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## Is cook ‘*der Koch*’ or ‘*die Köchin*’?

### Problems of (social) gender in translation

#### Abstract

By means of the category of gender, especially the concept of social gender, this article intends to illustrate the different parameters that are involved when referring to translation as a “crosscultural transfer”. Specific factors that have an influence on the translation, such as connotations of gender, pragmatic situations, different linguistic structure (i.e. languages that show grammatical vs. languages that show pronominal gender), are discussed. The article emphasizes the importance of the translator’s role to interpret the source text and to determine the function of the target text.

#### 1. Introduction

Translation has been described as a “crosscultural transfer” (Vermeer 1986); in consequence, translation is possible only if the translator is in possession of a profound knowledge of the culture of the languages in question. By means of the category of **gender**, especially the concept of **social gender**, I intend in this article<sup>1</sup> to illustrate that ‘culture’ involves very many different aspects, including, for example, historical and pragmatics factors. Furthermore, I intend to show briefly that, although the culturally oriented approach to translation theory has, for various reasons, mainly been applied to more pragmatic texts (cf. Snell-Hornby 1990:84), the transfer based on cultural considerations applies just as much to **literary translations**.

Consider the Latinamerican Spanish words *ichú* and *mate*. As these words (a plant and a hot and stimulating drink, respectively) are typical Latinamerican culture-bound expressions, a word-to-word translation into English is not possible. On the other hand, as few English readers

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know their meaning, the translator somehow has to ‘explain’ the words. In these cases, an easy solution is simply to add the explanation (at any rate the first time the word appears in the text), e.g. ichú-grass and e.g. mate-tea. In this way, the relevant information is supplied and the Latin-american ambience which the two words infer, is maintained.

Naturally, there are times when ‘explaining’ the source text turns out to be more complicated. Let us consider the following two fragments given by the authors of a German textbook on translation (Hönig and Kussmaul 1982: 53-54):

- A) In Parliament he fought for equality, but he sent his son to Winchester.  
 B) When his father died his mother couldn’t afford to send him to Eton any more.

Due to the fact that both Winchester and Eton are what Hönig and Kussmaul call unika (ibid.), i.e. institutions or objects that exist only in one specific socio-cultural environment, they suggest the sentences be reformulated when translated into German:

Im Parlament kämpfte er für die Chancengleichheit, aber seinen eigenen Sohn schickte er auf eine der englischen Eliteschulen.

and:

Als sein Vater starb, konnte seine Mutter es sich nicht mehr leisten, ihn auf eine der teuren Privatschulen zu schicken.

The authors’ solutions reflect their functional approach: one of the roles of the translator is to supply the reader of the target language with the necessary information to be able to interpret the text in, supposedly, more or less the same way as the reader of the source language<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hönig and Kussmaul’s comment: “Damit ist nicht im entferntesten alles gesagt was “man” zum Komplex *public school* sagen könnte, aber der Übersetzer hat alles gesagt, was er (...) seinem Adressaten mitteilen muß. ... die Erläuterungen *englische Eliteschulen* und *teure Privatschulen* sind funktional notwendig.” (1982:54). Although I agree, in principle, with the authors’ attempts as to translate what seems functionally important, they, nevertheless, underestimate the reader’s ability to interpret texts that derive from a different culture than their own. The sentences are not well chosen: in both cases the reader can easily deduce from the immediate context that the schools in question belong to a specific class of schools. In A) this is indicated by the conjunction but which automatically establishes an opposition to equality (as a result of this, “segregation” enters the mind of the reader). Similarly, in B): the mother’s lack of money indicates that the school in one way or other is based on some kind of fee-paying. I believe that Winchester and Eton may be substituted by almost any place name without changing the meaning of the text considerably: the reader would infer some kind of elite-school. If the function of the translation is to convey this idea, then the immediate context will suffice.

