

Transgendered Translation of Mande and Maa Languages

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Abstract

In her 2001 study of linguistic gender, *Pronoun Envy*, Anna Livia analyzes the dynamic tensions between formal and semantic gender in French and English, asserting that “[i]n the event of a clash between the two systems, semantic gender will tend to take precedence over formal gender.” This paper asserts that the same tendency is exhibited by Western(ized) scholars confronted with clashes between the formal linguistic gender in two African languages and the scholars’ own semantic gender schemata.

As more African languages and cultures are documented by scholars writing in a world language such as English or French, issues of gendered translation arise. This is particularly evident in French with its formal gender marking, but it also occurs in English where linguistic gender is semantically governed. While gender-sensitive scholars have been attempting to find gender-neutral pronouns to replace the gendered “generic pronouns” in English, the reverse trend has been taking place in English and French language scholarship on African cultures. This paper examines cases from the Mande languages of West Africa and from the Maa languages of East Africa that illustrate what amounts to phallogocentric scholarly distortion of indigenous linguistic gender, rendering particular cases of both feminine and neutral nouns into the masculine. In the Mande languages, this paper will show that where certain nouns are gender-neutral and must be marked morphemically when gender is to be specified, the neutral nouns themselves become endowed with masculine gender upon translation into French and English and, subsequently, new feminized forms are created in both languages to pair with the now-masculine noun, even though there is no grammatical motivation to do so in the language being translated. In the Maa language, the semantic distortion is even more overtly sexist: I will discuss the case of one formally feminine noun that is consistently translated as masculine. There is no grammatical motivation for transgendering this noun, but there are clear cultural incentives for doing so.

International Perspectives on Gender and Language (2007)

© José Santaemilia, Patricia Bou, Sergio Maruenda & Gora Zaragoza (eds.)
Valencia: Universitat de València. 306-317.

This paper illustrates how the gender, position, and, sometimes, religion of the scholar-translator influence how and to what degree noun transgending takes place.

Keywords: *sexism ~ transgendered translation ~ feminine nouns*

For more than 30 years, linguists have been wrestling with issues of the masculine gender as the linguistic norm (e.g. 1975 *Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Lakoff, 1980 *Man Made Language* by Dale Spender, etc.). The so-called "generic" masculine in which the unmarked case is masculine while the feminine must be marked (as in priest/priestess) has been a cause for feminist battle for all these years, and remarkable reductions of these gendered pairs have resulted: words such as *authoress*, *poetess*, *sculptoress* and *aviatrix* have been pushed off the lexical horizon by broadening the semantic scope of the unmarked *author*, *poet*, *sculptor*, and *aviator* to include women as well as men. Although few writers or editors tolerate a generic masculine pronoun as a rule these days, the issue of what to replace it with continues to be debated. Does it serve equity to offer a set of choices each time as in she/he, his/hers? Is it preferable to violate rules of number and settle for a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent, as in "every student should get their book by Friday"? As Baron notes, "It is doubtful that any one semantic gap in any language has ever received the attention that reformers over the years have lavished on our lack of a common-gender pronoun in English" (1986: 8).

This paper examines issues of normative masculinity from a slightly different angle by focusing on pronominal and nominal gender in translation into both English and French. English has a semantic gender system while French has both semantic and formal gender systems. Specifically, here we will examine translation into these languages from two African language groups: Maa from East Africa with a formal gender system and Mande from West Africa with its semantic gender system.

For scholars writing in languages such as English or French, issues of gender-accurate translation arise with both Mande and Maa. This is particularly evident in French with its formal gender marking, but it also

occurs in English where linguistic gender is semantically governed. I will argue that the cases of translation I discuss here are examples of what Derrida 1975 called phallogocentric scholarly distortion of indigenous linguistic gender.

In the Maa language, the semantic distortion is overtly sexist: a socially and politically-charged noun which is formally feminine is widely translated as semantically and formally masculine. In the Mande languages, we will see that a specific neuter noun, which must be morphologically marked when gender is to be specified, has become semantically transgendered in translation. In the Mande language the word holds a linguistic version of intersexed status. Upon translation into French and English, it is made masculine. To add to the confusion, new feminine forms have been created subsequently in both French and English to pair with the now-masculine noun -- all this without any grammatical motivation from the Mande language. This paper explores both these instances of sexist transgendered translation and the apparent motivations for them.

In her 2001 study of linguistic gender, *Pronoun Envy*, Anna Livia analyzes the dynamic tensions between formal and semantic gender in French and English, asserting that “[i]n the event of a clash between the two systems, semantic gender will tend to take precedence over formal gender” in the selection of anaphoric pronouns so that, for example, a woman teacher will be referred to by her French pupils with the masculine “le professeur” but the pronoun used to anaphorize the masculine “professeur” will be the feminine “elle” in recognition of the teacher’s real-world, semantic gender (2001: 15). The same tendency is exhibited by some Western scholars when they confront clashes between the grammatical gender in these two African languages and their own culturally-grounded semantic gender schemata.

