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Sex and gender representation in translation: Unveiling the complications

Abstract: The paper discusses a number of difficulties connected with translating gendered vocabulary which, for the limited purpose of this discussion, is understood as either vocabulary that allows the translator to identify the sex of a referent or all other vocabulary that, in one way or another, relates to gender as a cultural concept. The presentation, based on students' translations as well as authentic examples from contemporary literature collected by the author, is primarily intended for translation trainees who frequently underestimate the problems they will one day be obliged to resolve in confrontation with this particular segment of the lexicon. Other than that, it may be of use to fellow translation instructors, especially those interested in authentic material that they could employ to illustrate how the two concepts, translation and gender, intersect. The illustrative material presented in the paper represents English and Polish. From this, it follows that it is pertinent to any discussion of rendering gender while translating from an analytic to an inflectional language. Its novelty resides in the fact that it showcases issues that are often ignored in current discussions of translation and gender, but are nevertheless important from the point of view of everyday translation practice.

Key words: sex, gender, translation, translation error, gender and culture

1. The enigma of a referent's sex

Rendering information on the sex of a fictional character should not be *that* complicated. After all, the only thing a translator from English will have to do is, first, decode this information from gendered lexemes (e.g., a female given name such as *Mary* or a female pronoun *she*) and, next, encode it in the target language by means of those linguistic elements that this language uses as indicators of gender.[1] A glimpse into

[1] I assumed that readers are familiar with the common senses of the terms *sex* and *gender* relevant for this study, namely sex as all biological attributes that allow for the classification of a newborn

the Polish translation of *Just One Look* by Harlan Coben reveals that such vocabulary may, however, cause problems. When the Polish translator was rendering the first two passages depicting one of the novel's minor characters, detective Indira Khariwalla. he employed a significant number of female verb (e.g. *był-a*$_{[F]}$; *pochodził-a*$_{[F]}$; Eng. 'was'; 'came'; p. 205) and adjective endings (e.g. *mał-a*$_{[F]}$; *szczupł-a*$_{[F]}$; Eng. 'small'; 'lean'; p. 205) as well as a number of feminine pronouns (*ona*; *jej*, Eng. 'she'; 'her', p. 278) that leave no doubt that this is a female character:

> Indira Khariwalla był**a** mał**a** i szczupł**a**. Jej ciemna skóra – gdyż, zgodnie z tym, co sugerowało nazwisko, pochodził**a** z Indii, a konkretnie z Bombaju – zaczęła już twardnieć i marszczyć się. Indira nadal był**a** atrakcyjn**a**, lecz nie tą kusicielską egzotyczną urodą jak kiedyś. (p. 205)

However, in a subsequent passage featuring this character, on page 330, the translator improperly declined a Polish adjective-noun combination, *prywatn-y*$_{[M]}$ *detektyw* $_{[M \& F]}$ (Eng. 'private detective'). Instead of using female endings (*prywatnej* $_{[F]}$ *detektyw* $_{[F]}$) that would identify Indira as a female detective, he used *prywatn-ego*$_{[M]}$ *detektyw-a*$_{[M]}$ that suggest a male character:

> Scott Duncan zbladł.
> – Co tu się dzieje, do diabła?
> – To proste, panie Duncan. – Perlmutter odwrócił się twarzą do niego. – Rocky Conwell pracował dla Indiry Khariwalli, prywatn**ego** detektyw**a**, któr**ego** pan wynajął. (p. 330)

Coben's novel is not the only example that Polish crime fiction fans could cite to demonstrate that rendering information concerning a character's sex may cause problems even for professional, experienced translators. An identical mistake concerning an incorrect allocation of a gendered ending has been spotted in the Polish translation of *Bad Luck and Trouble* by Lee Child. Though the female character, Frances Neagley, who figures prominently in the initial chapters of the novel, is consistently described in a way that identifies her as a female, when the reader comes across a scene in which Frances informs her partner that she has already ordered her assistant to try to obtain the listed phone numbers they need, the translator has used a masculine verb ending, *-em* (*zlecił-em*$_{[M]}$; Eng. 'I ordered'):

