

**Translating genderless characters  
in the confinements of grammatical gender  
in children's literature**

Barbora Vinczeová  
Matej Bel University  
barbora.vinczeova@umb.sk

**Abstract**

This paper aims to examine methods used to translate genderless characters from languages with natural gender into languages with grammatical gender, specifically from English to Slovak. The context of children's literature is used. First, the difference between natural and grammatical gender is examined (Ibrahim 1973). Consequently, the importance of gender-inclusive language is stressed (Di Sabato and Perri 2020). The possibilities for gender-inclusive expressions offered by a language using grammatical gender are highlighted, considered, and applied into practice (Cviková et al. 2014; Urbancová 2022). Two research questions are answered: 1. How can a language using grammatical gender be gender inclusive? 2. Should specific translation strategies be used when translating gender in children's literature? The author of this paper aims to answer these questions from the position as a researcher and a translator.

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## 1. Natural and grammatical gender

Grammatically, gender is one of linguistic categories assigned to nouns. It is one way of dividing nouns into classes in some languages. Although gender does have sociocultural meaning as well, the term will be described from the grammatical point of view at first as an indication of the grammatical category in nouns. Not all languages have this category – gender “is not a universal linguistic category and [...] it has disappeared from some languages which had gender at a certain time in their history” (Ibrahim 1973, 24).

According to their take on gender, is it possible to talk about two main language groups: “The traditional categorization, on the basis of descriptive linguistics, is between languages possessing grammatical gender and languages possessing natural gender” (Di Sabato, Antonio Perri 2020, 363). Grammatical gender reflects the form of a noun and has little to do with its meaning, so the “form determines the way the word will behave grammatically as regards the agreement of adjectives, articles and pronouns” (Simon 1996, 16). Typically, Slavic languages including Slovak have three grammatical genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter. English, on the contrary, has natural gender, which “means that gender is attributed not by form but by meaning” (Simon 1996, 16).

Roman Jakobson in his paper *On linguistic aspects of translations* lays down some of the basics of translation studies, specifically that “languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *can* convey” (1959, 264) listing an example of some languages needing to know if the action was completed or not in order to be able to express it with a verb phrase. Grammatical gender, although “often cited as merely formal” (Jakobson 1959, 265) might be a problem when translating from a language with natural gender such as English into a language with grammatical gender such as Slovak. The language using grammatical gender, must, in Jakobson’s words, know the gender of the thing or person.

## 2. Strategies for using gender-inclusive language in English

Gender-inclusive language is widely discussed today as means of contributing to gender equality. Gender-inclusive language is sometimes used as a synonym for gender-neutral language, but inclusion focuses on affirming all identities rather than not taking a position” (LGBTQ+ Pride Center 2024, 1), hence, the term gender-inclusive language was chosen for this paper.

There are various strategies for using gender-inclusive language through various languages. For English, the UN lists using non-discriminatory language (using appropriate forms of address, avoiding “gender-biased expressions or expressions that reinforce gender

stereotypes" (UN 2024, 1); making "gender visible when it is relevant for communication" (UN 2024, 1) (using correct pronouns, and using two words when promoting gender equality); making gender invisible when it is irrelevant in the given context (using gender-neutral words, plural pronouns/adjectives, the pronoun "one", the pronoun "who", using plural antecedents, passive voice, and avoiding gendered words (UN 2024).

Similarly, the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) provides guidelines for gender-inclusive language (2023), summarized as using they/them/theirs in singular; using combined forms such as he/she/they; omitting gender-specific pronouns; avoiding gender-specific titles and gendered job titles; avoiding the generic use of man; avoiding trivialisation; using gender-sensitive language (ECAS 2023).

These points make it clear that gender-inclusive language is a priority in the modern society, since it "advocates for people, regardless of gender, to have equal chances and recognition [and] incorporates and acknowledges the experiences of those who identify differently than standard gender norms" (Montano, Opeña, Miranda 2024, 337). English, however, has a slight "advantage" over languages utilizing grammatical gender, because "creating gender-neutral forms in English requires only an alteration to a single lexical item" (Reilly-Thornton 2024, 422), such as changing the pronoun "he" or "she" to "they".

### **3. Strategies for using gender-inclusive language in Slovak**

Languages with grammatical gender must consider gender not only when dealing with nouns and pronouns, but also other word classes. "Discussions on how to create gender-neutral language are different in grammatical gender languages than in social gender languages" [...] "because grammatical gender languages require gender-agreement between more elements within a sentence" (Reilly-Thornton 2024, 428). In Slovak, the adjective will take a different suffix for masculine, feminine, and neuter noun. Similarly, the verb will have a different suffix when used in the past tense.

