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THE IMPACT OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of grammatical gender on translation practices, with a focus on cross-linguistic discrepancies between gendered and non-gendered languages. The analysis considers the cognitive, semantic, and sociolinguistic effects of grammatical gender and how these affect both literal and interpretive translation strategies. Special emphasis is placed on languages with rich gender systems such as Russian, German, and Spanish, and their translation into English, which lacks grammatical gender. The article highlights challenges in gender agreement, cultural nuances, personification, and gender-neutral translation trends.

Keywords: grammatical gender, translation theory, gender neutrality, cross-linguistic equivalence, linguistic relativity, cognitive linguistics, cultural adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

Grammatical gender is a syntactic category present in many languages, assigning nouns and associated words to classes such as masculine, feminine, and sometimes neuter. While English uses natural gender in personal pronouns (he, she, it), many Indo-European languages — including Russian, French, Spanish, and German — possess robust grammatical gender systems that affect not only pronouns but also articles, adjectives, and verb forms. This linguistic feature introduces significant complexity in translation, particularly when moving between gendered and non-gendered language systems. The translator must navigate not only formal grammatical rules but also cultural and social connotations embedded in gendered expressions.



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MATERIALS AND METHODS

One of the central challenges in translating from a gendered language to a non-gendered one (e.g., from Russian to English) lies in the loss of explicit gender cues. For example, the Russian sentence “Учитель устал” (The teacher [male] is tired) vs. “Учительница устала” (The teacher [female] is tired) becomes simply “The teacher is tired” in English, with no indication of the subject’s gender unless contextually necessary. This leads to a semantic flattening, potentially erasing nuances important to the narrative, especially in literary or gender-conscious texts. On the other hand, translating from English into a gendered language necessitates lexical decisions based on implied gender. For example, translating "The friend arrived" into French requires choosing between "l'ami" (male) and "l'amie" (female), often forcing the translator to infer the character's gender or restructure the sentence to maintain ambiguity. This issue is exacerbated in legal, academic, or technical texts where precision is critical and assumptions are undesirable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Moreover, grammatical gender influences personification and metaphor in different cultures. In many Romance languages, abstract concepts are gendered: “la liberté” (freedom, feminine in French), “el amor” (love, masculine in Spanish). These gender attributions can affect the imagery and tone of texts. When a translator shifts from a gendered to a non-gendered language, these connotations may be lost or misrepresented, potentially altering the metaphorical significance. This is especially problematic in poetry, religious texts, and classical literature where symbolic gender plays a central role [1].

Grammatical gender also intersects with cognitive linguistics and linguistic relativity. Studies have shown that speakers of gendered languages may associate characteristics with objects based on grammatical gender — e.g., German speakers describing a bridge (“die Brücke,” feminine) as “beautiful” or “elegant,” while Spanish speakers (with “el puente,” masculine) might say “strong” or “long.” Translators must be aware of these subconscious associations, especially in descriptive and persuasive texts, where the emotional tone is shaped by such gender biases [2].



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In recent years, there has been a growing demand for gender-neutral language, particularly in contexts advocating for inclusivity and equality. This has led to deliberate strategies in translation that aim to neutralize gendered forms. For example, instead of translating “les étudiants” (students, masculine plural in French) as “the students,” translators may opt for “the students (male and female)” or use “students of all genders” depending on the audience. While this approach enhances inclusivity, it can sometimes distort the stylistic and syntactic integrity of the original text.

Another layer of complexity arises in translating between languages with different gender assignment systems. For instance, the word “sun” is feminine in German (“die Sonne”) but masculine in Spanish (“el sol”), while “moon” is masculine in German (“der Mond”) and feminine in Spanish (“la luna”). In mythology, poetry, and folklore, these differences carry deep symbolic meanings. A translator must choose whether to preserve the original symbolism, adapt it to the target language, or explain the cultural discrepancy through footnotes or commentary — each choice affecting the reader’s experience [3].

In some cases, grammatical gender creates ambiguities and inconsistencies within the same language that complicate translation. For example, in Russian, the word “врач” (doctor) is grammatically masculine, regardless of the actual gender of the person, which may conflict with modern gender sensitivity. Translating such words into English requires tact, particularly in contemporary settings where representation matters.

Advanced translation strategies include modulation (changing the perspective or emphasis), transposition (shifting grammatical categories), and adaptation (replacing a cultural concept with a more familiar one). These tools help translators bridge the gender gap while maintaining fidelity to both meaning and tone. However, mastery of such techniques demands deep linguistic and cultural awareness, as well as sensitivity to the target audience’s expectations and sociocultural norms [4].

CONCLUSION

Grammatical gender profoundly impacts translation, influencing semantic accuracy, stylistic consistency, and cultural resonance. Translators must engage with



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grammatical gender not merely as a syntactic constraint but as a cultural and cognitive phenomenon. Navigating gender discrepancies requires more than lexical substitution — it calls for interpretive decisions that honor both the source text and the target audience. As global conversations on gender evolve, so too must translation practices, balancing respect for linguistic tradition with the demands of modern inclusivity. Ultimately, the skilled handling of grammatical gender in translation not only preserves textual meaning but also affirms the nuanced identities embedded within language.

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