> – Nie masz numerów ich prywatnych telefonów? – zapytał.
> Mają zastrzeżone. Można się było tego spodziewać. Też mam zastrzeżony. Zdobycie tych numerów zlecił**em** asystentowi. W dzisiejszych czasach nie jest to takie proste. Komputery firm telefonicznych mają coraz lepsze zabezpieczania. (p. 42)

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as either a man or a woman and gender as the socially constructed roles/behaviours of women and men. That said, one may also come across sentences such as the one above in which the two are used interchangeably, and this also concerns scholarly literature (Torgrimson & Minson, 2005). Needless to say, the word *gender* also refers to one of the categories (masculine, feminine and neuter) into which words are divided in many languages. In the article all three senses are applied.

Lee Child's earlier novel from the Jack Reacher series, *The Visitor*, constitutes another example of how easy it is for a Polish translator to stumble upon (Polish) gendered endings that in this language mark a character as either a man or a woman. This particular novel features twenty eight fragments which present a mysterious narrator who often engages in internal, second-person monologues, evidently trying to reassure him- or herself that he or she has planned everything perfectly and, consequently, the police will never discover his or her identity. In 27 out of these 28 passages, the masculine verb and adjective endings (e.g., *-eś*, as in *zaplanował-eś*$_{[M]}$; Eng. 'you planned') imply that the narrator is a man. However, in the eighth fragment, which falls more or less in the middle of the book on page 224, a feminine verb ending *-aś* has been used (*A im bardziej myślisz, tym większą masz pewność, że tym razem czegoś nie zrobił-aś*$_{[F]}$!),[2] creating a passage that, as described by Brooks (2021, para. 1) could be evaluated as "at best, frustrating to read":

> Może tym razem coś ci umknęło? Zaczynasz się tego strasznie bać. Nabierasz pewności, Ze oczywiście, musiało umknąć. Myślisz, cały czas myślisz. A im bardziej myślisz, tym większą masz pewność, że tym razem czegoś nie zrobi**łaś**! (p. 224)

Alina Busila, an experienced translation trainer who, by her own admission, "had the opportunity to observe the most diverse and sophisticated translation mistakes made by students" (Busila, 2018, para. 1), offers a partial explanation concerning reasons for which translation errors of this kind occur. As she argues, although statistics claim that the average workload for translators is eight pages per day, it is also "well known that the reality exceeds the standard volume" (Busila, 2018, para. 8). Other factors that may also be at play include lack of proofreaders that the publishers may be unwilling to hire, making the correction of errors the sole responsibility of the translator. Genre considerations may also play a role, with lower standards used in the case of popular fiction as opposed to high literature. Consequently, audiences are presented with material that, when assessed in terms of the translator's performance, "reflects sloppiness [and] lack of respect for the reader" (Brooks, 2021, para. 1) and that certainly does not enhance his or her credibility.

Ignoring contextual clues is another common reason why gendered vocabulary may be rendered incorrectly. As classroom experience dictates, students tend to pay more attention to clues that precede a given lexical item, simultaneously failing to take note of those which come after it. An example provided by a colleague of mine illustrates this well. As he has told me, all groups he was teaching and which had to translate a short passage from Tess Gerritsen's novel *The Apprentice* notoriously mistranslated a sentence featuring the English noun *reporter* which they rendered by means of Polish *reporter-a*$_{[M]}$ instead of *reporter-ki*$_{[F]}$. The problematic

[2] The original passage reads as follows: "Maybe this time you forgot. You become terribly afraid about it. You become sure you forgot. You think hard. And the more you think about it, the more you're sure you didn't do it yourself."

fragment, which I decided to find for this article, occurs on page 25 of the original and reads *See*, *there was this asshole reporter who talked her way past me just a few minutes ago,* with the feminine pronoun *her* following the noun in question.[3] The case additionally shows what may happen when one tends to treat a sentence as a collection of words rather than a translation unit in its own right, to be read in its entirety before it gets translated.

