institutional power dynamics, which can perpetuate gender inequalities (Barad 2007). As a result, female asylum seekers are disproportionately burdened by the limitations and biases inherent in machine translation technologies, which highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to asylum processing that considers the gendered implications of technological interventions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In discussing the gender binary inclinations of techno-material advancements in interpreting and the discourses surrounding them, this paper agrees with Irigaray (1980) in its intention not to solidify dichotomies, but rather to challenge and redefine them through a critical exploration in interpreting studies. Therefore, the focus ought not to be on whether discussing gender binaries in and of interpreting technologies perpetuates them, but on how this dualistic thinking perpetuates exclusionary narratives.

This warrants the following question: How can we redefine meanings within interpreting's symbolic and sociomaterial realm to foster genuine inclusivity? Consequently, I invoke the affordances of feminist and posthuman theories to attend to interpreting as a space of performative acts, material mediation, and identity politics (see von Flotow [1998] 2016). De Lauretis (1987) suggests that grasping the system within which gender technologies operate fosters awareness of their cultural production, enabling us to transcend it: mutating, juxtaposing, moving beyond binaries towards multiplicity. Establishing a theoretical framework to analyse socially and materially-mediated interpreting practices, and examining the influence of (translated) discourses on gender expression within interpreting, hence holds immense potential. Yet this necessitates theoretical and methodological tools that allow for counter discourse and deconstruction, such as embracing the posthuman concept, structuring contemporary cultural representations of interpreting technologies (Braidotti 2021); exploring dissonant relations between bodily-material processes and cultural practices of interpreting (Haraway 1985, 1997); and viewing bodily-material forces of interpreting dynamically (Barad 2007).

Advancing these theoretical pathways necessitates further conceptual and empirical exploration of untapped areas of knowledge. How do we effectively examine sociomateriality—embracing the body, material allowances, and their interactions within multilingual settings? How can we deepen our scrutiny of normative gender ideologies in interpreting, and their role in reinforcing power imbalances within institutional frameworks? What ramifications do gendered technological advancements in interpreting entail, and how do they influence accessibility and inclusivity dynamics? Addressing these inquiries can enhance the social consciousness of interpreting studies, fostering

greater responsiveness to the diverse requirements of interpreters, communities, and the institutions they engage with.

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