## 2. Gender

It is generally accepted that languages can be classified according to whether they show gender or not<sup>3</sup>. The determining criterion of gender is agreement, and saying that a specific language has two genders implies that there are two classes of nouns which can be distinguished syntactically according to the agreements they take. In the vast literature on gender, however, there seems to be no unanimous acceptance of what agreement means (cf. Corbett 1991:chapter 5) and a bone of contention is often whether or not agreement includes the control of anaphoric pronouns by their antecedent, e.g. *the husband ... he*. According to Corbett, languages in which pronouns present the only evidence for gender are to be included in grammatical gender languages but, as this approach is not generally accepted, he prefers to label them pronominal gender systems<sup>4</sup> (1991:5). Hence, in the following discussion I will distinguish between languages that show grammatical gender (e.g. Spanish and German) and languages that show pronominal gender (e.g. English and Danish). However, one has to bear in mind that the former languages (Spanish and German), also show pronominal gender. Furthermore, with respect to human beings (and contrary to what is the case with inanimate nouns), gender most frequently is not assigned arbitrarily, e.g. in Spanish and German there is a great overlap between grammatical gender and the sex of the person involved. In fact, apart from the so-called generic reference, most feminine nouns refer to females and most masculine nouns refer to males. Therefore, as a whole, the cultural transfer from a language that shows pronominal gender to a language that shows grammatical gender does not constitute severe problems in the majority of the cases (e.g. Danish: fader or English: father are easily transferred to the masculine gender in e.g. Spanish: el padre or German der Vater).

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware that the term 'sex' during the last decade in language and gender studies, for various reasons, has been substituted by the term 'gender'. However, in this article I will reserve 'gender' for the linguistic category and 'sex' for the biological classification. 'Natural gender', then, when referring to human beings, is equivalent to biological sex.

<sup>4</sup> In many cases this denomination is equivalent to natural gender systems. However, as grammatical gender systems more often than not contain some natural criteria for their noun classification and, as natural gender systems are far from being 'natural' (cf. e.g. English feminine pronoun selection when referring to a ship), the term employed by Corbett seems much more appropriate.

## 2.1. Grammatical gender

In some cases, where the grammatical gender language marks gender syntactically in a way unavailable to a pronominal gender language, it may be difficult for the translator to convey the information about the sex of the person in question. In the first line of the following stanza of the poem *Ninguneo* (“Nobodying”) by the Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos the first person reference *hago* (“I do”) could refer to either a woman or a man, but already in the second line the predicate construction reveals the sex of the referent:

*¿qué diablos hago aquí en la Ciudad Lux,  
presumiendo de culta y de viajada  
sino aplazar la ejecución de una  
sentencia que ha caído sobre mí?*

Languages that do not mark gender in predicate constructions must, naturally, resort to other methods to supply the reader with the necessary information about the sex of the protagonist in the poem:

*What the devil am I doing here in the City of Lights  
putting on the airs of a cultured and well-traveled woman  
but simply postponing the execution of a  
sentence that has been pronounced upon me?  
(cit. in Ahern, 1989:58)*

Apart from extending the line by adding a word and, consequently, changing the rhythm of the stanza, the translator has also slightly altered the focus of interest compared to the original text. Whereas the Spanish original focuses on ‘**I** (type: woman) + **cultured/well-traveled**’, the English translation focuses on ‘**I** + **woman** (type: cultured/well-traveled)’. A back-translation from English to Spanish would, most probably, prompt: *mujer [=woman] culta y viajada*, and the focus on the fact that the referent is a female would be intensified.

Naturally, similar problems arise in all those cases where the source language by means of agreement structures (predicate, noun-modification, pronoun use, pronominal reference, etc.) operates differently from the target language. Although, obviously, the gender marking is much easier if the translation occurs between languages that both show gender, these languages may be confronted with other problems as a result of the connotations gender as such conveys<sup>5</sup>. With respect to metaphors or

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<sup>5</sup> For details on connotations on gender, see Ervin, 1962.

when personifying inanimate nouns, a semantic clash may occur if a specific gender in one language connotes certain properties, while the translated word in the target language belongs to another gender that conveys different connotations. The following quote from Roman Jakobson will suffice to exemplify this problem:

