

***The Ambiguity of Gender***  
***in English - Arabic Translation***

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***Abstract***

Most linguists consider *Gender* as a grouping of nouns into classes of masculine, feminine, and sometimes neutral such that the choice of a noun of a given class syntactically has an effect on the *form* of some other words or elements of the sentence or discourse (such as articles, adjectives, and pronouns). The objective of this work is to draw the attention of translators and students of translation to the significance of the context in disambiguating the gender of the first person singular pronoun when translating from English into Arabic. This will lead to improvement in the quality of texts translated from English into Arabic. We shall first discuss the translation problems due to types of gender especially grammatical, pronominal and social gender. We will move on to the overview containing various views of this linguistic area in both Arabic and

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English, then a description of the approach and the data follows . We conclude this paper with some remarks on the role of the context in determining gender. Finally, we are going to analyze three sentences translated by a group of students in the Dept. of Translation, College of Arts, University of Mosul trying to disambiguate the gender of each sentence searching the clue to help the translator choose the appropriate Arabic translation of each English sentence.

Translation Problems due to types of Gender:

### *1. Grammatical and Pronominal Gender*

According to Pauwels (2003:557), languages with a "grammatical gender" system categorize nouns into gender classes on the basis of morphological or phonological features. Grammatical gender may cause translators some difficulties when they translate from source languages in which gender is differently grammaticalized compared with the target language like:

Arabic	English	Gender
أنا طالب في قسم الترجمة	I am a (male) student in translation Dept.	Masculine
أنا طالبة في قسم الترجمة	I am a (female) student in translation Dept.	Feminine

If we trace this gender problem we shall find that Arab students consider that every "I" in a sentence represents أنا and the other elements in the sentence like verbs, adjectives and complements as formally unmarked for masculine. Students do not relate their translations with context which may cause shifts in them. According to A.Z Guiora (1983) in English ,biological gender is of some importance only in the selection of the personal pronouns "he", "she "and "it" ; it figures nowhere else in the morphology . The Arabic language on the other hand pays more attention to sex since it determines the selection of grammatical forms. This point is very important in the study of gender since the students of translation should pay attention to the morphological differences between the two languages as to other linguistic aspects .

English has a pronominal gender system based on semantic criteria that are reflected only in personal possessive and reflexive third-person pronouns. The use of he, she and it is determined by simple principles: "male humans are masculine (he), female humans are feminine (she) and anything else is neuter (it)". (Paulwels 2003: 557) In Arabic, on the other hand, there are two genders: masculine and feminine. The first is used for male creatures and formally unmarked nouns referring to inanimate things; the latter is used for female creatures and for formally marked nouns referring to inanimate things.

Al-Qinai (2000) draws our attention to the problems the translators may encounter in translating pronominal gender from English to Arabic. If we translate the following example into English we shall find that the underlined pronoun ها indicates feminine gender while in English it is a neuter (it). So, the translator must be aware of such a pronominal problem

Arabic	Gender	English	Gender
أنها تمطر بغزارة	Feminine	It is raining heavily	Neuter

## 2. Social gender

This is a term that deals with two semantic levels: The features [male/ female] refer to the natural gender of the person referred to; nouns with these features (e.g. woman, امرأة, man, رجل) possess, therefore, a gender-specifying function. Nouns like lawyer (محامي/ محامية) or secretary (سكرتير/ سكرتيرة) on the contrary, have no gender-specifying function. Nevertheless, often the features 'generally male', 'generally female'<sup>1</sup>, respectively, are assigned to these words as a reflection of normative societal conditions." (ibid. 1990) For example:

English	Arabic
One of my lawyers did not attend the session	لم يحضر احد محامي الجلسة
One of my lawyers did not attend the session	لم تحضر إحدى محامياتي الجلسة

This example indicates discrepancy in translators' expectation of the social gender of a 'lawyer'. Al-Qinai (ibid.) concludes, "As no clues are given in the text as to the sex of the referent, the translators have to make their choice in accordance with the knowledge they possess of the source community. If we translate this phrase into Arabic: (إحدى محامياتي) it signifies that the lawyer was a female and the contrary is true if we translate it as (أحد محاميي) it signifies the lawyer was a male .

