

Thesis

MSc Applied Linguistics (2 years)

**Through the Translation Looking Glass:
Differences in Writing Styles of Male and
Female English Language Writers**

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ABSTRACT

Literary studies refer to the male sentence and the female sentence, but the definition of such sentences is highly subjective, and frequently untangible. This study uses a quantitative approach to determine the differences between male and female sentences. Urdu translations of four short stories written by female writers were compared with four other Urdu translations of short stories written by male writers, by calculating the frequencies of masculine and feminine nouns used to describe the male and female characters in each story. The stories were from 'A Selection of Short Stories and One Act Plays for BA students' by Prof. Salim Ahmad Siddiqi. All eight writers were native English speakers. The nouns for each character were gathered by selecting words used by the narrator to describe the character, words used by the character to describe himself or herself, words other characters used to describe the character, and the names of any objects the character interacted with in the story. These words were divided into two groups, masculine and feminine, and the percentage of masculine and feminine nouns was calculated. In order to determine any differences between male and female writers, the percentage of masculine nouns allocated to male characters and the percentage of feminine nouns allocated to female characters were separated and grouped according to whether they were created by a male or female author. These figures were then represented as bar graphs. The results of the study show that male writers tend to create male characters with higher levels of masculine nouns and female characters with higher levels of feminine nouns. In contrast female writers have fewer characters with high frequencies of either masculine or feminine nouns.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the 'me' who said, "I couldn't."

I proved him wrong.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where gender stereotypes exist in all cultures. Distinctions are made between men and women in myriad ways. What these stereotypes are and how common they are, varies from society to society. There have been many studies on how societies portray men and women and their roles within a particular culture. Many studies have also looked at the role language plays in this portrayal of gender. The stylistic analysis of literature reveals how words associated with each of the two genders help to perpetuate gender stereotypes.

In recent years there have been moves to change this scenario. French and Spanish feminist writers have sought to address the problem of a ‘phallogocentric history’ by attempting to rewrite it. (Ordonez, J.E., 1987). Others also have tried to balance the scales by emphasizing the need for the documentation of the ‘masculine experience’ (Schwenger, P., 1979). This suggests that, in literature at least, the words men and women use, are influenced by their gender. Therefore, the gender of the author of a piece of work may play an important role in the way readers perceive fictional characters in a story.

The biological sex of writers is predetermined before birth, but the way they express or think about their gender, and the characters they create, and write about, may be determined through their cultural experiences and the norms of the society to which they belong. These norms will usually help to shape a writer’s sexuality and the way they view their own and other people’s gender. Generally speaking, male members of a particular society would be expected to adopt qualities from a list of traits considered to be masculine in that society. Similarly, females would need to conform to a set of female traits. Even gay and lesbian individuals, be they writers or characters in a story, would need to select certain traits from within their cultural norms even though they may not be wholly masculine or wholly feminine.

This research study focuses on points that consider the role grammatical gender plays in reinforcing writers’ sexual stereotypes in a particular language and whether these stereotypes travel across languages during translation. In addition, as with the feminist writers of France who translate from French to English in an attempt to neutralize the effect of grammatical gender which they consider to be sexist, we must consider whether these stereotypes can be controlled.

In the case of translation from English to Urdu we move towards a target language (TL) which possesses grammatical gender. Despite the fact that grammatical gender is not revealed in English, the source language (SL), there is evidence to suggest that a so-called ‘metaphorical gender’ plays a role in placing connotative gender meaning to words. This was claimed by Deborah Cameron (Wheeler, A., 2003) who conducted research on native English speaker who were not familiar with any other languages. A similar study in French and Spanish (Forbes, J. N. et al., 2008) where images of various everyday objects were shown to subjects and asked to decide their gender, if they were animated for a film, showed that grammatical gender did play a role in the allocation of biological gender. This may have important implications in the way writers select words to create and portray characters in literature.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To explore whether the gender bias of writers, writing in English, travels across languages during translation from English to Urdu, and whether this bias is revealed through the grammatical gender of Urdu.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

Does Urdu grammatical gender highlight the gender bias of male and female writers in literature translated from English to Urdu?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study brings together the areas of grammatical gender, translation, literature and gender studies. The focus is grammatical gender, but previous studies on bilingual subjects such as those conducted by Forbes, J. N. et al., (2008), and Phillips and Boroditsky (2003), have concentrated on single words or pairs of words, whereas this study will consider larger samples of discourse and consider the collective effect of gendered words within these larger samples. Previous research has not considered the effects played by grammatical gender when translating literature. This will be a significantly new contribution to the field of gender studies as the analysis of literature translated from English to Urdu aims to highlight gender biases amongst male and female writers of English literature through the identification of any stereotypical images of the characters they may create.

1.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Grammatical gender is one of many different types of linguistic information that is available to readers of a piece of literature which enables them to make sense of what they read and helps them to understand and follow the story. If we take nouns out of the context of the story, we lose much of the detail that readers rely upon to create a mental picture of what the story is about and the kind of character they are reading about. From this context, they will already know that a particular character is male or female when they interact with words that describe him or her, and will respond to the words accordingly. Grammatical gender will help to reinforce the image they have of male and female story characters.

This study makes the assumption that the information via grammatical gender, which is transferred from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT), reflects the ideas of the author of the source text. In reality, the words used in the target text are determined by the translator and may play a significant role in influencing the meaning of the TT.

As the stories are only translated into one language, Urdu, the results can only be said to hold true for this language. A general theory could only be formulated if similar trends were observed in translations in other languages.