

# **Impact of the Gender System on the Translatability of Personification in Literary Texts**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Personification is a figure of speech in which objects are given human qualities. This rhetorical device, per se, may cause particular difficulties for the translator when rendering a literary text between languages that belong to two remote cultures. The difficulties encountered may arise from a number of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors.

The present paper deals with the potential effect of the gender system on the translatability of personification .It is to examine the hypothesis that the gender system would significantly affect the translation of personifications within literary texts.

The study has found that translators usually take their mother tongue gender system as their perspective to comprehend the ST personification. They are also restricted by the TL gender system to a great extent, impeding them from arriving at TL meaning equivalents of references to the objects in the SL. Therefore, The gender system shapes to a great extent both processes of comprehension and translation of personification in literary texts.

## **1. Introduction**

Personification is a figure of speech in which objects are given human qualities. This rhetorical device, per se, may cause particular difficulties for the translator when rendering a literary text into a language whose culture is remote from that of the source text (ST). These difficulties arise from a number of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors.

The present paper deals with the potential effect of the gender system on the translatability of personification .It is to examine the hypothesis

that the gender system would significantly affect the translation of personifications within literary texts.

To achieve the aim of this paper, an excerpt from an English short story with several expressions of personification value is edited into two versions.

In the first version, all the animate pronouns that refer to the personified creatures and objects are changed into 'it' or into 'its' as grammatically appropriate. Hence, the translators whose first language is Arabic and who are supposed to render this version into their mother tongue, are kept unable to recognize the gender reference of the concepts personified from the text itself. It is only the translators' knowledge of the source language (SL) culture that can help recognize the gender of the creatures personified in the ST.

The second version, on the other hand, is kept intact as far as the animate pronouns that refer to the personified creatures and objects are concerned. The translators, participating in the test, are supposed to recognize the gender of the creatures personified from the text itself.

In both cases, the translators are given the same translation on two different sheets of paper; each is attached to a version. Translation options are made available on each sheet for the translators to tick off for eleven personification expressions selected from the ST.

The test participants are instructed that the first version ('it' version) should be ticked off first and that the second version is to be the second to read and tick off. The results obtained are sorted out and discussed.

## **2. Personification and Gender**

Personification is a figure of speech, which ascribes animate qualities (life, thoughts, speech, feelings, etc.), to things or abstract notions (*love is blind* or a ship as '*she*'). Perrine (1974:24) defines personification as " the ascription of characteristics of a human being to an animal, an object, or an idea. It is actually a kind of metaphor in which the comparison is implied and the figurative term of comparison is always a human being ".

Personification is commonly used in poetry and other literary genres in both English and Arabic. However, the notion of ascribing the animate qualities to non-animate things or abstract ideas has been investigated in

Arabic under two concepts, *الاستعارة المكنية* and *التشخيص* (Hilal, n.d.: 126).

The concept (*الاستعارة المكنية*) is broader in scope than that of the English personification as it includes the examples where the figurative term of comparison is either a human being or a non-human being (al-Jarim & Amin, n.d.: 75-76).

For Example:

Compared to a human being:"

"و لما سكت عن موسى الغضب" (الأعراف: ١٥٤)

To a non- human being:

"قال ربي أني وهن العظم مني وأشتعل الرأس شيئا" (مريم: ٤)

As regards (*التشخيص*), this term has been extensively used by modern Arab linguists and rhetoricians to refer to the notion of ascribing the animate qualities to non-animate things or abstract ideas where the figurative term of comparison is only a human being. It is worth mentioning that it is *Abdul Qahir al-Jurjani* who first used this term centuries before the modern scholars did. ( Hilal: ibid.).

In both languages, gender plays an important role in constructing personification. A great deal of English personifications is the use of animate pronouns for inanimate things, objects and creatures instead of using 'it'. Hence, there is a close relation between gender and personification.

### **3. Types of Gender Systems**

Gender is a device used by language to refer to one or more divisions of sex in the outside world. Languages differ in the number of genders they recognize. Some languages do not recognize any linguistic gender; others have more than ten (Aziz: 1989:119).

Gender, hence, is considered a complicated category of language. At this point, It is worth mentioning that languages, in general, show two types of gender systems, one according to grammatical conventions, e.g.

the Arabic gender system, and the other is according to natural conventions such as that of the English language.

