

Translation of Gender-Marked Vocabulary

Summary

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The paper provides an overview of a series of translation solutions that have been employed for interlingual transfer of gender-marked vocabulary across the languages belonging to different morphological types. The paper specifically focuses on translation of nominal phrases presenting metaphoric and metonymic personifications of animate and inanimate objects as anthropomorphic characters from English as grammatical gender devoid language into Latvian and Russian as grammatical gender languages.

Key words: *gender-marked vocabulary, idealized cognitive model, gender representation, metaphoric personification, metonymic personification*

Kopsavilkums

Dzimuma aspekts tulkošanā

Rakstā tiek aplūkoti tulkošanas izaicinājumi un iespējamie risinājumi, kas ir saistīti ar dzimuma aspekta izpēti valodās, kas pieder atšķirīgām morfoloģiskām sistēmām. Pētījumā īpaša uzmanība pievērsta nominālo vārdkopu, kas apzīmē dzīvu un nedzīvu objektu metaforisku un metonīmisku personifikāciju kā antropomorfu tēlu, tulkošanai no angļu valodas (dalījums dzimtēs nepastāv) latviešu un krievu valodā (dzimtes kategorija pastāv).

Atslēgas vārdi: *dzimuma aspekts tulkošanā, idealizēts kognitīvais modelis, dzimtes reprezentācija, metaforiska personifikācija, metonīmiska personifikācija*

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Introduction

Grammatical aspects of the source and target languages are often considered secondary in the process of translation, whereas semantic aspects of the language pair are always put into the fore. Pronominal gender may potentially pose challenges in translation, especially in case of interlingual transfer of personifications of inanimate objects. Many personifications of that kind are rooted in mythology and reflect mythological perception of the universe characteristic of different linguacultures.

The paper provides an overview of a series of translation solutions that have been employed for interlingual transfer of gender-marked vocabulary across the languages belonging to different morphological types. The paper specifically focuses on translation of nominal phrases presenting metaphoric and metonymic personifications of animate and inanimate objects as anthropomorphic characters from English, which is a language devoid of grammatical gender, into Latvian and Russian, which are grammatical gender languages.

Theories of Gender: Cognitive Perspective

Gender as grammatical, semantic and cultural category has been addressed by scholars from various perspectives. Borneman [1991] studied *linguistic theory of gender* analyzing language and speech as semiotic systems of marking gender differentiation, considering the correlation between grammatical gender and semantic category of sex. Tafel [1997] investigated the effects of *gender stereotypes* on lingual consciousness [see also Dronova, Ermolenkina, et al. 2005]. Hellinger and Bußmann [2015: 8] analyze “*referential gender*”, which relates linguistic expressions to the non-linguistic reality, and “identifies a referent as “female”, “male”, or “gender-indefinite”. The recent *cognitive theory of gender* studies the processing of various stimuli by men and women as gender actualization of hidden gender meanings and stereotypes [Pykkönen, Hyönä, & van Gompel 2010].

Pykkönen et al. [2010: 127] with the reference to Oakhill et al. [2005] argue that gender stereotypes may be difficult or even impossible to suppress, “*Elaborative activation of gender stereotypes is in line with the view that during text comprehension people construct a mental model, a representation of the situation in the world described by the text. The representation includes both explicitly stated text information and implicit information activated on the basis of world knowledge.*”

Therefore, the system of gender stereotypes shapes idealized cognitive models of the represented objects that implicitly and explicitly underlie the common understanding of what is feminine and what is masculine in each linguistic and cultural community.

The category of gender is one of the linguistic phenomena that does not demonstrate a consistent patterns in different languages. Most languages have a lexical category of gender differentiating between humans and/or animate objects as being “female”, “male”, or “gender-indefinite” [see Hellinger and Bußmann 2015]. At the same time, many languages also have a grammatical category of gender that, as formulated by Motschenbacher [2010: 82], “*builds on discursive materialization that has ultimately led to the association of masculine with maleness and the feminine with femaleness*”. In these languages, all countable nouns are treated as being either masculine, feminine or gender neuter, and the category of grammatical gender frequently gives ground for metaphoric personification of inanimate objects and anthropomorphic representation of non-human objects.