Slovak as a language with grammatical gender has several possibilities when attempting to be gender-inclusive. Jana Cviková et. al. summarized them in 2014 and generally follows the already listed possibilities for English – avoiding gendered nouns, generic masculine, and syntactic structures hinting at a specific gender unless so desired.

A question arises when talking about genders not adhering to the strict dichotomy of male – female. English solves this problem with the aforementioned "they" used in singular, or new pronouns. However, in Slovak, the problem transcends pronouns. Vít Kolek addresses the same issue in Czech, talking about "the problem of (in)authenticity" [which] "is framed as activated in any situation of language use; due to typological

characteristics of the Czech language, one needs to out one's own gender identity in nearly every sentence" (Kolek 2022, 277). Consequently, even though gender-inclusive pronouns are used, the remaining word classes "want to know" the gender of the person or the object referred to.

Victory Vargicovie (2022) lists several solutions, such as using the existing genders: male, female, neuter, and "they" in singular. Alternation between genders is a widely used option. In addition, neopronouns are available, further divisible into agender and others (Vargicovie 2022). The usage of neuter may "have a dehumanising or ridiculing effect or other negative connotations" (Kolek 2022, 273), since it is commonly used for objects, animals, and children. The Slovak "they" is an archaic indicator of politeness, but as Kolek (2022) correctly states, it may have humorous connotations, and, "the relevant personal pronoun also carries gender-specific forms for masculine, feminine and neuter grammatical gender" (274).

Neopronouns are more widely used in English, but they do not solve Slovak's problem of mismatched noun/pronoun and adjective/verb. Such solution was proposed by Jakub Séleš (2018), who lists the neopronoun "en" along with its forms, and the forms of adjectives and verbs attached to it. This approach was adopted by the Slovak translator Lucia Halová of Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. In an article on translating this novel, the translator describes the challenges of choosing the suitable form of address in Slovak, saying that it was not enough to choose to right pronoun, but also to address the problem of verbs and adjectives. The Slovak "they" was considered, but not chosen, because grammatically it takes verbs and adjectives in plural and in reference to singular, this would be confusing (Halová, 2021). Halová therefore chose to use the neopronoun "en" with adjectives and verbs taking the neuter suffix, bypassing the problem with dehumanising encompassed in the pronoun "it".

#### **4. Translating children's literature**

This paper does not aim to provide universal solutions for translation challenges that translators might encounter. Instead, the concept of a "situation" as understood by Oittinen (2000) is used. Oittinen borrows it from Martin Buber and his "Einmaligkeit" or "oneness", meaning that „situation, a key issue within all translation, can be understood as context—time, place, and culture—including the individual interpreting the context and acting in the context. [...] Situations are not repeatable; each one creates a different set of functions and purposes that act on the concept derived from that particular situation" (Oittinen 2000, 9).

Oittinen's "for whom" question; that is, the question which "clearly takes precedence" (Oittinen 2000, 159) must be considered when translating. The "for whom" question has been present since Reiss and

Vermeer's skopos theory (1984, 2014), where the receiver of the target text is included in the "skopos", "i.e. the purpose determines whether, how and what is done" (Reiss, Vermeer 2014, 89), and, "the skopos can be described as a variable of the intended recipient" (Reiss, Vermeer 2014, 90).

With that in mind, the situation of the example text<sup>1</sup> used for this paper can be described as a text that is indented for children aged 8 – 12 (publisher's data); a heavily illustrated text; and a text with the purpose to acquaint young readers with dragon mythology, combining storytelling and encyclopaedic elements.

Within this context, a non-binary deity appears in one of the stories, prompting a discussion about a suitable strategy for transferring the all-gender or agender character from a language with natural gender to a language with grammatical gender in children's literature. Any of the strategies listed in previous chapter are usable, functional, and purposeful and the only unacceptable strategy is ignoring the non-heteronormative aspect. The trend of localization – in this case ignoring the non-heteronormative aspect – is common when treating foreignness (Carmen Bravo-Villasante 1978) and although Bravo-Villasante addresses mostly the cultural aspects of the story, her approach of "antilocalization" can also be used for translating gender as well. This is because in the context of English – Slovak translation, other than the heteronormative gender discourse is still less common in Slovak and not represented enough. Furthermore, educational aspect must be considered. Opinions which favour naturalizing and localizing foreign aspects are often

"a sign of adult worry about children not learning "enough," not becoming educated "enough"—from an adult point of view. They show that we adults have little faith in our children's ability to find knowledge and information by themselves. We undervalue the role of imagination in learning. Another important issue here is that children learn many other important things from books, not only the names of flowers and capital cities: children need to be emotionally involved so that they learn to understand other people's feelings in different situations" (Oittinen 2000, 190).