However, the gender system of a given language may suffer a change over time. In this respect, Smith (1996: 130) states that, "the traditional theory holds that at one time English had a grammatical gender system, but made the transition to a natural gender system in the East Midlands of England by the early twelfth century".

A grammatical gender system uses inflections to indicate whether a referent's gender is masculine, feminine or neuter. Inflections are affix-tags attached to words, and involve a more complex system of declensions for nouns, pronouns, adjectives and determiners, which must agree, or concord, with the noun's gender.

The Arabic gender system, a grammatical, has two genders; masculine and feminine. These two kinds correspond to male and female animate objects to a great extent. However, the two genders also include inanimate things where the division into masculine and feminine is formal (based on gender markers affixed to the form of the word (Aziz: *ibid.*)).

A natural gender system, on the other hand, indicates gender according to its referent's biological sex and English is a clear example of this kind of gender system. In this connection, Classen (1919: 101) argues that, "in a natural gender system is hardly even a category, for nouns and pronouns reveal the referent's gender themselves, and determiners and adjectives take the same form, whether modifying a masculine, feminine or neuter referent. Hence, she/ he/it is happy".

Although the natural gender system seems closer to the outside world, theories have given various reasons for the origin of grammatical gender systems. Ibrahim (1973: 15) mentions that, "traditional theories attribute the origin of grammatical gender systems to the human- primitive tendency to anthropomorphize nature, when one endows human qualities to non-human creatures and objects".

The grammatical gender is but an accidental outcome of the linguistic development of some languages. Its main function and advantage is its ability to clarify syntactic agreement in otherwise ambiguous cases. Thus, a language based on a grammatical gender can indicate the gender of unsexed noun with inflections, whereas the English natural gender system must add the words ' male' or ' female' to make the referent's sex clear such as ' a male Canadian' or ' a female Canadian' compared to (کندي) or (کنديه) in Arabic.

There is also a serious shortcoming that the natural gender system suffers from. Platzer (2001:36), in this respect, argues that even the natural gender system does not equate the gender of the noun with the sex

of its referent. Rather, gender is merely related to the class of referent involved so that human animates take masculine or feminine gender while all other classes of referents (animals, plants, objects, abstracts) receive neuter gender.

Therefore the English gender system in general is not so much based on natural sex, or grammar, but on the class distinction between (human) animate and (non-human) inanimate referents.

In the case of animals in the English gender system, they tend to shift between the two classes of animate and inanimate depending on familiarity or involvement (Biber, 1999: 317). Hence, one would most likely use 'it' when referring to a creature like an ant, but 'he' or 'she' when referring to a pet. In many cases, moreover, specific lexical types for male and female referents often indicate the gender of an animal, especially mammals and birds. Therefore, the attribution of gender depended more on pragmatics- the attitude of the speaker more than referent.

In general, however, as Baugh (1957:11) indicates that," the use of masculine and feminine gender for non-animates is not a function of grammatical or natural gender but of attributive gender, a type of personification and a matter of rhetoric, not grammar".

## **4. Translation of Literary Texts**

Over the last four decades, many theoretical positions to the study of literary translation have developed as a result of the progress made in the field of literary studies.

The new approaches seem to make a departure from the traditional essentialist approach, called by Lefevere (1988: 173) 'the corpus approach', which is based on the romantic notion to literature. That notion sees the author as a quasi-divine 'creator' possessing 'genius'. He is believed to be the origin of the creation that is original, unique, organic, transcendental and hence sacred.

Thus, translation has been seen a mere copy of the unique entity, which by definition is uncopy-able. The traditional discussion of the problems of translation considers finding equivalents not just for Lexis, syntax or concepts, but also for features like style, genre, figurative language, historical stylistic dimensions, polyvalence, connotations as well as denotations, cultural items and culture-specific concepts and values.

What differentiates the recent approaches from the traditional one is that they view literature as a subsystem by its own. In this respect, Lefevere (ibid. 16) states that, " literature is a subsystem of society and it interacts with other systems". This subsystem has a control function which works from outside of this system as well as from inside. The control function within the system, as Lefevere (ibid.: 23) argues, works through two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, symbols, and the other a concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the society at large".

