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The Absence of Grammatical Gender in Uzbek and its Implications for the Translation of Female Lyric Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a structural asymmetry between Uzbek and English that has received limited attention in translation research: Uzbek lacks grammatical gender, whereas English requires gender specification in third-person singular human reference. Drawing on Jakobson's (1959) principle of obligatory categories, the study argues that translating Uzbek poetry into English may involve not only the transfer of meaning but also the addition of grammatical information that is not encoded in the source text. A corpus of eight poems by the Uzbek poet Halima Xudoyberdiyeva (1947-2018) was analyzed using the author's English glosses as analytical tools. The analysis identifies four types of translation asymmetry: obligatory gender specification, register displacement in maternal-national compounds, evaluative narrowing in ethical-religious lexis, and loss of grammatical marking in reported judgment. The findings indicate that gender neutrality in the source language is not a gap to be filled but a structural resource permitting a lyric subject to remain grammatically unspecified while remaining contextually recoverable. A four-part typology of translation asymmetry is proposed, together with a compensatory strategy in which such asymmetries are made visible rather than silently resolved.

Keywords: Grammatical gender, obligatory categories, translation loss, Uzbek, contrastive analysis, lyric subjectivity

1. INTRODUCTION

Comparative work on Uzbek and English has concentrated largely on lexical and phraseological correspondence, while the consequences of structural divergence for translation have been examined less systematically. One such divergence concerns grammatical gender. Uzbek, like the Turkic languages generally (Johanson & Csátó 1998), has no gender as a grammatical category: nouns are not classified by gender, adjectives and verbs do not agree in gender, and the third-person singular pronoun u is used irrespective of the referent's sex (Bodrogligeti 2003). English likewise lacks gender agreement on nouns and verbs; it differs from Uzbek in one respect only, but a consequential one, since its third-person singular pronouns distinguish masculine, feminine and neuter reference. Singular they now provides a gender-neutral alternative in contemporary usage, although its acceptability in formal registers remains variable.

This asymmetry is easily described but its consequences are not trivial. When a translator moves a text from Uzbek into English, the pronominal system of the target language requires a decision that the source language never required the author to make. The translator must specify what the original left unspecified, and the specification enters the text as new grammatical information. In most genres this passes unnoticed. In lyric poetry, where the identity and position of the speaking subject are often themselves the subject matter, the consequence is more substantial.

The present study addresses this problem through the poetry of Halima Xudoyberdiyeva (1947-2018), a leading figure in twentieth-century Uzbek verse whose work centers on female experience. The aim is threefold: to describe the structural conditions that make gender specification obligatory in English and optional in Uzbek; to identify, on the basis of a corpus, the points at which translation into English forces such specification; and to propose a typology of the resulting losses. The study is contrastive rather than evaluative: it does not assess the quality of existing translations but describes what any translation into English must do.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. *Obligatory categories and the Jakobsonian principle*

The theoretical foundation of this study is a principle formulated by Jakobson (1959) in his discussion of the linguistic aspects of translation. Reworking an observation made earlier by Boas (1938), Jakobson argued that languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey. Any language can express any content; what distinguishes languages is which categories they compel the speaker to specify. A speaker of English cannot use a third-person singular pronoun without indicating sex or its absence; a speaker of Uzbek is under no such obligation.

The consequence for translation is direct. Where the target language has an obligatory category that the source language lacks, the translator cannot remain silent: silence is not an available option in the target grammar. Information must be supplied, and it can only be supplied from context, inference, or convention. Jakobson (1959) treated this as the central difficulty of interlingual translation, noting that the translator of a text from a language without grammatical gender must decide questions that the original never posed.

It is worth emphasizing what this principle does not claim. It does not assert that speakers of Uzbek are unable to indicate the sex of a referent; lexical means are readily available (*ayol* "woman," *qiz* "girl," *ona* "mother"). Nor does it assert that grammatical categories determine thought, a stronger claim associated with the relativist tradition and not required here. The claim is narrower and more secure: obligatory categories determine what a text cannot avoid saying, and translation between languages with different obligatory categories therefore involves addition as well as loss.

