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Linguistic Anisomorphism of Gendered Language in Translation

Anisomorfismo lingüístico del lenguaje de género en la traducción

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ABSTRACT: The anisomorphic differences between languages, conceptual systems, and grammatical structures create significant obstacles for translation. This paper focuses on Latvian, a gendered language, and examines how its clearly delineated and omnipresent gender distinctions affect translations into and out of languages with different gender systems or those that are essentially genderless. In regular and conventional texts, gender-related translation issues can be resolved with minimal loss. However, when translating gender-sensitive texts, traditional methods do not work well. Translator's paratexts (such as explanations and footnotes) can clarify some issues, and occasionally novel grammatical forms may be employed (again, with explanations). Nevertheless, the two texts cannot be considered equivalent in content, style, and effect.

KEYWORDS: anisomorphism; gender bias; inclusion; translation; Latvian; machine translation.

RESUMEN: Las diferencias anisomórficas entre lenguas, sistemas conceptuales y estructuras gramaticales crean importantes obstáculos para la traducción. Este artículo se centra en el letón, una lengua de género gramatical, y examina cómo sus distinciones de género, claramente definidas y omnipresentes, afectan a las traducciones hacia y desde lenguas con sistemas de codificación del género diferentes, o que carecen de género. En textos comunes y convencionales, los problemas de traducción relacionados con el género pueden resolverse con pérdidas mínimas. Sin embargo, al traducir textos sensibles a cuestiones de género, los métodos tradicionales no funcionan bien. Los paratextos del traductor (como explicaciones y notas a pie de página) pueden aclarar algunos aspectos y, ocasionalmente, pueden emplearse formas gramaticales novedosas (también acompañadas de explicaciones). No obstante, los dos textos no pueden considerarse equivalentes en contenido, estilo y efecto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: anisomorfismo; sesgo de género; inclusión; traducción; letón; traducción automática.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anisomorphism in linguistics, as well as in lexicography (Gómez González-Jover 2006), describes a situation where there is no exact correspondence between words, notions, or other linguistic features across languages. It involves asymmetry between two linguistic systems or their elements. In translation, this means resorting to manipulations and substitutions to achieve a similar overall correspondence and effect. It does not imply that translation is impossible or inferior, only that it will linguistically differ from the original. Therefore, anisomorphism should not be equated with untranslatability. Anisomorphism can be cultural, occurring when one culture has realia that do not exist in another culture, usually requiring explanation. It can also be pragmatic or rhetorical when the target culture is not accustomed to a specific source text type. Linguistic anisomorphism refers to the peculiar way how each language describes reality, how it separates into categories a continuum of time, body, etc. which involves a semantic aspect, e.g., the concept of «day» may be divided in different chunks, «palm» – «hand» - «arm» distribution can be different, «Northern» might mean colder or warmer climate depending on the hemisphere, colour distribution may be different in diverse languages, etc. In the same vein, seemingly equivalent words in two languages may actually conjure different visual images and notions, e.g., «forest», «sausage», «cemetery», «coffee». Lexical anisomorphism has long been noted and discoursed by linguists and translation experts. But linguistic anisomorphism comprises also phonetic (absence or presence of sounds) and grammatical anisomorphism (Šipka 2015, 154) that can be viewed at sublevels of morphology or syntax, e.g., there may be several forms of the past or future tenses, or none.

One of the categories of anisomorphism is gender. Some languages have multiple genders, while others have none. Gender can be purely grammatical or also semantic. Consequently, grammatical differences between languages can involve semantic aspects as well. In many cases, these mismatches do not affect the meaning of the translation, as the target language substitutes the original gender coding with its own gender system. However, in some instances, this creates problems related to both transfer and semantics, as well as ideology. Studies have long sought to determine the extent to which language use influences people's thinking, such as their conceptions of gender roles and, possibly, gender discrimination. Experiments have shown that «the gender of words can sometimes affect meaning representations, at least in some languages» (Vigliocco et al. 2005, 503). This is especially true if the original text focuses on gender peculiarities. In such cases, the connotations of gender reflect the different ways in which speakers perceive the world. In literary texts, this can lead to serious clashes or discrepancies between metaphors, metonymies, and personifications.

2. LATVIAN GENDER SYSTEM

Latvian is a very «gendered language»: the two genders pervade Latvian grammar, semantics and texts; it is obvious and inescapable not only in all nouns (clear masculine or feminine endings) and pronouns (personal, demonstrative, a. o.), but also in syntactic uses of adjectives, participles, and verbs. Gender is marked in all proper names, personal names, towns, lakes, countries, etc. Grammatical and semantic gender are clearly interlinked. As regards humans, one can observe almost full overlap between grammatical gender and the sex of the person. There are some borrowed proper names (and a few common names, such as «foto», «kino», «video») with foreign endings which are also assigned genders. Generic use is always masculine, and so are also plural forms, unless there is a particular reason to use feminine. Thus, an androcentric bias can be noticed.