Therefore, these approaches basically come in line with Talgeri and Verma's (1988:3) definition of a word as being " essentially a cultural memory in which the historical experience of the society is embedded" Literature here is seen distinct from the non-literary use of language in terms of various dimensions. Riffaterre (1992: 209) separates literary and non-literary use of language by saying that literature is different because:

- i) It semiotizes the discursive features e.g. lexical selection is made morphophonemically as well as semantically;
- ii) It substitutes semiosis for mimesis which gives literary language its indirection, and;
- iii) It has the textuality that integrates semantic components of the verbal sequence so that the parts of a literary text would seem vitally linked to the whole of the text and the text is more or less self-contained.

The literary translation, then, is a form of intercultural communication raising the problems that are not merely at the verbal level or at the linguistic level. It is no longer a problem of finding verbal equivalents but also of interpreting a text encoded in one semiotic system with the help of another.

In the translation of a literary text from English into Arabic, the translator, however, is faced with two main problems; first he / she has to deal with concepts which requires an understanding of the English culture. Secondly, he /she has to arrive at TL meaning equivalents of references to certain objects in SL, which include features absent from TL culture.

Moreover, the translation of English personification into Arabic must take the following into consideration:

- i) Personification may contribute to the symbolism, which the author of the literary text tries to reveal. A distortion whatsoever may lead the overall text symbolism to collapse, given that symbolism is not explicitly told, but rather implied.
- ii) Part of the personification in English is fully based on using animate pronouns instead of 'it'. It contributes to the text intertextuality in otherwise the text is less self-contained.

To demonstrate the effect of all these variables on the translation of personification, an excerpt from Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Red Rose*, a short story based on personification and symbolism, is edited in two versions (appendixes 1 and 2). The first version is edited through deleting the indications of the masculine and feminine pronouns used in the original text to refer to the personified creatures and objects by replacing them with 'it' or with 'its' as grammatically appropriate. The second version, on the other hand, is kept unchanged, i.e., the pronouns referring to the personified creatures and objects are kept as mentioned in the original text of the story.

A translation (Appendix 3) is prepared by the researchers with two options are given to the words and phrases related to personification in question. The translation is given along with the first version ('it' version-henceforth IV) to ten translation lecturers, each with no less than five-year-experience in translation teaching and practice, and are asked to read the text carefully and tick off the rightful option in the translation. Afterwards, the same lecturers are asked to carefully read the Second version (Original Version -henceforth OV) and tick off the rightful options on the same translation on a different sheet of paper.

By so doing, the translators' ability to deal with the concepts which require an understanding of the English culture is checked out with the IV, whereas the OV can check out the ability of the translator to arrive at TL meaning equivalents of references to certain objects in SL. The results have come out striking.

## **5. 'It' Version Results**

The results obtained from the test translation sheets of paper related to 'it' version are sorted out as shown in table (1).

**Table (1) Results of 'It' Version**

Expression	Reference in SL	References indicated by test participants				Percentage of incorrectness in Comprehension
		M		F		
		No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	
1.from its nest	F*	8	80%	2	20%	80%
2. nightingale (1)	F	8	80%	2	20%	80%
3. it (1)	F	8	80%	2	20%	80%
4.nightingale (2)	F	8	80%	2	20%	80%
5.nightingale (3)	F	8	80%	2	20%	80%
6. little green lizard	M*	2	20%	8	80%	80%
7. it ( 2)	M	2	20%	8	80%	80%
8.its	M	2	20%	8	80%	80%
9. daisy to its	M	1	10%	9	90%	90%
10. nightingale (4)	F	8	80%	2	20%	80%
11. laughed	M	2	20%	8	80%	80%

### **Notes**

\*F stands for Feminine

\*M stands for Masculin

## **6. Original Version Results**

The results obtained from the test translation sheets of paper related to text original version are sorted out as shown in table (2).

**Table (2) Results of Text Original Version**

Expression	Reference in SL	References Translated by Test Translators				Percentage of disparity between ST and TT reference
		M		F		
		No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	
1.from her nest	F*	5	50%	5	50%	50%
2. nightingale (1)	F	5	50%	5	50%	50%
3. she	F	5	50%	5	50%	50%
4.nightingale (2)	F	5	50%	5	50%	50%
5.nightingale (3)	F	5	50%	5	50%	50%
6. little green lizard	M*	2	20%	8	80%	80%
7. he	M	2	20%	8	80%	80%
8.his	M	2	20%	8	80%	80%
9. daisy to his	M	1	10%	9	90%	90%
10. nightingale (4)	F	4	40%	6	60%	40%
11. laughed	M	2	20%	8	80%	80%

### **Notes**

\*F stands for Feminine

\*M stands for Masculine

## **7. Discussion of Results**

Results on table (1) have indicated that the translators rendering the text into their mother tongue, have been deceived by the TL gender system reference with an average rate of 80.91%. Eight of the personified expressions, feminine in the SL, have been figured out by the test translators as masculine (80%) whereas only two translators have succeeded to figure out the expressions as feminine (20%).