Personification of inanimate or inhuman objects occurs by metaphoric meaning transfer based on the perceived similarity of certain virtue of the source and target domain. Rezanova [2011] maintains that gender metaphors imply transfer of not only physical properties between the source and target domains, but also of the spiritual qualities associated with the concepts of femininity and masculinity characteristic of each particular culture. These idealized cognitive models of gender representation often become the source for gender stereotypes dominating in various linguacultures. For example, in their comprehensive study of metaphorical nominations based on gender stereotypes in the Russian language, Rezanova and Khlebnikova [2015: 275] identify the following most common characteristics used as a vehicle in personification of inanimate and inhuman objects ascribing them anthropomorphic features associated with the notions of maleness and femaleness: appearance; traits of character or behavior; intellectual ability; and social role. These perceived similarities in appearance

or features of character are often culture-bound and are rooted in mythology and folklore of the respective linguacultures, still, often implicitly, having an impact on the worldview of the language users.

The issue how the presence or absence of grammatical category of gender may influence the process of personification of inanimate or inhuman objects has been studied by cognitive linguists considering the premises of the theory of linguistic relativity. In their research, Sato and Athanasopoulos [2018] demonstrate that grammatical aspects of language have a major impact on our perception of reality, *“Studies on the impact of grammatical gender on the perception of conceptual gender support hypothesis of linguistic relativity showing the way we interpret reality and make evaluative judgments of perceptual stimuli very much depends on the grammatical categories of the languages we use.”*

Studying gender-marked metaphors used in the process of personification of inanimate objects, Rezanova et al. [2014: 285] conclude, *“[...] grammatical gender is a powerful factor that influences the referential choice of gender-marked metaphors. People tend to make a gender-sex agreement even when there is no obvious grammatical need to do so. This finding seems to be in line with the linguistic relativity hypothesis.”* Thus, the users of languages that possess grammatical category of gender often perceive non-human objects as being gender-marked, although this markedness is fully arbitrary and does not have any referential grounding in the extra-linguistic reality.

Translation of Gender-Marked Vocabulary

In the field of translation studies, gender has been analyzed from multiple perspectives, e.g. as a cultural reflection of human sex differentiation [Channa 1995], and currently as an aspect of feminist translation [von Flotow 1991; Chamberlain 2004].

The problems associated with translation of gender-marked lexis across the languages with different systems of gender representation were profoundly discussed by R. Jakobson [1959 (2000)]. Referring to Boas, Jakobson notes that, *“[...] the grammatical pattern of a language (as opposed to its lexical stock) determines those aspects of each experience that must be expressed in the given language”* [Jakobson 1959 (2000): 264]. In other words, if a certain category does not exist in the source language but it must be represented in the target language, the translator will have to add information that is not explicitly present in the source text, thus taking certain risks, for example, in translation of Shakespeare sonnets into Russian, translators had to make choices regarding whether the author addressed a male or female addressee. The choices had to be made because the system of the Russian verb implies gender-markedness of the past verb forms.

Both the Latvian and Russian languages possess grammatical category of gender; all nouns in singular may be categorized as either feminine or masculine in Latvian and as either feminine, masculine or neuter in Russian. Whereas English is a language devoid of grammatical category of gender, gender is either aligned with sex and thus constitutes an element of the lexical meaning of a linguistic item (e.g. man-woman, fox-vixen, stallion-mare), or is conventionally ascribed to a limited number of inanimate objects with no particular conceptual grounding (e.g. ship).

A number of researchers addressed the issue whether the presence of the grammatical category of gender may influence perception of reality and formation of

idealized cognitive models that underlie interpretation of this reality. Studying the differences in gender marking in French and German, Sato et al. [2016] analyzed how linguistic encoding of gender in different languages shapes and shifts gender representations. They maintain that “*Grammatical gender languages work in a top-down manner, constraining their users to consistently monitor gender both on grammatical and semantic levels. [...] Processing a specific language therefore imposes speakers to focus on particular concepts that are grammaticized within its structure, resulting in language-bound representations*” [Sato et al. 2016: 3].

Considering the premises of the theory of linguistic relativity addressed above, the authors of the paper maintain that the gender-related challenges in translation may be two-fold. First, translators have to take into consideration that translating from a grammatical gender devoid language to a grammatical gender language, certain mismatch in gender representation is unavoidable, because grammatical structure of the latter may influence the semantic representation of meaning. Secondly, potential hurdles may occur if translation is performed across grammatical gender languages that grammaticize gender differently, and gender grammaticization has a potential impact on the semantic meaning of certain linguistic items. This impact is pronounced when certain inanimate object are personified, either metaphorically, or if this personification is conditioned by historical reasons (folklore, mythology, conventional use, etc.).