Fortunately for human translators, machine translation tools such as Google Translate may also have problems with correctly rendering the sex of a referent. As demonstrated by Kaiser-Bril from AlgorithmWatch, such a danger concerns first and foremost vocabulary for notions that do not fit with stereotypes. To substantiate, while Google Translate reads the sex of the referent when primed with such stereotypically female occupational titles as, say, Polish *sprzątaczka* (Eng. 'cleaning lady', it stumbles upon professions in which the participation of women is still a relatively recent phenomenon. Consequently, it may render a German *vier Historikerinnen und Historiker* (Eng. 'four female and male historians') as a Spanish *cuatro historiadores* (Eng. four male historians). The tests conducted by Kaiser-Bril (2020) suggest quite strongly that translation trainees ought to be sensitized to such inadequacies, especially as the use of this and other translation tools has increased substantially.[4]

2. Trapped in a conundrum with no ideal solution

If we asked Anglophone readers to process the opening lines from Lee Child's *The Visitor*, and then checked with them who they see, in their mind's eye, while reading this fragment, chances are that their first, intuitive answer would be that the individual in question, the narrator, is a man. The opening passage contains, namely, a significant number of lexemes which most of us still associate with masculinity: references to money, stock markets, knowledge and power as well as to "masculine" sports such as football or baseball.[5] Polish students I gave this

[3] The fragment's Polish translation by Zygmunt Halka correctly presents this character as a female reporter: "To przez tę wścibską **reporterkę**, która tak się mądrzyła, że pozwoliłem jej przejść przed paroma minutami."

[4] Readers interested in research on gender-bias in machine translation may additionally use Farkas and Németh (2022). Translation trainers who are interested in more illustrative material that shows what gender-related difficulties may arise for translators switching between synthetic and analytic languages may turn to Nissen (2002) or Stroińska, Drzazga and Kurowska (2013). I am grateful to one of the reviewers for drawing my attention to these three sources and their other insightful comments.

[5] The fragment, which opens the novel, reads as follows: "People say that knowledge is power. The more knowledge, the more power. Suppose you knew the winning numbers for the lottery? All of them? Not guessed them, not dreamed them, but really knew them? What would you do? You would run to the store. You would mark those numbers on the play card. And you would win. Same for the stock market. Suppose you really knew what was going to go way up? You're not talking

English fragment to also fell for the masculine imagery, partly because of its universal character and partly due to the absence of gendered endings that would help them determine the sex of the referent.

Upon a moment of reflection, both English-speaking and Polish readers would, however, have to admit that the speaker could just as probably be a woman. After all, as they might reason, there *are* some women out there who are interested in football and who seem as obsessed with power and control as this mysterious narrator addressing them seems to be. When this individual next starts talking about his or her experiences with the police ("You know more than most people about how the cops work. You've seen them on duty, many times, sometimes close-up. You know what they look for."), there is also a fifty-fifty chance that it might be a female: readers know from experience that this occupational area is no longer reserved for men.

The subsequent twenty seven passages during which the mysterious narrator reappears would still not allow the English-speaking readers to form any decisive conclusions concerning his or her sexual identity. As commonly known, English lost most of its masculine/feminine/neuter distinction in Middle English, i.e. between 1100 and 1500 (Blake, 2008, p. 72).[6] Consequently, when the character is reassuring him- or herself that he or she has taken care of every detail by saying *you planned everything*, there is nothing in this utterance (or any other similar utterances, for that matter) that would allow the English reader to pronounce the character, with one hundred percent certainty, either a man or a woman. The same is true for other gender-opaque words, such as *man* or *he*, interspersed through these passages of various lengths: both, as commonly known, can be used generically, meaning that while processing these passages it is impossible to make any rational decisions concerning the sex of the referent.

Things are a bit different for the reader of the book's Polish translation. While processing the English prologue, the reader will find no indications of what the narrator's sex might be.[7] While reading passages in which the English verbs in the

about a hunch or a gut feeling. You're not talking about a trend or a percentage game or a whisper or a tip. You're talking about knowledge. Real, hard knowledge. Suppose you had it? What would you do? You would call your broker. You would buy. Then later you'd sell, and you'd be rich. Same for basketball, same for the horses, whatever. Football, hockey, next year's World Series, any kind of sports at all, if you could predict the future, you'd be home free. No question. Same for the Oscars, same for the Nobel prize, same for the first snowfall of winter. Same for anything."