The Russian painter Repin was baffled as to why Sin had been depicted as a woman by German artists; he did not realize that “sin” is feminine in German (*die Sünde*), but masculine in Russian (у́бтх). Likewise a Russian child, while reading a translation of German tales, was astounded to find that Death, obviously a woman (Russian смтннм, fem.) was pictured as an old man (German *der Tod*, masc.). *My sister Life*, the title of a book of poems by Boris Pasternak, is quite natural in Russian, where “life” is feminine (ї брпым), but was enough to reduce to despair the Czech poet Josef Hora in his attempt to translate these poems, since in Czech this noun is masculine (*život*) (1959:237)

Unfortunately, my lack of knowledge of Russian and Czech does not permit me to say whether the following suggestions in reality would have prevented Hora’s despair, but, in general terms, there are, at least, three possible ways of solving some of the problems noted by Jakobson. In the first place, one might look for a synonym that belongs to the same gender as the source word (cf. last paragraph in this section). Secondly, one might select a word from another language that corresponds with the gender of the word in the source text, although the word must somehow be familiar to the reader. An instructive example is given by Wandruszka: in order to establish an opposition between the male (!) God of the Sun<sup>6</sup> [sun in German is feminine], and the feminine moon [moon is masculine in German], which later is pronominalized with the feminine pronoun sie (‘she’), he resorts to another language (in this case Latin) and introduces sol and luna:

... *der unbesiegbare mediterrane Sonnengott, Sol invictum, und seine sanfte Schwester Luna, die die lauen Nächte erhellen* (1991:31)

Thirdly, and perhaps as a last resort, the source text could be provided with a footnote indicating the divergent gender of the word in question in the original language. If we assume that the reader is capable of making this ‘gender-switch’, i.e. of assigning **another** connotative meaning to a

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware of the fact that the masculine article der determines Gott (which is a masculine word) and not Sonne; this fact, however, does not invalidate Wandruszka’s procedure of establishing a binary system that is contrary to the gender of the German words.

word that traditionally has another<sup>7</sup>, there is no reason to believe that the “cultural transfer” should not prove successful.

Connotations related to gender are not exclusively confined to literary texts. On the contrary, this relationship frequently plays a decisive role in advertising. The German slogan used by the petrol company *Eso Pack den Tiger in den Tank* (literal translation: ‘Put the tiger into the petrol tank.’) was to be translated into Italian. However, the masculine gender of the German word for ‘tiger’, *der Tiger* did not correspond with the gender of the Italian counterpart, as ‘tiger’ in Italian is feminine, *la tigre*. Presumably because the feminine word could not connote the ‘power’ and ‘energy’ the masculine gender supposedly conveys, the advertising company chose to use another, albeit related animal: *il leopardo* (Kahlverkämper 1979:61). Apart from the rather sex-stereotypical ideas this substitution is based upon, this example reminds us once more of the functional aspect connected with translation. ‘Faithfulness’ to the original text is certainly not at stake, what matters is to match the connotations of the masculine gender with (any?) ‘cat-like wild animal’.

## 2.2. Social gender

In the previous section I have outlined some difficulties that may arise due to the cultural transfer of gender in cases where the sex of the referent was known. In this section I intend to focus only on translations where the sex of the referent is unknown (or not relevant). For this analysis I rely on the concept of **social gender**.

It is common for speakers of languages that show pronominal gender, not to select anaphoric pronouns arbitrarily in connection with occupational titles. More often than not, a Danish speaker will pronominalize *dommer* (‘judge’) with *han* (‘he’), and, similarly, an English speaker ‘lawyer’ with ‘he’, whereas other professions usually trigger the feminine pronominal counterpart: Danish: *sekretæren ... hun* (‘the secretary ... she’) or English: ‘the kindergarten teacher ... she’. Everyday dialogues illustrate what is going on:

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<sup>7</sup> Here I would like to recall what Jakobson stated in relation to the misleading expressions ‘sunrise’ and ‘sunset’ that might indicate a rejection of the Copernican doctrine. However, he claims, people can easily transform customary talk into astronomical talk “simply because any sign is translatable into a sign in which it appears to us more fully developed and precise” (Jakobson 1959:234).

