

BOOK REVIEW

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE FEMINIZATION OF THE PROFESSION OF TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING

THESIS OF CHRISTA MARIA ZELLER

By

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The study of interpreting is clearly a "female study" as witnessed by the enrolment figures at the Institute of Translation and Interpretation of the University of Vienna where girls by far outnumber boys. In 1983/84 84.2% of the students were girls and only 15.8% were boys.

In her thesis, C.M. Zeller aims at drawing attention to the problem of feminization and also at showing up what might be the reasons for it. Why is it that so many girls are studying to become interpreters and why are so many women taking up this profession?

As language is one of the key elements in this question, the first part of the thesis deals with male/female language. Studies have shown that there is what is called "women's language" or the "female register": Women tend to speak more politely, use more euphemisms and hypercorrect forms and fewer vulgar expressions. They use more tag questions restricting the validity of their statements, etc. Both men and women may use the female register. The distinguishing feature of the female register is not, therefore, that it is used exclusively by women but rather that it embodies the female role in our society. The female register is both expressive (e.g. polite rather than direct and informative) and non-assertive. Both of these attributes are, of course, central aspects of the stereotyped feminine role in our culture.

In the second part, the author goes on to consider differences in the bringing up of girls and boys and tries to show that the use of language is always a reflection of social roles. She then discusses the myth of female superiority in languages, asking whether it is really true that women are superior to men in this respect and whether the percentage of female interpreting students is so high because women excel in verbal skills.

The third part of the thesis is probably the most interesting one for members of the interpreting profession. C.M. Zeller cites AIIC statistics that reflect the predominance of women and describes an interesting experiment that shows the consequences to be expected from the feminization of a profession.

AIIC statistics from the period 1978 to 1984 show two things: First, women make up almost two thirds of the membership; Second, the number of female interpreters increased more strongly than that of male interpreters. In the period under review the number of female interpreters rose by 364 (from 879 to 1243), while that of male interpreters rose only by 137 (from 461 to 598). This means that during those 7 years 2.5 times as many women as men joined AIIC. A statistical survey carried out by AIIC between December 1982 and March 1983 confirms the fact that more women than men

enter the profession: the number of women in the age group below 30 is almost 4 times that of men, viz. 4.3% vs. 1.1%.

Since our environment is generally dominated by men, it is to be expected that the presence of a large number of women in a given profession will have its consequences. In the United States an interesting study was carried out starting from the assumption that the mere presence of women in an occupation or specialty may have social psychological consequences, particularly on the ratings of occupational prestige and desirability obtained from observers who are considering entry into the same occupation. Two hundred students (114 male, 86 female) were asked to rate the prestige and desirability of (i.e. their own interest in) 5 high-status professions (architect, university professor, lawyer, medical doctor, scientist) after they were made to believe that a growing influx was to be expected. A control group rated the professions on the assumption that the number of women (which was generally low) would not change in the years to come. The result was that the control group attributed a high prestige to all professions, while the experimental group that was made to believe that the number of women would increase rated the same professions as less prestigious and desirable. Thus, the general findings provide some support for the hypothesis that increased proportions of women may reduce the prestige and desirability of a high-status profession. The response of men to more women entering an occupation is to view it as less valuable and to lose interest in it.

After suggesting sociological and linguistic reasons for the feminization of the interpreting profession, C.M. Zeller concluded that the high proportion of women in this field is not a sign of the emancipation of women in the academic field at all but that rather the opposite is true. By conceding higher verbal skills to women, men leave them a field in which they themselves are not interested as they consider it to be a "serving" profession. Thus, language studies and professions are viewed as a playground for women, with the resulting lack of professional recognition and ghetto formation.