3. INCLUSION DEBATE

Given the masculine focus, Latvian, like many other gendered languages, does not reflect the inclusivity sought today by many individuals and organizations. The debate on social gender started with the controversy of the term itself, since Latvian had two words: «dzimums» (sex) and «dzimte» (grammatical gender). After a prolonged controversy (and somewhat rushing, since some international documents had to be translated to be signed and ratified), it was agreed that the grammatical word «dzimte» would be used for social gender. Some ideas on inclusion have been suggested following foreign patterns, mainly English, which, however, being a practically genderless language, is a bad model. One of the strategies applicable to some languages has been to modify words themselves – remove or add new endings/letters. Since Latvian verbal and adjectival endings carry other grammatical indications apart from gender, like past or future tense, active or passive voice, this is not applicable. The opposite strategy seems a better solution. While some time ago there were still some job titles used only in the masculine form, with the entrance of women in these professions, feminization has taken place, so all job titles have now feminine counterparts: «bīskaps» (bishop), «atašēja» (attaché), «pulkvedis» (colonel), «ģenerālis» (general).

In some texts, masculine and feminine nouns are used consecutively or both endings are offered by use of a slash. However, this strategy lengthens the texts and excludes the new non-binary gender issue. As noted by von Flotow, «ideas about gender instability have added new dimensions to the discussions and undermined the categories “man” and “woman” on which earlier debates were founded» (von Flotow 2007, 92). Also, as models are sought outside, this often leads to absurd proposals which, instead of achieving inclusion, create cleavages and contaminate the social narrative. Several ideas have been proposed (Raudsepa 2021), e.g., declaring masculine ending «-s» a universal ending («kvīrs», «nebinārs»), but this further strengthens the generic masculine dominance. Another proposal suggests adding the ending «-o» to all pronouns and nouns. This is, however, also a masculine ending, and it would not affect the grammatical gender in syntactic uses of verbs and adjectives. Finally, there is the

pattern of one of the Latvian dialects that drops nominal endings in general, which, however, does not demasculinize the utterances. Besides, being Latvian an inflected language with free word order, grammatical endings are important to avoid ambiguity and incoherence.

4. TRANSLATION LACUNAS AND MISMATCHES BETWEEN LANGUAGES

Gender anisomorphism appears as a translation issue. There are some words combining persons of different genders in some languages with no counterparts in Latvian, e.g., English «siblings», German «Geschwister». This issue normally can be circumvented in translation. In specific literary texts, however, problems occasionally arise when the gender of certain characters differs between languages, and this difference is significant. For example, the Latvian word for «fox» («lapsa») is feminine, whereas the French word («renard») is masculine. Translating a fairy tale or fable that personifies gender differences in the image of a fox can create challenges for the translator. In Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, four characters - Rat, Mole, Toad, and Badger - are male, as confirmed by the illustrations. In Latvian, «rat» («žurka») is feminine. The translator turned it into the masculine form («žurks»), which is grammatically incorrect, but recognizable and stylistically acceptable. Similarly, the personification of death in English and «Tod» in German carries a masculine image (often depicted as a man with a scythe), while «nave» in Latvian is feminine (depicted as a woman in white, suggestive of a nurse). When a text elaborates on this personification and includes illustrations, the translation becomes problematic. By the same token, English «sun» is masculine and this can create problems for poetic translations into Latvian, where the word «sun» is feminine, e.g., in D.H. Lawrence's story *Sun*.

She was thinking inside herself, of the sun in **his** splendour, and her **mating** with **him**.
(Lawrence 1977, 31)

Viņa sevī domāja par sauli, tās krāšņumu, par to, kā saule ienāk viņā. (Lorenss 1993, 15)

Gloss: She was thinking inside herself of the sun (SHE), her splendour, about how the sun (SHE) enters her.

The heterosexual erotic imagery and interplay are distorted and lost in translation, with no apparent way to fully restore them.

5. PROPER NAME ISSUE

Foreign proper names without visible gender markers adopt masculine or feminine endings in Latvian, e. g., Bill / Hillary Clinton - Bils Klinton, Hilarija Klintone. An unknown non-gender-marked name like Robin Clarke will become either Robina Klārka or Robins Klārks, one of which will be wrong. An even more complex case would be transgender people, e.g., Welsh transgender historian, author and travel writer James/Jan Morris began medical transition in 1964 and underwent sex

reassignment surgery in 1972. In the interim period, Morris wrote several books. Is the author masculine Moriss or feminine Morisa in Latvian during this period?

Translating from English into Latvian often leads to attributing gender by stereotype. Therefore, a «friend», «writer», «assistant», «cousin», unless specified in the original, will be tagged as male or female in translation by the translator, e.g., if someone works in a perfume department, the person most likely will be branded as a lady, but if someone is described as a car mechanic, the individual will most likely be considered a man. This could be viewed as a specific form of sexist language use. When translating from Latvian into English, the obvious sex/gender of the person is not so clear in English, so it might require extra explanation. Thus, translation from Latvian into English becomes to some extent gender-blind. Is this a serious loss? It is usually not important for randomly referenced people in fiction, but in legal and specific gender-oriented texts it might be problem. Similarly, Lithuanian female surname endings signal the status of being married or not, and this is lost to the English reader unless specifically explained.