Maa, the language of the Maasai, Rendille, Samburu and other groups in Kenya and Tanzania offers the most transparently deliberate case of transgendering a formally feminine noun. Maa conjugates verbs through affixation of a neuter pronominal prefix, marked only for person, not for gender. In the 2nd person, plurality is indicated by a reduplicative suffix rather than by a distinctive prefix and in the 3rd

person, number is left ambiguous, both singular and plural sharing the same pronominal prefix.

I. Maa pronominal prefixes	
<i>a-pik</i>	I put.
<i>i-pik</i>	You put.
<i>e-pik</i>	He/she/it puts.
<i>ki-pik</i>	We put.
<i>i-pikipiki</i>	You put (pl)
<i>e-pik</i>	They put

Maa has three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. Gender is marked through prefixes which have masculine, feminine, and neuter singular and plural forms. The feminine prefix, *en-* (sg.) or *in-* (pl.) becomes *enk-* or *ink-* before a noun that starts with /a/ or /o/.

II. Maa Gender Prefixes		
Gender	Singular	Plural
Masculine	<i>ol-</i>	<i>il-</i>
Feminine	<i>en-</i>	<i>in-</i>
	<i>enk-</i>	<i>ink- /a,o/</i>
Neuter	<i>e-</i>	<i>i-</i>

Since Maa has both a semantic and a formal gender system, all nouns are assigned to one of the three genders. Animate nouns are either feminine or masculine. Neuter is available for inanimate nouns. The problematic word here is the word for the Supreme Being, *Enkai*, a feminine sg. noun.

Naomi Kipury, a Maasai anthropologist, notes that it was not until Christian missionaries came to Maasailand and translated the Bible into Maa that the nouns and adjectives referring to *Enkai* were masculinized. Before that, *Enkai* was seen as a middle-aged woman, she claims (1989: 167, note 7). Dorothy Hodgson devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of the feminine nature of the Maasai God within her larger work on women's spiritual and religious practices in Maasai communities of Tanzania. In addition to the feminine prefix, she notes that "En[k]'ai was addressed by such phrases as 'She of the black garment' (*Nolkila orok*), 'My mother with wet clothes' (*Yieyio nashal*

inkilani), and ‘She of the growing grasses’ (*Noompees*)” (2005: 22, citing Voshaar 1998: 137).

Father Frans Mol, a Catholic priest who has lived in Kenya and studied the Maa language for decades, has produced a combination dictionary and encyclopedia on the Maasai language and culture that translates words and texts into English, *Maasai Language and Culture Dictionary* (1996). He has also published a book for Maa language learners, *Lessons in Maa: A Grammar of Maasai Language* (1995).

In his translations of Maa into English in these publications, the noun Enkai is consistently anaphorized with masculine pronouns, as in the following example:

“Enkai [f] nanyokie: God Who is red, the red God. The Maasai refer to God as being red when they describe Him [emphasis added] as angry or in an angry mood.” (Mol 1996: 3)

For someone with Mol’s training, depth of experience of the culture, and degree of interest in the finer points of grammar of the Maa language to commit such an egregious violation of the translator’s principle of accuracy leaves little room for doubt of the motivation for doing so. In this case, the sociopolitical interests of the Christian faith trump issues of grammatical accuracy. Father Mol’s example has been widely followed: in churches throughout Christianized Maasailand where English is the language of worship, Enkai is spoken of as He and Him.

In the Mande languages of West Africa, all nouns and pronouns, with the exception of the words for woman, man, mother, and father, brother, sister, are formally gender-neutral. When gender-specificity is desired of an animate noun, a compound is formed by suffixing the lexemes for man and woman with appropriate tonal changes. Pronouns cannot be formally gendered; their gendered antecedents may be determined only when the sex of the nouns they anaphorize is clear. For simplicity’s sake, data will be offered only from Bamana (just one of the 71 languages in the Mande family) but the patterns illustrated hold for all.

III. Mande gender morphology

Neuter <i>den</i> (child)	Gender Morpheme <i>ke</i> (male) <i>muso</i> (female)	Gendered Compound <i>denke</i> (son) <i>denmuso</i> (daughter)
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<i>wulu</i> (dog)	<i>wuluke</i> (male dog) <i>wulumuso</i> (female dog)
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III.a.	Mande neuter pronominals	
	<i>n/ne</i> 1 st sg	“I/me” feminine or masculine
	<i>i</i> 2 nd sg	“you” feminine or masculine
	<i>a/ale</i> 3 rd sg	“he/she” feminine or masculine

IIIb. Mande anaphorization patterns

<i>Denmuso, a/ale taara.</i>	The daughter, she left.
<i>Denke, a/ale taara.</i>	The son, he left.
<i>Den, a/ale taara.</i>	The child, she/he left.