Four personified expressions, masculine in the SL have been rendered as feminine by eight translators (80%), whereas only two translators have correctly rendered them masculine (20%). One personified expression, masculine in the SL, has been comprehended by nine translators as feminine (90%), while only one translator has understood it masculine (10%).

The average percentage of incorrectness in the comprehension by the translators for the personified expressions has reached (80.91%).

This result reveals the inability shown by the test translators to deal with the concepts, which require an understanding of the English culture. Another conclusion can also be drawn here that most translators translating to their mother tongue take the TL gender system as their perspective to comprehend the ST personification. This distorts the symbolism, if any, which is based on the expressions with personification value in a literary text.

Results on table (2) reveal that the translators translating into their mother tongue have tried to make some adaptation to the personified expressions, equal to their counterparts in the SL and yet acceptable in the TL. However, these adaptations have been very limited and highly restricted by the TL gender system.

Five personified expressions, feminine in the ST, have been equally translated into feminine (50%) and masculine (50%). Four personified expressions, masculine in the ST, have been translated by eight translators as feminine (80%), and by only two translators as masculine (20%). One feminine personified expression in the ST has been translated by six translators as feminine (60%) and by four translators as masculine (40%). One masculine personified expression in the ST has been rendered into Arabic by nine translators as feminine (90%), and only one translator has insisted on rendering it as masculine (10%).

The average percentage of disparity in the reference between the ST and TT has reached (63.64%). This result indicates that though the translators have translated into their mother tongue, they have been unable to arrive at TL meaning equivalents of references to the objects in the SL due to the restrictions laid down by the TL gender system. It

means that despite the efforts made by the translators to bridge up the linguistic and extra-linguistic gaps between the two languages, they have been unable to build up expressions of personification parallel to those of the ST and thus distorting the symbolism built in the ST on personification.

At last, one can say that the gender system shapes to a great extent both processes of comprehending and translating personification in literary texts.

## **8. Conclusions**

- i) The study has found that translators usually take their mother tongue gender system as their perspective to comprehend the ST personification.
- ii) Translators are restricted by the TL gender system to a great extent, impeding them from arriving at TL meaning equivalents of references to the objects in the SL.
- iii) The gender system shapes to a great extent both processes of comprehension and translation of personification in literary texts.

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## APPENDIX 1

She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses," cried the young Student; "but in all my garden there is no red rose."

From its nest in the holm-oak tree the Nightingale heard him, and it looked out through the leaves, and wondered.

"No red rose in all my garden!" he cried, and his beautiful eyes filled with tears. "Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched."

"Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale. "Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."

"The Prince gives a ball tomorrow night," murmured the young Student, "and my love will be of the company. If I bring her a red rose she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine. But there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break."

"Here indeed is the true lover," said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers -- what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold."

"The musicians will sit in their gallery," said the young Student, "and play upon their stringed instruments, and my love will dance to the sound of the harp and the violin. She will dance so lightly that her feet will not touch the floor, and the courtiers in their gay dresses will throng round her. But with me she will not dance, for I have no red rose to give her"; and he flung himself down on the grass, and buried his face in his hands, and wept.

"Why is he weeping?" asked a little Green Lizard, as it ran past him with its tail in the air.

"Why, indeed?" said a Butterfly, who was fluttering about after a sunbeam.

"Why, indeed?" whispered a Daisy to its neighbour, in a soft, low voice.

"He is weeping for a red rose," said the Nightingale.

"For a red rose?" they cried; "how very ridiculous!" and the little Lizard, which was something of a cynic, laughed outright

## APPENDIX 2

She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses," cried the young Student; "but in all my garden there is no red rose."

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### APPENDIX 3

قالت إنها ستراقصني أن جلبت لها ورودا حمراء، صاح التلميذ الشاب : ولكن لا يوجد في حديقتي كلها وردة حمراء واحدة قط.

ومن (عشه، عشا) أعلى شجرة البلوط (سمع العنديل، سمعت العنديلية) ذلك الفتى (فنظر، فنظرت) خلال الأوراق (مندهشا، مندهشة).