[6] Trainees who need to refresh their knowledge of analytic and synthetic languages I am referring to in the Abstract may start with Crystal (1995, p. 293), who explains that these days English has only few inflectional endings which means that grammatical relationships must be "shown through the use of word order." In synthetic or inflectional languages such as Latin or Polish, the relationships are expressed by the use of inflectional endings which "express several grammatical meanings at once".

[7] When we go over the Polish translation of the prologue (p. 7) we can see that there are some masculine verb or adjective endings (e.g. *zgadywałeś*, *bogaty*), but here the narrator is addressing the reader, not talking about him- or herself: "Mówi się, że wiedza to potęga. Im więcej wiedzy,

present tense have been translated, the reader will, again, be witnessing successful attempts by the Polish translator to hide the individual's sexual identity, as in the Polish language present tense forms such as *widzisz* (Eng. 'you can see') refer to people of either sex. A problem arises when a translator has to render passages in which the narrator is addressing him- or herself and that contain past tense forms such as *you planned*, as at this moment it will have to be decided if they should be appended with masculine (e.g., *zaplanował-eś*) or feminine (*zaplanował-aś*) endings. Adjectives pose a similar problem, the English *you are not stupid* translatable, depending on whether it is a man or a woman, as *nie jesteś głup-i* or *nie jesteś głup-ia*.

A translator into Polish is, thus, caught in a double bind between endings that will unequivocally mark the narrator as a man or a woman, with neither of the solutions being optimal. If feminine endings are chosen, the narrator's (true) identity will be revealed too soon. If, conversely, masculine endings are chosen, the narrator's identity will remain concealed till the very last scene, which is consistent with how the author has planned it.

The problem is that while using masculine endings, the translator has made the narrator, Julia Lamarr, talk like no woman would ever talk. Polish readers know that women who engage in internal monologues during which they are trying to convince themselves that they are not stupid will always say *nie jesteś głupia*$_{[F]}$ and not *nie jesteś głupi*$_{[M]}$. By the same token, if they want to reassure themselves by quietly repeating to themselves that they had planned everything, they will say *wszystko zaplanował-aś*$_{[F]}$ and not *wszystko zaplanował-eś*$_{[M]}$. Consequently, the masculine endings, if chosen, will give the Polish translator this uncomfortable feeling that all throughout the novel he is actually making this character talk in a highly unnatural way. Paraphrasing would not be a good solution either: the number of fragments containing English past tense forms or adjectives is so high that resorting to circumlocutions would produce an even more unnaturally sounding text.

Unfortunately, the difficulties connected with translating gendered vocabulary do not end here. In what follows, two additional sources of problems will be discussed, namely, the situation of a translator who knows that the translated fragment will never have the same associations for the target and the source reader and in section four, gendered vocabulary as an important element of a character's identity and the risks a novice translator faces when choosing the wrong variant.

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tym więcej potęgi. Załóżmy, że znasz wygrywające numery loterii. Tak, wszystkie. Ne zgadywał**eś**, nie przyśniły ci się, po prostu wiesz, które wygrają. Co robisz? Biegniesz zgrać, nie? Skreślasz je i, oczywiście, wygrywasz. To samo jeśli chodzi o akcje. Załóżmy, ze wiesz, co pójdzie w górę. Nie chodzi o przeczucie, o wewnętrzne przekonanie. Nie mówimy o trendach, procentach, plotkach, cynku. Nie, mówimy o wiedzy! Prawdziwej, solidnej wiedzy. Powiedzmy, że masz tą wiedzę. Jak ją wykorzystujesz? Czy to nie oczywiste? Dzwonisz do maklera. Kupujesz. Po jakimś czasie sprzedajesz i jesteś bogat**y**."

3. Translation, gender, culture

Translator trainees are typically told that, in order to translate well, one (minimally) needs to be conversant with the two languages as well as the culture in which a text has originated. Upon closer inspection, they eventually discover that this familiarity with the source culture may, in many cases, boil down to their ability to predict all possible associations the reader of the original may have. Having accomplished that, a translator faces a difficult decision. Knowing that words in translation will not connote the same thing for the target reader, he or she must decide whether and how much to explain or, conversely, leave unsaid, accepting the unavoidable, i.e. that, more often than not, it may not be possible to produce a true equivalent of the passage in question, a passage that will provide the source and the target reader with access to the same set of associations.