Despite the transparency of this ubiquitous pattern in Mande languages, some Mande gender-neutral nouns are routinely gendered in translation and anaphorized accordingly. While doing so is obligatory when translating into a language like French with formal gender marking, it is entirely optional when translating into English where gender is semantic and even animate nouns can have ambiguous gender (e.g. cat, fish, teacher, doctor). One glaring example of the transgendering of neuter nouns in translation is the word for griot or bard in Bamana: *jeli*.¹ By itself, the word *jeli* has no gender, either formal or semantic. It refers to a social status and occupation that may be filled by both women and men. To specify the gender of a specific griot, the above pattern of compounding through affixation of gender markers must be followed:

IV. Gendering the word <i>jeli</i> (griot) in Bamana	
<i>jeli</i>	griot
<i>jelimuso</i>	female griot or griot woman
<i>jelike</i>	male griot or griot man

¹ Frank 1998 has observed the same phenomenon with regard to the Bamana word for “smith,” *numu*.

V. Contrast of Bamana gender morphology with translation in French & English

Bamana	French	English
<i>jeli</i>	griot	griot
<i>jelimuso</i>	griotte	female griot, griot woman
<i>jelike</i>	griot	male griot, griot man

The gender-marked forms of *jeli* are compound nouns in Mande, which is an intermediate form between the monolexemes of French and the paraphrastic forms in English.:

The problem of transgendering of the Mande (Bamana) word begins here with the French terminology. Granted, to translate any noun into French, gender must be assigned. The French have endowed their translation of the neuter *jeli* with formal masculine gender: *le griot*. The translation of *jeli* had to be either feminine or masculine. However, as Greville Corbett notes, the phonological rules governing the gender-assignment of new words in French is such that the word *griot* is only slightly more likely to have masculine gender than feminine: words that end in /t/, even if the consonant is not pronounced, are masculine approximately 51% of the time (1991: 59, citing Tucker, Lambert & Rigault 1977: 68-125).² The choice of the French to masculinize their translation of *jeli* has set in motion further transgenderings in both French and English in ways that I have argued elsewhere should be abandoned in English (Hoffman 2003). By creating a feminine counterpart, *griotte*, the French have affirmed the addition of semantic masculine gender to the formal gender of the word *griot*.³

This unfortunate pairing is borrowed wholesale into English by one of the most widely-cited authors on griots: my dear colleague Thomas A. Hale. Hale's survey of the West African bards, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*, is a paragon of unintentional, but nonetheless undeniable, sexist transgendering of a formally neuter,

² Etymological studies of the origins of the word "griot" indicate that it is very likely to have once been pronounced with a final /t/ (see Tamari 1997 and Appendix G in Hale 1999).

³ I have been unable to locate any information on date or time period of the addition of *griotte* as the feminine of *griot* to the French lexicon. To this day, it does not appear in the Dictionary of the Academie Francaise. The word *griot* itself only appears in the 9th edition, published in 1986. *Griotte* appears in all editions of that dictionary as a kind of cherry.

semantically intersexed noun. Hale first violates the rules of Mande semantic gender by assigning male gender to the word “griot” in English. He then compounds the error by borrowing from French the invented feminine correlate of *griot*, *griotte*. Despite his acknowledgement that the Bamana word *jeli* is neuter, and therefore, so is its translation, *griot*, and that it applies to both men and women, his careful observation is undermined by gratuitously transgendered anaphora like the following:

“[the griot can lighten a tense atmosphere] with his word and his service as mediator.” (1998: 34)

“... the griot is more than an exhorter. He appears to combine the roles of cheerleader for his patron, manager of the competitor’s financial and spiritual affairs, spokesman, and adviser.” (1998: 43)

The word “griot,” to be anaphorized faithfully and without sexist bias, must employ “he/she,” “his/her,” “him/her,” or use the plural pronouns “they,” “their,” and “them” in the singular. To do otherwise is to endow a single gender where there was potential for both originally; in other words, to transgender a semantically intersexed noun.