- I went to the dentist yesterday. What a day!
- What did he say?
- Well, she said that if I go on like this, I'll be in need of false teeth very soon.

and, similarly:

- My nurse told me to take five pills a day.
- Well, she should know, shouldn't she?

In his book *Semantics*, Lyons (1977) raises the following questions when trying to explain this phenomenon:

From the statement *My cousin is a nurse*, however, most speakers of English will infer that the person being referred to is female. Is this inference based upon an implication which belongs to the sense of 'nurse'? (...) Or is this inference probabilistic, being determined by our knowledge that most nurses, like most secretaries and most students of domestic science or speech therapy, happen to be female? (p. 310).

It seems clear that the choice of pronoun is based neither on grammatical nor natural criteria as such, but more likely on a stereotypical classification (which may be a consequence of quantitative considerations) according to which certain professions relate to either females or males:

*The occupational denominations lawyer, doctor and head-master belong to a group of words in which no feminine derivation exists. At the same time, and in contradiction to librarian, we are dealing with a group in which women are still today rare; as regards these denominations, most Danish speakers [of either sex] would associate them with men. (Gomard 1985:85, my translation and emphasis<sup>8</sup>).*

On the basis of this stereotypical classification, Hellinger (1990:61) introduces the term **social gender** and defines it as the property of a word according to which people assign 'generally male' or 'generally female'. She differentiates two semantic levels:

*The features [male/female] refer to the natural gender of the person referred to; nouns with these features (e.g. woman, man, sister, brother) possess, therefore, a gender-specifying function. Nouns like lawyer or secretary on the contrary, have no gender-specifying function. Nevertheless, often the features "generally male", "generally female",*

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<sup>8</sup> Bei Berufsbezeichnungen wie sagfører (..), læge (...) oder rektor (...) handelt es sich um eine Gruppe, in der es keine movierten Formen gibt, aber im Gegensatz zu bibliotekar auch um eine Gruppe in der Frauen heute noch selten sind, und bei diesen Bezeichnungen würden die meisten dänischen Sprecher/innen an Männer denken (Gomard 1985:85).

respectively, are assigned to these words as a reflection of normative societal conditions.” (Hellinger 1990:61, my translation<sup>9</sup>)

It may be worth pointing out that social gender assignment is not bound to occupational titles as such, but is dependent on pragmatic considerations as well, which, in the case of occupational titles, frequently is based upon **status**. Thus, status explains why the occupational title secretary is associated with a female by most English speakers, whereas the denomination Foreign Secretary or Secretary of State, more often than not will evoke an image of a male.

Another important feature of **social gender** is its dependency on time. As the assignment of social gender is based on parameters that are determined by society, these parameters may alter due to societal changes. If we return once more to the occupational title, secretary, it may surprise people today to learn that only one century ago this occupation was predominantly executed by men. In the past century, then, the social gender of secretary was opposite of what it is today, namely “generally male”. When Lyons points out that “at the turn of this century in Britain the expression ‘lady typist’ was quite commonly employed in contexts (e.g. in advertisements) in which ‘typist’ would now be used.” (1977:311) he, too, indicates that the assignment of social gender changes in the course of time.

The question of which social gender to assign frequently emerges in connection with translations and the following examples<sup>10</sup> are intended to demonstrate the ways in which translators have tried to deal with the issue.

In Daphne du Maurier’s gothic-like novel *Rebecca*, the protagonists, Maxim and his wife, have invited some relatives to their once-deserted manor in the English countryside. After dinner, Maxim’s brother-in-law expresses his admiration for the meal by saying:

*Same cook I suppose, Maxim?*

<sup>9</sup> Es müssen also zwei semantische Ebenen unterschieden werden: Die Merkmale [männlich/weiblich] referieren auf das natürliche Geschlecht der bezeichneten Person; Nomina mit diesen Merkmalen (z.B. woman, man, sister, brother) haben also geschlechtsspezifizierende Funktion. Nomina wie lawyer oder secretary haben dagegen keine geschlechtsspezifizierende Funktion. Ihnen wird aber häufig ein Merkmal wie “im allgemeinen männlich” bzw. “im allgemeinen weiblich” zugeordnet, das normative gesellschaftliche Bedingungen widerspiegelt. (Hellinger 1990:61)

<sup>10</sup> A number of examples were taken from Mario Wandruszka’s *Sprachen - vergleichbar und unvergleichlich* (1969). In the book he systematically compares the translations of a great number of literary works into various European languages.