### *Overview*

Due to the fact that they belong to different families of languages, obviously there are differences between Arabic and English on one or more linguistic levels. In Arabic, it is commonly believed that in terms of gender, forms are divided into masculine and feminine. This formal division is made according to:

(a) The referent's biological sex as in the following examples:

Arabic	English	Gender
ولد	boy	Masculine
بنت	girl	feminine

(b) Conventions as shown in the following examples:

Arabic	English	Gender
أسد	lion	Masculine
سوق	market	feminine

(c) However, there are forms, which can be either feminine or masculine like:

Arabic	English	Gender
سكين	knife	Masculine/ feminine
سلاح	weapon	Masculine/ feminine

More importantly, suffixing it with one of the following can feminize a masculine form:

(a) The linked taa'

English	Arabic
A male engineer	مهندس
A female engineer	مهندسة

(b) al Alif that can be abbreviated or shortened (al Maqsūra)

Arabic	English
الابن الأكبر	The oldest son
البنات الكبرى	The oldest daughter

(c) al Alif that can be long or lengthened (al Alif al Mamdūdah)

Arabic	English
حسن	good looking (male)
حسنا	good looking (female)

However in Arabic, there are nouns which are formally feminine but functionally masculine e.g. Hamza, Talha and Zakariya (حمزة وطلحة وزكريا)

All of these are Arabic proper nouns.

In terms of concord, Canterino (1975) claims that any changes in the gender of the referent will lead to changes at the phrasal and sentential levels e.g.

Arabic	English
ولد ذكي	A clever boy
بنت ذكية	A clever sirl

On the same line W. Wright (1967) claims that in most Arabic non-imperative sentences, when the gender of the referent changes, there are morphological verbal changes:

Arabic	English
هو طرق الباب	He knocked the door
هي طرقت الباب	She knocked the door

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However, Wright (ibid.) claims that there is no morphological verbal change in this kind of sentence when the sentence is uttered by a singular male or female speaker whatever the tense of that sentence:

Arabic	English	Tense	Gender
أطرق الباب	I knock the door	Non-past (imperfect)	Masculine/ feminine
طرقت الباب	I knocked the door	past (perfect)	Masculine/ feminine

The same can be said about the sentences uttered by plural male or female speakers:

Arabic	English	Tense	Gender
نطرق الباب	We knock the door	non- past (imperfect)	Masculine/ feminine
طرقتنا الباب	We knocked the door	past (perfect)	Masculine/ feminine

This also is the case when the sentence is imperative directed to two male or female addressees like:

Arabic	English	Tense	Gender
أطرق الباب	you two knock the door	Imperative directed to two	Masculine/ feminine



Now let us move on to see how gender agreement is achieved in English. It is commonly believed that gender is not very important in English if it is compared with other languages like Arabic. For example a nominal phrase like: 'A clever student' Can be used in English with either feminine or masculine referent, i.e. there is no need to inflect the determinative and the adjective to agree with head noun of the phrase which stays unchanged. On the other hand the phrase:

Arabic	English
طالب ذكي	A clever male student

is used only with amale referent while it can not be used with a feminine referent unless the determinative and the adjective are inflected to agree with the feminine head noun of the phrase. Then the phrase becomes:

Arabic	English
طالبة ذكية	A clever female student

It is also commonly believed that at the sentence level the gender of the complement in English does not determine the choice of the subject pronoun unlike in Arabic. Let us go back to our previous example " a clever student ". This nominal phrase can be used equally with the pronouns "he" or "she" or by implication any other singular pronoun while the Arabic phrase " طالب ذكي " agrees

only with the pronoun "هو" (he) and the phrase "طالبة ذكية" agrees only with the pronoun "هي" (she). We will, therefore, have two different nominal phrases in terms of gender in two different Arabic sentences while we will have the same nominal phrase in the corresponding English ones:

Arabic	English	Gender
هو طالب ذكي	He is a clever student	Masculine
هي طالبة ذكية	She is a clever student	Feminine

After this brief account, let us move on to discuss the approach and the data of this work.

### ***The approach***

This section is devoted to describing the approach applied to the analysis and the data. As mentioned earlier, in this work we are going to draw mainly on assumptions made by Brown & Yule (1983) who claim that their views are universal. They maintain that the discourse analyst/hearer should be equipped with some principles, which could help him/her interpret what he/she encounters. They cite two main principles. These are:

- (a) The principle of local interpretation.
- (b) The principle of Analogy.

For the purpose of this work, we are going to confine ourselves to the first principle; the principle of local interpretation. Before embarking on examining this principle, it should be noted here that this principle is applicable to translation for the following reasons:

- i) The translator is a discourse analyst because he/she (whether trained or by trade) has to analyze the original text before translating it.
- ii) This principle is devised to enable the analyst or the hearer to extract interpretations from stretches of the language spoken or written.