Hale actually meant for his borrowing of the gendered pair from French to serve a feminist goal of increasing the visibility of women griots, the very existence of whom escaped the attention of numerous male travelers, explorers and scholars over the centuries. For example, when Hale interviewed the famous African-American author, Alex Haley, he found that, even after making his historic journey back to the land of his ancestors which resulted in the book and television series, *Roots*, Haley was unaware of the fact that griots could be women too. Hale accordingly explains his use of the artificial French word *griotte* in this way:

...by using both *griot* and *griotte*..., scholars can more effectively bridge the gap in knowledge about the oral tradition for persons outside West Africa. At the same time, the adoption of both *griot* and *griotte* signals to those who are unaware of the existence of *jelimusow* [griot women] and their sisters in neighboring West African cultures that women play an active role in the profession. Although *jeli* can refer to both sexes (a woman may say that she is *jeli* – *n[e] ye jeli ye*; Barbara Hoffman, personal communication, 1996), the

central Mande *jeliw* distinguish when necessary between *jeli ke* and *jelimuso* – man and woman griot. Given the lack of information about women griots, it is useful to maintain the gender distinction in the regional terminology by pairing *griotte* with *griot*. (1998: 16)

First, let us examine the difficulties already inherent with borrowing the word *griot* from the French. With increasing afrocentric awareness in the US, the term has attained a remarkably wide adoption in the American English lexicon with some innovative broadening of its semantic scope to include a range of activities linked to communication in verbal, visual, or plastic media (Hoffman 2002).

It is a term readily available in written English, but relatively few speakers of English have learned it yet. For one thing, it is a difficult word for English speakers to learn to pronounce correctly. If it is first encountered in writing, the default assumption is that it is pronounced [griət] or [griot] –the final /t/ pronounced, as it is in “griotte” in French. Why is this the case?

The morphophonemics of English demand that words –even those that are cognates in English and French– whose written form ends in an alveolar stop have that consonant pronounced:

VI. French	English
<i>Un tort</i> [tor]	a tort [tort]
<i>une part</i> [par]	a part [part]
<i>le pot</i> [po]	the pot [pat]

The pronunciation of “griot” with a hard final /t/ clearly fits English morphophonemic practices for final consonants. For most native speakers of English, there is thus no difference between the pronunciation of “griot” and “griotte.” However, the correct pronunciation can be easily be learned upon hearing it or upon learning that it is borrowed from French since words borrowed from French into English often retain the original French silencing of the final consonant:

VII. Pronunciation of words borrowed from French into English	
Camembert	[kæmɛmbɜ]
Merlot	[mɛrlɔ]
Pinot	[pino]

Renault [rəno]

While I applaud Hale's rationale of promoting awareness of the existence of women griots, the adoption of "griotte" as the label for women griots is an even more troublesome misfit in English than is the word "griot." If one wanted to create a new lexeme for "griot woman," (which I am not advocating) there are reasons not to use "griotte" and a number of productive means already available:

VIII. Formal linguistic problems with borrowing "griotte"

1. Spelling: no non-borrowed English sexed noun pair uses the strategy of doubling the consonant and adding -e to form the feminine:
shop-shoppe indexes "old", not "feminine"
comedian – comedienne indexes feminine, but is borrowed from French
2. Morphology: there are productive suffixes available in English to transform a masculine noun into a feminine one, the most common being -ess:

Actor – actress

Master – mistress

Host – hostess

This and similar suffixes work equally well in French:

Acteur – actrice

Maitre – maitresse

Hôte – hôtesse

Note however, that this is not a fully productive morphological rule in English:

director – *directress

teamster – *teamstress

gangster – *gangstress

cantor – *cantress

Another available suffix (also valid in French) is -ette

Bachelor – bachelorette (American English)

Fourche (pitchfork) – fourchette (French) [signals "small" not feminine]

Basin – bassinette [signals both feminine and small]

Côte – côtelette

3. Semantic considerations

The most significant problem by far with using the word "griotte" in English is that adopting a separate, sex-specific term sets up mutually-exclusive semantic domains:

If griotte = female *jeli*

then griot = male *jeli*

The unfortunate outcome, then, of popularizing “griotte” as the English translation of *jelimuso* is to further promulgate the fallacy that a “griot” is always a man. Despite Hale’s laudable feminist intentions, this is the regrettable and unnecessary result.

To translate into French does admittedly force one to accept formal transgendering of neuter nouns; it is simply a fact that in a language with obligatory gender, one gender or the other must be assigned to every noun. It is not required, however, to then add semantic gender to the noun, nor to further formalize it by creating a neolexeme with both formal and semantic gender to complement it. In English, doing so is even less justified. English has readily available means to remain morphologically and semantically faithful to the source language. By importing the French gendered terms into English, Hale and those who follow the same practice force the transgendering of “griot.” I say it is the duty of the translator to be as true to the source as possible, and so, having that possibility in English, let there be no “griottes.” Just as we have escaped the trap of “waitress,” “stewardess,” and “directress,” let us leave the word “griotte” aside and acknowledge that the honorable status and profession of the griot belongs to men and women alike, as it does in the world of the *jeli*.

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