There is no later reference in the book to the cook and the sex of this *chef de cuisine* is never revealed. How does a translator, whose task it is to translate the sentence into a language that shows grammatical gender, cope with this problem? How do we know whether the cook is female or male? There seems to be no one agreed solution as five different translations into grammatical gender languages show:

*French: la même cuisinière*

*Italian : lo stesso cuoco*

*Spanish: el mismo cocinero*

*Portuguese: a mesma cozinheira*

*German: dieselbe Köchin*

(Wandruszka 1969:173):

The example demonstrates that three translators decided the cook was female and two assigned “generally male” as the social gender of cook. Apparently, the Italian and the Spanish translators thought a male cook to be more likely in a noble English manor than a female.

A similar example stems from Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah*. The original text is as follows:

*One of my secretaries was remarking only this morning how well and young I am looking.*

In this case the translators chose the following solutions:

*French: Un de mes secrétaires*

*Italian: Uno dei miei segretari*

*Spanish: Una de mis secretarias*

*Portuguese: Uma das minhas secretárias*

*German: Einer meiner Sekretäre*

(Wandruszka 1969:174)

Again, the translators disagree: three of them imagined the flatterer to be a male and two decided the secretary was a female.

The surprising incongruity reflected by the translations above could lead to the assumption that the assignment of social gender depends on the target language as such. Indeed, for certain occupational titles a ‘fixed’ denomination in the target language is recommended. Thus, Beier (1982) suggests switching the gender when translating German *der Hutmacher* (‘hatmaker’) to Spanish *la sombrerera* due to the fact that this profession is generally occupied by women in Spain.

It is suggested, in defiance of the shift of gender from German to Spanish, to use *sombrerera* for the generic occupational title and to use *som-*

*brerero* only if the real-world object, i.e. the person carrying this denomination, is a male. (Beier 1982:103-104, my emphasis and translation<sup>11</sup>).

In the cases pointed at by Beier, the culture of the target language naturally would determine the final output, a consideration that is relevant in pragmatic texts (e.g. job-advertisements), but probably not so much in literary texts, where the culture of the source language has (or should have) a much greater influence.

The next fragment and its translations intend to demonstrate that the target language as such is not crucial.

The modern romance *Edge of Dawn* written by Maura Seger begins with a description of the preparations for a garden-party dinner:

*Since early in the day, the caterer and his staff had been on hand, setting the tables with gleaming china, crystal and silver and beginning preparations for the dinner. (p.7)*

Here, obviously, the caterer is a man, but, as there is no pronominal reference, difficulties arise as to the sex of the staff? How are we to know whether the caterer's helpers are females or males or, perhaps, both?

In 1986, two years after the English original had appeared, the novel was translated into Spanish and an edition was published both in Spain and in Mexico. Although Mexican Spanish and Peninsular Spanish are very close (the average reader can easily read books published in one country and vice versa), the Peninsular edition was revised extensively before entering the Mexican market - a process, by the way, nobody would dream of undertaking with respect to 'decent' literature. The version that was published in Spain begins as follows:

*Ya desde por la mañana, muy temprano, el proveedor y sus empleadas trabajaban alrededor de las mesas... (p. 3)*

The Spanish translator chose to interpret staff to mean females only. Surprisingly, the Mexican editor assigns just the opposite social gender to the same word:

*Desde la mañana, muy temprano, el proveedor y sus empleados trabajaban colocando la vajilla ... (p. 3)*

In this case the caterer's helpers all turn out to be men, or, subsidiarily, both men and women if we interpret the masculine form as so-called

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<sup>11</sup> Es wird vorgeschlagen, trotz des Wechsels im Genus vom Deutschen ins Spanische, für die allgemeine Berufsbezeichnung *sombrerera* zu benutzen und nur, wenn das Objekt der Wirklichkeit, d.h. die Person mit dieser Berufsbezeichnung maskulin ist, *sombrero* zu verwenden.

generic reference. In the latter case, the masculine form leaves the question open, just as was the case in the English original.