## **5. Duality of Mawu-Lisa in translation**

The story of Mawu-Lisa is a creation story based on an African myth. "In the sky pantheon, Mawu, the female, is the moon; Lisa, the male, is the sun. Mawu is a dualistic figure, one side of its body being female, with eyes forming the moon, and bearing the name of Mawu, "body divided." The other portion is male: the eyes are the sun, the name is Lisa" (Mawu-Lisa and the Shape of the Universe 2024, 1).

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<sup>1</sup> Dragon World, Tamara Macfarlane, Dorling Kindersley, 2021.

The character is introduced by name, with the addition that they are "both He and She" (Macfarlane 2021, 56). Contextually, the duality is clear, and it would be unwelcome to force gender on them. In English, the author cleverly bypasses using pronouns, despite calling Mawu-Lisa a "God<sup>2</sup>", and "God of All Creation". Since English verbs do not need to "know" the gender of the speaker or character unless differentiating between the third person singular and other persons in the present tense, the author maintains the duality by simply avoiding the usage of present tense: "Fly Aido-Hwedo, fly," called out Mawu-Lisa, the great God of All Creation" (Macfarlane 2021, 56).

In Slovak translation, the choice was made to indicate the duality of Mawu-Lisa's gender by having them use the plural form of address, reflected in the verb suffixes. The construction where the singular noun and plural verb do not align is in Slovak called "onikanie" (Kesselová 2005) and indicates that the person addressed as "they" in singular taking a verb in plural has a high social standing (Mistrík 1993). Although this form has archaic connotations, they fit well to the character's age and origin. It is also important to consider the fact that this form of address is dying out and younger people might not be familiar with it (Sedláková 2011). An opportunity then arises to repurpose it and if used to stress duality instead of indicating politeness, it might in the future gain new connotations, which were utilized in the following cases.

ST<sup>3</sup>: "Land," commanded Mawu-Lisa finally, "this is where our work must begin" (Macfarlane 2021, 56).

TT<sup>4</sup>: „Pristaň," **prikázali** nakoniec Mawu-Lisa. „Tu začneme pracovať" (Macfarlane 2023, 56).

BT<sup>5</sup>: "Land," **commanded**<sub>they, plural</sub> Mawu-Lisa finally, "we start working here."

Making Mawu-Lisa take plural verbs stressing their duality was suitable also because of the absence of adjectives. In Slovak, adjectives differentiate between male and female form also in plural – e.g. *pretty*<sub>they, female</sub> as *pekné* or *pretty*<sub>they, male</sub> as *pekní* (Halová 2021). Had there been adjectives present describing the deity, a different strategy would have to be applied.

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<sup>2</sup> Note the usage of gendered noun.

<sup>3</sup> Source text.

<sup>4</sup> Target text.

<sup>5</sup> Back translation.

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ST: Mawu-Lisa, who was both He and She, stood on Aido-Hwedo's mighty tongue and raised a stick to the sky (Macfarlane 2021, 56).

TT: Mawu-Lisa, muž i žena zároveň, **stáli** na obrovskom jazyku draka Aido-Hwedo a k oblohe **vystreli** ruku s vetvičkou (Macfarlane 2023, 56).

BT: Mawu-Lisa, who was both man and woman, **stood**<sub>they, plural</sub> on Aido-Hwedo's mighty tongue and **raised**<sub>they, plural</sub> a stick to the sky.

ST: Mawu-Lisa guided him to slide across its surface [...] (Macfarlane 2021, 56).

TT: Mawu-Lisa mu **prikázali**, aby sa po nej plazil (Macfarlane 2023, 56).

BT: Mawu-Lisa **guided**<sub>they, plural</sub> him to slide across its surface [...].

ST: Mawu-Lisa poured in fish, hippos, and other water creatures (Macfarlane 2021, 57).

TT: Mawu Lisa **pridali** ryby, nosorožce a iné vodné živočíchy (Macfarlane 2023, 57).

BT: Mawu-Lisa **added**<sub>they, plural</sub> fish, hippos, and other water creatures.

ST: Mawu-Lisa worried about the burden the great serpent must endure, and pledged to help him however possible (Macfarlane 2021, 58).

TT: Mawu-Lisa **sa trápili** kvôli bremenu uvalenému na draka a **rozhodli sa** pomôcť mu (Macfarlane 2023, 58).

BT: Mawu-Lisa **worried**<sub>they, plural</sub> about the burden the great serpent must endure, and **pledged**<sub>they, plural</sub> to help him however possible.