It goes without saying then that the translator is a person whose task is to arrive at an interpretation of a written stretch of the language. This interpretation can only be achieved by reading and analyzing the text. According to this principle the analyst should be able to utilize his/her knowledge of the world and his/her previous experience of similar events. Let's consider this example:

Arabic	English
أنا حامل في الشهر الثالث	I am in the third month of my pregnancy

We can specify the gender of the speaker on the basis of our knowledge of the world. That is because that pregnancy is a biological quality associated with just one sex. Any mention,

therefore, of one sex in this situation mutually excludes the other. Thus the gender of the speaker in the above example can easily be identified.

In English-Arabic translation, guided by the principle of local interpretation, the translator should expand the text or the context to the limit where he/she could find clues helpful to produce cohesive, coherent and genderwise appropriate translation. These clues could be linguistic and/or extra linguistic and could delimit the gender and/or the number of the speaker(s) or addressee(s). He/she should also be attentive to the constancy of the entities referred to in the text or context.

How to determine Gender?

One may ask about the types of clues the translator seeks to find. As Lotfi (1990) suggests there is a number of signaling expressions in written texts enlightening the translator and helping him/her determine the gender of the speaker in texts with a high frequency of the first person singular pronouns. These are:

1) Expressions almost exclusively used by one sex not the other, like:

Arabic	English
شفرة حلاقة	Razor blade
احمر شفاه	Lipstick

2) Biological qualities exclusively associated with one sex not the other:

Arabic	English
الحمل	Pregnancy
حلاقة الوجه	Face-shaving

3) The existence of common nouns likes:

English	Arabic
husband	زوج
Wife	زوجة

4) Titles of address:

English	Arabic
Mr./Mrs./Miss	سيد / سيدة / أنسة
Sir/Madam	سيد / سيدة

5) The availability of formally inflected English expressions like:

English	Arabic
Actress	ممثلة
ambassador	سفير

6) The availability of gender clarifying expressions like

English	Arabic
Male nurse	ممرض
Woman teacher	مدرسة

7) The availability of proper nouns:

English	Arabic	Gender
Linda	لندا	Feminine
Tom	توم	Masculine

Lotfi also claims that when these linguistic clues are not available in the written text or they are not sufficient, the translator should 'hunt' for extra-linguistic clues available in or through the context. These are:

- a) The photo of the speaker (s)
- b) The voice of the speaker (s)
- c) The medium through which the text is communicated. For example, texts written in a publication associated with one sex not the other (Woman's Own) are mostly written by members of that gender.

### *Data Analysis*

In this section we are going to analyze three sentences translated by a group of fourth year students in the Translation Dept. College of Arts/University of Mosul trying to disambiguate the gender of each sentence searching the clue to help the translator choose the appropriate Arabic translation of each English sentence. To reach this aim we will try to find out any possible clue that helps

in analyzing any gender-problematic sentence making clear the type of gender in translating a sentence from Arabic into English and vice versa.

Here are symbols that will be used in this analysis:

Symbol	Meaning
Eng.Sent	English Sentence
Ara.Tra	Arabic Translation
Ambiguity	No gender clue
F	Female
M	Male

The following questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this paper:

- 1) I am a student in the translation Dept. I would like to study Shakespearean plays.
- 2) I am an Iraqi resident in USA.
- 3) I completed my study though I was pregnant.

Let us start with sentence (1); it looks ambiguous in terms of gender. Let us analyze this sentence on its own.

*Sentence (1)*

Eng.Sent	1- I am a student in the translation Dept. I would like to study Shakespearean plays.
Ara.Tra	1. أنا طالب في قسم الترجمة ارغب بدراسة مسرحيات شكسبير (M) 2. أنا طالبة في قسم الترجمة ارغب بدراسة مسرحيات شكسبير (F)
Ambiguity	No gender clues

For the reasons mentioned earlier, translation students followed the first translation using the masculine gender.

It would never occur to them (unless instructed) that the speaker is feminine. This sentence is ambiguous in terms of gender and is absolutely unhelpful to the students in determining the gender of the speaker and that is because the sentence is neutral for gender. Definitely the students here came up with a cohesive and coherent Arabic translation for one obvious reason that they took it for granted that every "I" in any sentence indicates a male speaker.