Gender-related vocabulary can, again, serve as a good illustration of this issue. When I asked a group of my English- and German-speaking friends (nine individuals altogether) to read a short passage from another novel by Lee Child, *Without Fail*, their conclusions concerning what is actually happening in this short dialogue were surprisingly uniform. However, when I gave the same passage to a group of 26 students I was teaching translation in the winter semester of 2022, their interpretation was also uniform, but differed significantly from what the first group of respondents has told me.

In the passage I used, a young Secret Service agent, M. E. Froelich, initially refuses to provide her superior, Stuyvesant, with a piece of information he requests.[8] She eventually changes her mind: Stuyvesant has reformulated his question, this time using a gender inclusive *person* instead of a generic *he*. The interpretation forwarded by my foreign interlocutors was that Froelich seems to be one of these progressive young American women who insist that their co-workers, irrespective of rank, avoid linguistic sexism. In turn, Polish students' interpretation referred to some unspecified procedures Froelich was probably obliged to follow and that require the agents to keep some information hidden even from their immediate superiors. Anyone who is familiar with this particular novel knows that it is the first interpretation that is correct. Froelich's "obsession" with inclusive language is depicted in a considerable number of passages in which she corrects her male and female interlocutors who, out of habit, use genera, and this obsession becomes her trademark, something she will be fondly remembered for by her friends and co-workers after she has been killed while on duty.

[8] The passage used reads as follows: "'I want an outsider to do it,' Froelich said. Stuyvesant […] ran his fingers along the spine and the adjacent edge […]. 'You think that's a good idea?' he asked. Froelich said nothing. 'I suppose you've got somebody in mind?' he asked. 'An excellent prospect.' 'Who?' Froelich shook her head. 'You should stay outside the loop,' she said. 'Better that way.' 'Was he recommended?' 'Or she.' Stuyvesant nodded again. The modern world. 'Was the person you have in mind recommended?'"

Experienced translator trainers who have been confronted with a similar inability on the part of their classes to correctly read the meaning of a passage in accordance with author's intentions, may be interested in one more example, which is indicative of the same pattern. This example, again from Lee Child's *Gone Tomorrow* features the protagonist of his series travelling on a New York subway. In the passage in question (p. 8), Child describes how the public became angry with the New York subway authorities on account of them having the emergency instructions read by male speakers, while all other information was recorded by female speakers.[9] While readers in countries in which attempts to remove linguistic sexism have been particularly intense for the past couple of decades (see e.g. Pauwels, 2003) do not require an explanation as to what was so controversial about this decision, readers of the translated versions who represent milieus in which ideas concerning the mutual relation between language and the continuing discrimination of women are still relatively unknown may fail to understand what the author is driving at. This in turn puts a translator before a difficult decision, namely whether to explain, e.g. by means of a footnote, passages whose interpretation requires knowledge that has become a firm element of the source society's collective identity or, conversely, withdraw, accepting the unavoidable losses that will occur.

While deciding on how much to leave unsaid, translators sometimes have to remember that references to cultural events that are easy to decipher for the source reader and mean nothing for the target reader may also constitute an important element of a person's characteristics. When the Polish translator of Tess Gerritsen's *The Apprentice* decided to omit the phrase *bra-burning shit* from the lines spoken by detective Vince Korsak, an important element of Korsak's identity became lost for the Polish reader.[10] The "original" Vince Korsak, thanks to this phrase, is depicted as man who has come of age before the 1968 Atlanta Miss America protest, which, as a historical event, became one of the catchphrases of the second-wave feminism. This in turn means that he has read about the protest in newspapers or watched it on television – historical evidence confirms that the movement garnered considerable media attention and, for days to come, was commented upon by virtually all media outlets across the United States. Readers of the original

[9] The original fragment reads as follows: "The car's number was 7622. […] I knew it could run two hundred thousand miles without major attention. I knew its automated announcement system gave instructions in a man's voice and information in a woman's, which was claimed to be a coincidence but was really because the transportation chiefs believed such a division of labour was psychologically compelling."