These examples illustrate using the plural verb form with nouns in singular. As can be seen, the name of the god takes verbs in plural in Slovak, since these morphologically differ in singular and plural. Hence it is clear that the character of Mawu-Lisa is not heteronormative and that it encompasses both the male and the female aspect of human nature.

Gendered nouns pose a significant problem in translation, specifically the word "god". Morphologically, its female opposite is the word "goddess".

The author has not opted for the gender-neutral "deity" instead and the translator opted for generic masculine as well, although this choice is debatable. The reason for choosing the generic masculine was that the dual gender of the character is indicated with verbs; the author of the original has not opted for gender-neutral nouns; and Séléš (2018) advocates the usage of agender mostly for professions.

ST: The God of All Creation pulled clouds above the holes and ordered them to rain (Macfarlane 2021, 57).

TT: **Stvoriteľ** nad ne **pritiahli** oblaky a **prikázali** im, aby spustili dážď (Macfarlane 2023, 57).

BT: **The God of All Creation**<sub>he, singular</sub> **pulled**<sub>they, plural</sub> clouds above the holes and **ordered**<sub>they, plural</sub> them to rain.

ST: Aido-Hwedo lifted his fine form skyward, taking great care not to crush the God standing inside his mouth (Macfarlane 2021, 56).

TT: Aido-Hwedo zdvihol svoje krásne telo do vzduchu a dával pozor, aby nepomliaždil **boha** vo svojich čeľustiach (Macfarlane 2023, 56).

BT: Aido-Hwedo lifted his fine form into the air, taking care not to crush the **God**<sub>he, singular</sub> inside his mouth.

This is not a universal strategy, and far from an ideal one. Using agender nouns was considered, however, as mentioned above, according to Séléš (2018), these are preferable when talking about professions. Moreover, they might seem grammatically questionable in Slovak. On the other hand, nowadays agender nouns are being used more frequently and they are a suitable option for when non-heteronormative gender needs to be indicated:

ST: **The God of All Creation** pulled clouds above the holes and ordered them to rain (Macfarlane 2021, 57).

Hypothetical TT: **Stvoriteľstvo**<sub>it, singular</sub> nad ne pritiahli oblaky a prikázali im, aby spustili dážď.

Hypothetical BT: **The deity of creation** pulled clouds above the holes and ordered them to rain.



Since the character's dual gender is already indicated with verbs, agender nouns were not utilized. Choosing to use them would be an equally functional translation strategy, yet the non-binary character of Mawu-Lisa was successfully maintained, on the one hand, thanks to the absence of adjectives, which indicate gender also in plural, and on the other hand, thanks to the ability of verbs to indicate plural without indicating gender. With widespread usage of such nouns in the future it would be possible and even advisable to reconsider this approach and consider agender nouns one of the possible strategies when facing a similar translation challenge.

## 6. Conclusion

The presented paper suggests an outline of the problems relating to translating genderless/agender or other non-heteronormatively gendered characters from a language with natural gender into a language with grammatical gender, using English and Slovak as a language pair. Two research questions were stated - 1. How can a language using grammatical gender be gender inclusive? 2. Should specific translation strategies be used when translating gender in children's literature?

From the presented sources it is obvious that a language with grammatical gender can be gender-inclusive. In case of Slovak, there are several possibilities which were outlined drawing from Séléš (2018), Halová (2021), and Vargicovie (2022). Although the usage of gender-inclusive language is considerably less spread in Slovak than in English, progress is being made, and options for using gender-inclusive language are increasing. Urbančová (2022) states that there are undoubtedly many reasons for the slow, reserved, or partial implementation of gender-balanced language in Slovak and it remains a great challenge to push the idea of gender balance of language into the awareness of the wider public, to pay linguistic attention to this issue and within it to search for appropriate methods of linguistic expression of the current varied gender identity expressions.

When translating children's literature, it is necessary to indicate gender-inclusivity somehow – that is, not to ignore it. The educational aspect of children's literature is ever-present. Undoubtedly, using such language as early as possible may support tolerance, inclusivity, acceptance, and other values deemed necessary for people living in democratic countries. The translator has ample choices when it comes to transferring the non-heteronormative gender into a language using grammatical gender. One of these options was illustrated with the translator opting for referring to the character as with plural verb forms tied to nouns in singular and repurposing the usage of the archaic honorific for nouns in singular taking verbs in plural. Contextually, the duality of the character's gender was maintained. This strategy might work for other

texts as well, but with more complex ones, different strategies might have to be considered. In this case, the lack of adjectives when referring to the non-heteronormative character allowed the usage of plural in verbs, with suffixes not indicating "they – male" or "they – female" as is common in Slovak.

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