Let's move to Sentence (2) and see how the students translated it:

*Sentence (2)*

Eng.Sent	I am an Iraqi resident in USA
Ara.Tra	1. أنا عراقي مقيم في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية 2. أنا عراقية مقيمة في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية
Ambiguity	Unambiguous



Because of the reasons mentioned earlier, the students followed the first rendering but when they saw the signature (clue) in the end of the sentence they realized that the gender is female then consequently they followed the second translation.

*Complement of (2)*

Eng.Sent	(signed by) Fatima Ahmed
Ara.Tra	توقيع فاطمة أحمد
Ambiguity	Unambiguous

There is no problem when we translate from Arabic into English though there is some Arabic nouns which can be either male or female like صباح وصفاء depending on the context in determining the gender of these nouns but when we translate from English into Arabic the ambiguity will be removed. So, the students therefore usually come up with inconsistent translations in terms of gender when dealing with sentences like the one above. To avoid such inconsistency in translation, the translator is required to be guided by clues available in or through the context (like the proper name above).

For contrastive and comparative purposes let us focus our attention on sentences (1) and (2) first and then deal individually with sentence (3). In sentence (1) translation students felt that every "I" represents a male singular speaker so they followed the first

rendering (male) .In sentence (2) when they noticed that the signature was entailed which is a linguistic clue they realized that the gender is female.

Now let us go to sentence (3) which is ambiguous in terms of gender and analyze it.

***Sentence (3)***

Eng.Sent	I completed my study though I was pregnant.
Ara.Tra	أكملت دراستي رغم كوني حامل
Ambiguity	Unambiguous

This sentence was highly significant to translation students because it would help them interpret the gender of other problematic sentences in the text. This sentence represents the biological differentiation between male and female, so the students rendered it directly and without having any difficulties concerning the female gender.

## *Conclusion*

English has three genders, masculine, feminine and neuter while Arabic has two genders, masculine and feminine. Very few nouns are marked for gender in English; thus gender is more relevant to pronouns. Verbs and Adjectives have no gender or are not involved in gender agreement. Most Arabic nouns are marked for gender, which is also relevant to pronouns, verbs and adjectives. If our approach is plausible and our choice of data is convincing, we may come up with the following concluding notes. An unambiguous rendering of a gender- problematic sentence can be secured by expanding the context to the limit where a clue (linguistic or extra linguistic) can be spotted. This, at the text level, will in turn lead to a cohesive, coherent and gender wise accurate translated text. Any change in the gender-specific sentence results in a formal change in the gender- problematic sentence signaling a change in the gender of the speaker. A gender-free sentence is unhelpful in securing an unambiguous rendering of the gender-problematic sentence. Linguistic clues are not the only ones which enable the translator or the translation beginners to obtain an unambiguous translation. This implies that extra linguistic clues are as important as the linguistic ones in disambiguating the gender of the first person singular. Non-linguistic clues need separate and detailed investigation for consideration of time and space.

## ملخص

# الالتباس في تمييز الجنس في الترجمة من الانكليزية إلى العربية

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يعد معظم اللغويين الجنس تصنيفاً للأسماء إلى صنفين: مذكر و مؤنث وفي بعض الأحيان يضاف إليهما صنف آخر هو المحايد. وإنَّ اختيار الاسم من أحد هذه الأصناف له تأثير في الكلمات وعناصر الجملة ومن ضمنها أدوات الجر والصفات والضمائر.

ان الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو لفت انتباه المترجمين وطلبة الترجمة إلى أهمية النص لكشف الغموض الخاص بالجنس العائد إلى ضمير المتكلم عند الترجمة من الانكليزية إلى العربية، وهذا يؤدي إلى تحسين نوعية النصوص المترجمة من الانكليزية إلى العربية.

يتناول هذا البحث أولاً مشكلات الترجمة الخاصة بأنواع الجنس، ولاسيما النحوية والاجتماعية والمتعلقة بالضمائر، ثم يتناول وجهات النظر المتعددة من الناحية اللغوية لكنتا اللغتين العربية والانكليزية ومن ثم وصف لدراسة خاصة أعدها ج يول وج براون (1983) مع بياناتها، وأفردنا بعض الملاحظات عن دور النص في تقرير نوعية الجنس. وأخيراً يقوم البحث بتحليل ثلاث جمل ترجمها طلبة في قسم الترجمة في محاولة منهم لإزالة الغموض عن ترجمة الجنس الموجود في كل جملة وبحثاً عن الكلمات الدالة على الجنس لمساعدة المترجم على اختيار الترجمة العربية المناسبة.

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