[10] In the original fragment the phrase is part of a short dialogue between Korsak and his partner, detective Jane Rizzoli, who is upset by the sexist remark Korsak has just made. The passage reads as follows: "Korsak laughed, snorting out a lungful of smoke. 'Any grown man who gets off powder-puffing dead ladies is gonna squeal like a girl, no matter what I do.' 'How, exactly, do girls squeal?' she countered in irritation. Kind of like boys do?''Aw, jeez. Don't give me that bra-burning shit. My daughter's always doing that. Then she runs out of money and comes whining to chauvinist-pig daddy for help.'"

can, consequently, wonder whether young Vince Korsak sympathised with the movement and try to identify factors that at one point made him incorporate the expression into his daily vocabulary. Readers of the Polish translation, in turn, encounter a Vince Korsak whose language is less picturesque and who becomes a bit flatter than he is in the fictional reality of the original. While omission as a strategy has, on many occasions, proved of considerable service to the translator, examples such as this show that there may be occasions in which one almost starts feeling sorry for a target reader who has been deprived of a chance to learn a story behind the omitted item that the source reader was able to decipher simply because of having been part of the reality the story stands for.

4. The risks of character dialogue that rings inauthentic

The last example that also shows how gendered vocabulary may be treated as an element of a character's identity is instructive in one more respect: a reminder that, while translating such words, one should not make a character say things they would never say in reality. The recent popularity of the so-called feminatives in Polish illustrates this well, so, before closing, let us briefly discuss this particular linguistic variant as one that does call for some reflection on the part of the translator.

The term *feminatives* is used in Polish linguistic literature (see, e.g., Łaziński, 2006; Małocha-Krupa, 2018) with reference to those occupational titles that acquired the feminine form. A (male) *lawyer* may be rendered by means of *adwokat*; a female lawyer either by means of (*pani*) *adwokat* or *adwokatka*. This puts a translator from English into Polish before a seemingly simple choice, *your lawyer has just called* being translatable either as *twoja adwokat*$_{[M \& F]}$ *dzwoniła* or *twoja adwokat-ka*$_{[F]}$ *dzwoniła*.

However, the choice becomes anything but simple when we consider that feminatives still raise considerable controversy among many Polish speakers. Many refuse to use them, treating them as a sign that one favours dangerous Western ideologies that threaten traditional family values, to say the least. Mindful of such facts, if a translator into Polish decided to use forms such as *psycholożka* or *socjolożka* (Eng. 'female psychologist/sociologist') while rendering utterances stemming from the aforementioned M. E. Froelich, such a choice would be consistent with what readers of *Without Fail* have learned about this character: a 35-year old woman, who has lived all her life in the U.S. and who has been primed into viewing sexist language as one of the reasons why gender discrimination still persists.

Would such a form sound equally well if a translator put it into the mouth of Froelich's superior, Stuyvesant who, while not a sexist, still uses, probably out of habit, linguistic forms that feminist linguistic activists claim should be removed from English? Would it sound genuine in the mouth of the aforementioned Vince

Korsak? Young Polish female translation trainees I teach frequently fall for this trap, assuming that if they use a feminative, they are somehow contributing towards the Polish language becoming more inclusive, but it seems obvious that while doing so, they may, simultaneously, be making the speaker sound more progressive that he or she actually is.

5. Concluding remarks

In the foregoing, I tried to show, particularly to young, still relatively inexperienced translators, that translating gendered vocabulary may cause problems they should remain aware of. Firstly, as demonstrated in the first section, even experienced translators can make mistakes while assigning sex to a referent. Second, the machine translation tools they are using are also, to a certain extent, blind to grammatical indicators of gender. Next, the texts to be translated sometimes force us to adopt solutions that, as we know from the start, are far from ideal. Thirdly, gendered vocabulary, like many other categories of words, may represent concepts that target readers are not familiar with, which raises a difficult question of how much intervention on the part of the translator is desirable, i.e. if steps should be taken to fill respective gaps in the target audience's knowledge. Finally, gendered vocabulary serves as a poignant reminder that, as noticed by the American linguist, Robin Lakoff, we are what we say, meaning that having been subject to considerable controversy among language users, it may contribute towards a false impression of the speaker (e.g., a fictional character), as when one makes him or her use a variant that their real-life counterpart would not have used.

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