For example, in various linguacultures, *the Sun* and *the Moon* are frequently personified as stereotypical or rather archetypical human couple, this perception is typical in conceptualizing the organization of universe, which is deeply rooted in culture and mythology. However, there is no consistency in sex-gender distribution within a couple – in some languages *the Sun* is personified as a female character and *the Moon* – as a male (e.g. German, Latvian), whereas in other languages it is vice versa (e.g. Greek, Italian, Russian, French, Spanish). Considering these differences in gender representation, Hellinger and Bußmann [2015: 3] state, “*From a semantic perspective, a major issue was the question as to whether the classification of nouns in a language follows semantic principles rather than being arbitrary. While gender assignment in the field of personal nouns is at least partially non-arbitrary, the classification of inanimate nouns, e.g. words denoting celestial bodies, varies across languages.*”

Translation of gender-marked personifications based on either metaphoric or metonymic meaning transfer from the languages devoid of grammatical gender into the languages that possess this category may pose a challenge in translation. This challenge may be more or less significant depending on the genre of the translated text and on the role of gender-markedness in ensuring relevance in translation.

U. Eco [2001] considered this issue as potential translation problem in translation of books for children, referring to Italian translation of the German book *Struwwelpeter* by Heinrich Hoffmann. Eco argued that although a translator can easily change the gender of *the Sun* and *the Moon*, changing their roles as husband and wife, s/he cannot change the classical pictorial representation of this couple where *Mrs. Sun* invited her husband *Mr. Moon* for dinner. Figure 1 features the illustration from the classic 1845 edition of this book.



Fig 1. Illustration from Struwwelpeter, reprint.

At the same time, translating texts that perform mainly informative function, gender representation in translation may be seen as a minor issue. Whether *the Wall Street* or *the White House* are feminine or masculine translating an economic text from English into Russian may seem irrelevant for special meaning transfer, but it certainly has an impact on producing a reader friendly, coherent and cohesive text.

Nevertheless, translating metonymic personifications from English into Russian, a translator frequently faces the dilemma connected with the choice of gender marker in Russian and in Latvian when it is absent in English. For example, as mentioned previously, gender markedness in Russian is an essential grammatical category of the past tense of a verb. Thus, translating such well-known metonymies as *the White House*, *the Downing Street*, *Brussels*, *Washington*, *Moscow*, etc., a translator is *obliged* to decide on the respective gender marker:

(1) **EN:** the Downing Street has announced the new Brexit strategy

RU: Даунинг Стрит **сообщил** (masculine) or **сообщила** (feminine) о новой стратегии по Брекзиту.

Normally, the rationale behind this choice is the grammatical gender of the head of the noun phrase or the noun itself. *Street* (улица) in Russian is feminine, thus most frequently metonymies having *street* as a head (*the Wall Street*, *the Downing Street*) are translated using feminine gender markers in Russian. Into the Latvian language *the Downing Street* is transferred as the transcribed solid compound, i.e. *Dauningstrīta* (feminine). The same strategy is employed transferring metonymies based on city names – *Washington*, *Moscow*, *London*, etc. They are normally translated as either masculine or feminine nouns depending on the conventional gender representation of

cities in both Russian – *Washington* (Вашингтон), *London* (Лондон) – masculine, *Moscow* (Москва) – feminine; and Latvian – *Washington* (Vašingtona), *London* (Londona), *Moscow* (Maskava) – feminine. At the same time, in Russian a translator may employ a different strategy and relatively easily avoid transfer of gender markedness, for example, by using plural verb form or introducing an impersonal active construction:

(2) **EN:** the Downing Street has announced the new Brexit strategy

RU: С Даунинг Стрит **сообщили** (plural, gender unmarked) о принятии новой стратегии по Брекзиту.

Thus, as it has been demonstrated, the translator may either avoid introducing gender markers in translation or use them as prescribed by the grammatical system of the target language.

Important and complicated translator decision should be made if gender representation is an essential component of the lexical meaning of the word, and this meaning does match in the source and target languages. The problem may be aggravated by the fact that some traditionally personified inanimate objects have established visual images within certain linguacultures and thus the issue of sex identity is not just the matter of grammar or semantic, but the matter of conventional world view. Visualization of the anthropomorphic images of *the Sun* and *Moon* are good examples to this point, along with the visual representation of *Death* (*Grim Reaper* (male) in English and old woman with a scythe – *Nāve*, *Смерть* (female) in Latvian and Russian, respectively. Thus, translating across the languages with different traditions of symbolic gender representation, a translator should either choose between content precision and retain the sex identity of the personified character, at the same time making the processing for the target reader more complicated, or, meeting the expectations of the target audience, to radically change authorial intention.

Translation of the series of fantasy books by Terry Pratchett *Discworld* may serve a good illustration to this statement. *Grim Reaper* is character of many books in the series and as prescribed by the traditions of the British culture it is a male character. In translation of the book series into Russian, the translator opted for content faithfulness, and the character is featured in the target text as *Мрачный Жнец* (a calque from *Grim Reaper*). It can be argued that in Latvian the translators have employed the same strategy and created the character of *Drūmais Pļāvējs* (a calque from *Grim Reaper*).

