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Gender issues in language and translation: English ↔ Ukrainian

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The paper deals with a sociolinguistic issues of gender. A translation approach has been employed to compare gender in English and Ukrainian languages, cultural traditions and contexts. Ways of avoiding sexism have been suggested.

Key words — gender, avoiding sexism, translation, intercultural communication, English/Ukrainian parallels.

I. Introduction

Recently, gender issues and gender studies have become a target of intensive socio-cultural research. Sex is considered a biological notion while gender is viewed from a socio-cultural perspective. Gender research reflects social dynamics on male-female relations. In male-dominated world sexism is a belief that one sex is not as good, clever etc as the other, especially when it results in unfair treatment of women by men.

Tannen D. [8] following Lakoff R. joined the growing dialogue on gender and language because the risk of ignoring differences is greater than the danger of naming them. She claimed that there are gender differences in ways of speaking and we need to identify and understand them. Tannen D. recognizes talk between men and women as cross-cultural communication.

II. Gender and Language

In the era of opening opportunity, women are beginning to move into position of authority. Democratic society denies any kind of discrimination, sex discrimination included. Language reflects social changes. Words discriminating against a person because of his/her sex are called sexist words. Although this form of discrimination can be against men, most instances involve discriminating women. The reason is that many of our words suggest male superiority. Our language developed in a male-dominated society. From this perspective, the situation in Ukraine is much more problematic as compared to the U.S. and the UK [1]. A common tendency around the civilized world is to avoid sexist words.

III. Ways of avoiding sexism in language

Suggestions for avoiding some of the more troublesome sexist words are given below in Lesikar's Basic Business Communication [4].

Perhaps the most troublesome sexist words are the masculine pronouns (*he, his, him*) when they are used to refer to both sexes, as in this example: "The typical State

University student eats his lunch at the cafeteria." Assuming that State is coeducational, the use of *his* suggests male supremacy. Historically, of course, the word *his* has been classified as generic – that is, it can refer to both sexes. But many modern-day businesspeople do not agree and are offended by the use of the masculine pronoun in this way.

You can avoid the use of the masculine pronoun in three ways. First, you can reword the sentence to eliminate the offending word. Thus, the illustration above could be reworded as follows: "The typical State University student eats lunch at the cafeteria". Here are other examples:

1. Sexist: When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, he is subject to dismissal

Non-sexist: An employee who enters the security area is subject to dismissal.

2. Sexist: When a customer needs service, it is his right to ask for it.

Non-sexist: A customer who needs service has the right to ask for it.

A second way to avoid sexist use of *he, his, him* is to substitute any of a number of neutral expressions. The most common are *he or she, he/she, s/he, you, one* and *person*.

1. When an unauthorized employee enters the security area, he/she is subject to dismissal

2. When service is needed, one has the right to ask for it

A third way to avoid sexist use of the masculine pronoun is to make the reference plural. Fortunately, English has plural pronouns (*their, them, they*) that refer to both sexes:

1. When unauthorized employees enter the security area, they are subject to dismissal

2. When customers need service, they have the right to ask for it.

Many of English words are masculine even if they do not refer exclusively to men. Take *chairman*, for example. This word can refer to both sexes. But more appropriate and less offensive substitutes are *chairperson, chair* and *moderator*. Similarly, *salesman* suggests a

man, but many women work in sales. *Salesperson*, *salesclerk*, or *sales representative* would be better.

Sexism is typical of the Ukrainian language. The examples are abundant : *бзнесменка*, *омбудсмен*, *пожежник* тощо.

Still, there is a pragmatic reason to differentiate between the pairs of words such as *секретар* і *секретарка*, *помічник* і *помічниця*, *професор* і *професорка* тощо.

Gender-related issues are being considered by Ukrainian society from social and linguistic perspectives which reflects a new cultural tendency.

In Theory and Translation course at the department of Applied Linguistics at Lviv Polytechnic National University, the students are taught to be sensitive to the gender-related issue and search for adequate ways when communicating in the process of translating from English into Ukrainian or vice versa [1; 2]. The examples of such tasks are provided below:

TASK. Extend the list of sexist words and their non-sexist substitutes. Give appropriate Ukrainian equivalents.

- Man made – manufactured - штучний
- Manpower - personnel, workers -
- Congressman- representative, member of Congress -
- Businessman – business person -
- Policeman – police officer -
- Fireman – fire fighter -
- Fisherman – fisher -
- Cameraman – camera operator -
- Single mother – single parent –

TASK. Provide an adequate English version of the following Ukrainian sentences found at the Ukrainian billboards. Avoid sexist language.

Кожний *студент* повинен надати своє оновлене резюме до 11 квітня 2015 року.

Студент, який не пройшов медогляд, не буде допущений до навчання.

Кожний *пацієнт* повинен пройти первинний медогляд у кабінеті № 7.

III. Translating from a cross-cultural perspective

When we communicate with people from other cultures we often are confronted with languages, rules, and norms different from our own [3; 6]. The translation process as communication with strangers, i.e. people from other culture, presents the challenge of having to understand their cultural backgrounds and their communicative patterns [5].

The question of what happens when a text is imported from one cultural context to another is essential to the theory and practice of translation and reflects the balance between the wish to be faithful to the original text and the wish to fit into the new cultural context of the target language.

Wierzbicka A., in her book *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*, argues that we are different people not only because we speak different

languages, but we think differently, feel differently and relate to other people differently [8].

Gender-related issues are not to be neglected when translating across cultural lines. Thus, this aspect is emphasized in Handbook on Translation as Intercultural Communication [1]:

e.g. There are some related cultural issues. I have encountered a few expatriate men who were uncomfortable travelling out of town with *female interpreters* (Protocol for Interpreters).

A very vivid example of culturally marked gender usage is Britain's worship of **the sea** and **the ship**. The personal pronoun **she** and possessive pronoun **her** are used instead of **it** and **its** in the examples below:

Titanic has become one of the most famous ships in history, **her** memory kept alive by numerous books, folk songs, films, exhibits, and memorials.

RMS Titanic was a British passenger liner that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in the early morning of 15 April 1912 after colliding with an iceberg during **her maiden voyage** from Southampton, UK to New York City, US.

The collision caused the ship's hull plates to buckle inwards along her starboard side and opened five of her sixteen watertight compartments to the sea; the ship gradually filled with water. By 2:20 a.m., **she** broke apart and foundered, with well over one thousand people still aboard.

Conclusions

The gender differences in communication between male and female interlocutors have been considered in the paper across cultural lines. This aspect is to be in the focus of translation profession as well to provide adequate translation and avoid cultural pitfalls.

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