Although the above example<sup>12</sup> demonstrates that the assignment of social gender is definitely not language bound, it raises other interesting questions: can we assume that Mexican readers are more likely to imagine both women and men as a caterer's helpers, whereas Spanish readers are more inclined to accept females only in this position? If so, is the translator/editor then accommodating to the readers instead of the original text? Naturally no definite answers can be given, but they show, nevertheless, how many pragmatic considerations influence the choices as to which basis social gender is to be assigned upon.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the fact that translation problems related to social gender are not limited to occupational titles alone, although this aspect has most frequently appeared in the linguistic literature<sup>13</sup>. Again, I take an example from Wandruszka (1969:172). He mentions the famous sonnets by Shakespeare, which he dedicated to a 'friend'. His sonnet 104 begins with the line:

*To me, fair friend, you never can be old*

Is this invocation addressed to a male or a female? Wandruszka claims (ibid.) that the debate on how to answer this question is still going on and draws attention to two different translations into German from the last century, published within a time span of only six years:

*Für mich, Geliebte ... (from 1867, translated by Karl Simrock)*

*Für mich, Geliebter ... (from 1873, translated by Friedrich Bodenstedt)*

Naturally, the translator is forced to choose one solution if the ubiquitous slash is to be avoided: "Für mich, Geliebte/r" - a method, by the way, that may be adequate for certain types of texts (e.g. forms) but certainly not for poems. This method is similarly not suitable for book titles: "Naked Came the Stranger" (by Penelope Ashe, New York, 1969) does not reveal whether the reader has to imagine the stranger to be female or male. Nevertheless, the French translator chose the feminine option: "L'étrangère est arrivée nue" (Wandruszka 1981:329). However, although the title is semantically ambiguous, other indications may reveal the sex of the referent in question: in this case the translator's task was facilitated by the cover photo showing a girl (ibid.).

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<sup>12</sup> cf. also the later example from Shakespeare.

<sup>13</sup> cf. e.g. Hampares (1976).

Whether the translator likes it or not, in all the above cases she/he is forced to select a specific gender by means of which the sex of the referent is determined. The translator takes, therefore, the first important step in interpreting the text, a step which may turn out to be quite decisive to the interpretation of the text as a whole. English readers, however, can come to a decision themselves and they might opt for a unisex solution: that the referent in the sonnet or in the book-title is female and male alike.

### 3. Conclusion

The exposition of the problems that appear when translating gender has shown that a variety of parameters are involved when the translator has to make her/his choice: connotations of gender, changes in society, the socioeconomic status of the referent, historical considerations, etc. Especially the translation of expressions where **social gender** had to be determined turned out to be more complicated than expressions which inherently belong to a specific gender.

As a whole, we may conclude that when characterizing translation as a “crosscultural process”, the term **culture** is to be understood as broadly as possible. In fact, as we have seen, translation should more correctly be described as a “cross-cultural-socio-historical-pragmatic transfer”. This expression is unlikely to gain acceptance but, nevertheless, it recognizes that the translator frequently is in need of a profound knowledge of all factors that have an influence on the text. However, since there are often many unpredictable factors in a source text<sup>14</sup> the knowledge in itself is not sufficient; instead, we might argue that this encyclopedic knowledge constitutes only the necessary basis from which the more crucial steps in the translation process are to be taken, i.e. the interpretation of the source text and the decision as to which function the target text will or should have (i.e. to translate in a functionally relevant way). Undoubtedly, both these two steps must be taken, if the translation (and hence, the transfer across culture, history, society, and pragmatic situations) is to prove successful.

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<sup>14</sup> cf. e.g. the frequent reference to ‘most speakers’ in many of the above quotations [how many/who does the author refer to?].

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