6. TRANSLATION OF SPECIFIC GENDER-MARKED TEXTS

In semantically unimportant cases, generalization when translating into English, explicitness in important cases, or specification when translating into Latvian normally resolves the mismatches. However, real obstacles to close translation appear in gender specific texts. This is the case when language intervenes actively in the creation of meaning (Simon 2005, 8). Thus, when the seminal book by von Flotow, *Translation and Gender. Translation in the Era of Feminism* (von Flotow 1997) was recently translated into Latvian (fon Flotova 2022), the translators chose to do a very thorough job. The Latvian translation includes numerous footnotes by the translators, laboriously explaining the author's intentions, understanding, means of language use, and other details. These footnotes sometimes occupy a third of the page. The translated text is deliberately drafted in the feminine gender. Is this translation equivalent to the original? At the macro level, it demonstrates textual and rhetorical anisomorphism, becoming a meticulous scientific study of the original and diverging significantly due to the extensive translator's paratexts. At the micro level, it breaks the Latvian grammatical norm of generic masculine dominance. Therefore, despite their creative skills, translators found themselves in a position where, due to the gender structure of the target language, they had to select one specific option. Whether this choice is ultimately worth it depends on the goal of the translation (*Scopus*) – whether the text aims at normal consumption or seeks to inform, disturb, or shock. As noted by Federici in discussing feminist subject literary book translation corpus, «[t]he translators' voice clearly emerges in the TT and sometimes shapes the TT in a different way from the ST, as if the result in the TT should be that of a pleasant, readable version» (Federici 2012, 197). Translators of von Flotow's book have clearly chosen to enlighten, even at the price of making the reading experience more challenging.

7. MACHINE TRANSLATION, NEURAL MACHINE TRANSLATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Traditional machine translation outputs into Latvian tended to be very masculine, which seems to reflect a general trend that machine translation from a genderless language to a gendered language usually favours the masculine gender. This seems to stem from bilingual dictionaries, which generally demonstrate asymmetry (Bengoechea and Cabellos 2012) and generally ignore feminine gender unless the equivalence is gender-marked. To save space, dictionaries have traditionally been and are «pro-masculine»: only the Latvian masculine form of nouns, adjectives and participles is included (Veisbergs 1999, 2016). This is known as the economy principle in languages where the default gender is masculine.

One could expect a change with NMT approach. However, it seems that the problem is far from solved (Monti 2020; Saunders et al. 2020). In fact, the gender bias seems especially strong in language combinations where one or both languages do not possess extensive corpora and data. Since language processing tools are becoming more prevalent, concern has grown over their susceptibility to social biases and their potential to propagate bias (Hovy and Spruit 2016).

8. STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATION

We should likely adopt a piecemeal strategy, employing different approaches for translating literary, technical, social, and other types of texts. A good translation should sound natural and be easily readable and understandable. Vanguard and exotic translations should be reserved for special cases. Strategies should be tailored to the text type and the commissioner's wishes, as cultures and organizations may have varied preferences and goals (Santonocito 2023). Overdoing gender-neutral language can actually alienate text consumers and counteract professed aims of inclusiveness. Thus, inclusivity and readability can sometimes be at odds. In texts specifically devoted to gender issues and breaking the «normal» use of language, there would be a particularly strong loss of naturalness. Translator's paratexts (such as explanations and footnotes) can clarify some issues, and novel grammatical forms can occasionally be employed (again, with explanations), but the two texts can never be considered equivalent. The cognitive and cultural mapping of the world is perceived differently by speakers of languages with varying gender systems. Many concepts in this world are not directly translatable, although they can be explained. However, the translation of specific social and humanities texts that focus on language-specific issues will never achieve equivalence from the perspective of a «normal» reader. Translators, therefore, find themselves in an unenviable position – trying to convey the content of the work into a language that inherently impedes the process. It also raises issues of the translator's power and manipulation. For example, while English readers can decide for themselves whether the referent in a book or a «friend» in a Shakespeare's sonnet is female or male,

Latvian readers must accept the translator's choice. The translator will actually have given the word his or her interpretation, which can be quite ideological (Nissen 2002).

9. CONCLUSIONS

When translating an English text that focuses on gender-neutral language or «new genders», transferring these nuances into Latvian is nearly impossible from a linguistic point of view. This does not mean that the text cannot be translated, but the target audience may perceive it more like a treatise on foreign language grammar issues. The differences between languages, conceptual systems, and grammatical structures clearly show that certain traits, where notions and grammatical peculiarities are tightly interlinked, cannot be translated equivalently, thus defying the myth of universality in translation. This issue is not limited to English and Latvian, but applies to most language pairs in translation to varying degrees.

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