However, in some cases, translators consider the expectations and the existing word knowledge of the target readers to be more important than the intentions of the source text author. It is often the case in translation of the books for children, where anthropomorphic animals act as protagonists and their sex identity is part of their image. For example, in translation of two children books, namely, the *Jungle Book* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*, into both Latvian and Russian, translators opted to change the sex of two important characters – *Bagheera* and *Owl*. In Latvian, the characters are featured as *pantera Bagira* and *Pūce*, in Russian – *пантера Багира* and *Сова*, two female characters respectively, whereas in English both are male.

- (3) **EN:** Everybody knew Bagheera, and nobody cared to cross his path; for he was as cunning as Tabaqui, as bold as the wild buffalo, and as reckless as the wounded elephant. But he had a voice as soft as wild honey dripping from a tree, and a skin softer than down. (R. Kipling. The Jungle Book)

LV: Visi pazina Bagiru, un neviens nedrošinātos stāties viņai ceļā, jo viņa bija tikpat viltīga kā Tabakijs, tikpat spēcīga kā bifelis un tikpat nevaldāma kā ievainots zilonis. Taču balss viņai bija tik salda kā meža medus, kas pil no koka, un spalva mīkstākā par pūkām.

RU: Все знали Багиру и все боялись становиться ей поперек дороги, потому что она была хитра, как Табаки, мужественна, как дикий буйвол, неудержима, как раненый слон. Тем не менее, ее голос звучал мягко, точно звук падающих с дерева капель дикого меда, а ее шерсть была нежнее лебяжьего пуха.

- (4) **EN:** [...] for Owl, wise though he was in many ways, able to read and write and spell his own name WOL, yet somehow went all to pieces over delicate words like MEASLES and BUTTEREDTOAST. (Winnie-the-Pooh, A.A. Milne)

LV: Kas attiecās uz pašu Pūci, tad viņas galva gan bija dažādu gudrību pilna, viņa prata lasīt un uzrakstīt savu vārdu Pūce, bet nekādi netika galā ar tik sarežģītiem vārdiem kā Masalas vai Sviestmaizīte.

RU: Даже Сова, хотя она была очень-очень умная и умела читать и даже подписывать свое имя - Сава, и то не сумела бы правильно написать такие трудные слова.

Taking into consideration that “*readers automatically activate gender-associated information when reading gender stereotypical human referent role nouns*” [Sato et al. 2016: 16], the translators had to adapt representation of the characters in question not to violate the grammatical norms of the target languages. The principle of linguistic relativity is at work – although the speakers of Latvian and Russian empirically know that owls and panthers in nature may be both male and female, they subconsciously ascribe these species feminine traits. Moreover, Bagheera ends with *–a*, and if transcribed in Latvian and Russian, the proper noun would be classified as belonging to the 1st declination in Russian, which with very few exceptions groups feminine nouns, and the 4th declination in Latvian. Thus, a feminine common noun in conjunction with a feminine proper noun cannot denote a male character. It may be also pointed out that in Russian panthers belong to a generic class of Big Cats (RU: *большие кошки*), where cats are seen as female. Therefore, these translation decisions seem to be justified in the given context because translators seem to have taken into consideration idealized cognitive models underlying representations of anthropomorphic animals of the target rather than the source language.

Such examples are prolific, especially in the children’s literature (e.g. *Slow-Solid Tortoise* (male) translated into Russian as *Чепенaxa* (female); *Cat who walked by himself* (male) – *Кошка, которая гуляла сама по себе* (female), etc.) thus, it may be concluded that gender markedness in translation remains a topical issue for a translator, calling for creative solutions and understanding of the processes of gender representation in the working languages.

Concluding Remarks

Translation of gender marked vocabulary may pose a challenge in translation across the grammatical gender languages and languages devoid of grammatical gender. These challenges may be more or less significant depending on the genre of the translated text and on the role of gender-markedness in ensuring relevance in translation. In some cases, the differences in gender representation between the source and target language will not be seen as important, whereas in translation of poetry, expressive prose and books for children these differences may become a major obstacle in ensuring communicative purpose of the translated text.

The impact of the presence or absence of the grammatical gender on the perception of reality by the speakers of different languages deserves further analysis in view of the hypothesis of linguistic relativity with an aim to consider whether this perception is changing under the influence of internal or external governing factors, e.g. under the influence of major languages, especially English, being devoid of this category.

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