ما من وردة حمراء واحدة في حديقتي كلها، صاح التلميذ واغرورقت عيناه الجميلتان بالدموع . "آه، ما أصغر الأشياء التي تتوقف عليها السعادة! لقد قرأت كل ما كتبه الحكماء وحويت كل أسرار الفلاسفة ولكن لاجل وردة حمراء واحدة تعست حياتي."

"ها هو ذا أخيرا عاشق حقيقي" (قال العنديل، قالت العنديلية). "ليلة تلو ليلة تغنيت به، وليلة تلو ليلة حكيت للنجوم حكايته، وها أنا ذا أراه. شعره داكن دكنة الليل، وشفاهه حمراء حمرة الوردة التي يطلبها، بيد أن العشق أحال وجهه عاجا شاحبا وترك الحزن إماراته على محياه."

"سيقوم الأمير حفلة راقصة ليلة الغد،" تتم الفتى التلميذ "حببتي ستحضر الحفلة، فأن أحضرت وردة حمراء واحدة لها ستراقصني حتى الفجر. أن أحضرت وردة حمراء لها سأضمها بين ذراعي وستضع رأسها على كتفي وتشبك يداها يداي. ولكن ما من وردة حمراء واحدة قط في حديقتي، سأجلس وحيدا إذا، وستمر بي غير أبهة لي، فيتكسر قلبي كمدا".

"ها هو ذا حقا عاشق حقيقي" (قال العنديل، قالت العنديلية) ". ما تغنيت به عانى منه وما تمتعت به آذاه. لاجرم أن الحب شيء بديع، فهو أنفوس من الزمرد وأجمل من الياقوت. لا يمكن للألبيء ولا الأنعام أن تشتريه ولا يعرض أبدا في الأسواق، فلا التجار لهم أن يبيعوه ولا يوزن في موازين الذهب."

"سيقعد الموسيقيون في شرفاتهم،" قال الفتى التلميذ وأردف " وسيعزفون على آلاتهم الوترية لترقص حببتي على عزف القيثارة والكمان. سترقص بخفة لا تكاد معها قدماها أن تلامس الأرض وسيلتئم رجال الحاشية بأثوابهم الزاهية حولها. ولكنها لن ترقص معي لأنني لا أملك وردة حمراء أعطيها إياها"، ودفن نفسه بين الحشائش واضعا رأسه بين يديه ليبيكي.

"لم يبيكي؟" (تساءلت سحلية خضراء صغيرة، تسائل سحلية خضراء صغيرة) و(هي تمر، هو يمر) به و

(ذيلها، ذيله) -في الهواء.

"حقا، لم يبيكي؟" قالت فراشة تلهث وراء شعاع الشمس.

"حقاً، لم يبكي"، (همست زهرة لرفيقتها ، همس زهرة لرفيقها ) بصوت ناعم رخيم.  
"أنه يبكي لاجل وردة حمراء" ( قال العندليب، قالت العندليبه).  
"لاجل وردة حمراء؟" صاحوا جميعاً: "ما أتفهه من شيء!" و(ضحكت، ضحك) السحلية  
ضحكة عالية.

## ملخص البحث

التشخيص احد الأوجه البلاغية التي تضيف على الأشياء صفات آدمية. ويتسبب هذا الوجه البلاغي بالذات بصعوبات جمّة للمترجم عند نقله نصاً أدبياً بين لغتين تعودان لثقافتين مختلفتين. وتنشأ الصعوبات من عوامل عدة منها لغوي ومنها غير لغوي.

تبحث هذه الدراسة الأثر الكامن لنظام الجنس على ترجمة التشخيص، ولهذا فهي تتقصى فرضية أن نظام الجنس في اللغة يؤثر تأثيراً عظيماً على ترجمة التشخيص في النصوص الأدبية.

وقد وجدت الدراسة أن المترجمين يعتمدون عادة على نظام الجنس في لغتهم الأم قياساً لفهم التشخيص في النص الأصل، وهم بذلك يتقيدون بنظام الجنس في اللغة الهدف إلى حد كبير مما يعيق وصولهم إلى معنى مكافئ في اللغة الهدف لإشارة الأشياء كما تظهر في اللغة الأصل. ولهذا فإن نظام الجنس يشكل إلى حد كبير عمليتي فهم التشخيص و ترجمته في النصوص الأدبية.