2.2. *Gender as a typological category*

Corbett (1991) provides the standard typological account of gender systems and establishes the criterion by which gender is recognized as a grammatical category: agreement. A language has gender if and only if gender distinctions on nouns are

reflected in agreement patterns elsewhere in the clause. By this criterion Uzbek has no gender system whatever. Nouns are not assigned to classes, and neither adjectives, verbs, nor determiners show gender agreement.

English occupies an intermediate position that is often misdescribed. By Corbett's (1991) criterion English has a residual gender system confined to pronominal reference: nouns do not inflect for gender and adjectives do not agree, but the choice among he, she, and it is determined by properties of the referent. This residue is small in typological terms but consequential for translation, because pronouns are high-frequency items and third-person reference is unavoidable in extended discourse.

The relevant contrast may therefore be stated precisely. The two languages do not differ in the presence or absence of a canonical gender system, since both lack one; they differ in whether a particular closed class of high-frequency items obliges the speaker to specify the referent's sex. In Uzbek the pronoun u is neutral, and no choice arises; in English the speaker must select among he, she and it, and the selection carries information about the referent whether or not the speaker intends it.

2.3. *Equivalence, loss, and compensation*

Translation theory offers several frameworks for describing what happens when structural correspondence fails. Nida (1964) distinguished formal from dynamic equivalence, the former oriented to the form of the source text and the latter to the effect on the receptor. Baker (1992) provided a more granular taxonomy of non-equivalence at word level, including culture-specific concepts and lexical gaps, and discussed compensation strategies. Venuti (1995) reframed the issue in ethical terms, contrasting domesticating translation, which conceals the foreignness of the source, with foreignising translation, which retains it.

These frameworks were developed primarily for lexical and cultural non-equivalence. The present case is different in kind: the problem is not that Uzbek has a word English lacks, but that English has a grammatical obligation Uzbek lacks. The direction

of the difficulty is reversed. In lexical non-equivalence the translator must find a way to say something; in obligatory-category asymmetry the translator must find a way to avoid saying something, and typically cannot. Baker's (1992) notion of compensation remains applicable, but compensation here operates against addition rather than against omission.

3. DATA AND METHOD

The corpus consists of eight poems by Halima Xudoyberdiyeva drawn from her collected volume *Saylanma* (Xudoyberdiyeva 2000) and from the collections *Muqaddasayol* (Xudoyberdiyeva 1987) and *Yo'ldadirman* (Xudoyberdiyeva 2005). 'Muqaddasayol,' 'Ayolo'tibborar,' 'Onaelim,' 'Oldimdanoqqansuv,' 'Tishsizodamfaryodi,' 'Tomoqqirishi,' 'Yo'ldadirman,' and 'O'zimningyo'lim.' Selection followed two criteria: each poem takes a female speaker or female figure as its organising subject, and the poems span the poet's mature period from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s.

The method proceeds in three stages. First, each poem was examined for points at which the source text leaves the referent's sex grammatically unspecified. Second, English glosses were produced and the points at which the target grammar forced specification were recorded. Third, the recorded instances were classified by the type of information added or lost. All glosses are the present author's and are intended as analytic tools rather than as literary translations; they follow the source syntax closely in order to make structural correspondence visible.

Two limitations should be stated. The corpus is drawn from a single author, so the findings describe a pattern rather than establish its frequency across Uzbek poetry generally. And the analysis works with glosses rather than published literary translations, since few of Xudoyberdiyeva's poems have been translated into English; this isolates the structural problem but does not capture the strategies that practicing translators actually adopt.

3.1. *Glossing conventions*

Interlinear glosses follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Morpheme boundaries are marked by hyphens in both the object-language line and the gloss line; a full stop separates elements of a gloss that correspond to a single, unsegmentable form. The following abbreviations are used:

> ABL ablative; ACC accusative; AOR aorist; AUX auxiliary; COP copula; DAT dative; EXCL exclamative particle; IMP imperative; LOC locative; NEG negation; PL plural; POSS possessive; PRS present; PST past; PTCP participle; SG singular; VN verbal noun; 1, 2, 3 first, second, third person.

Numerals combined with SG or PL indicate person and number, so that POSS3SG denotes a third-person singular possessive suffix and PST-3PL a past-tense form with third-person plural agreement. It should be noted that the Uzbek suffix glossed here as PRS marks a present-future tense, and that the form glossed as AOR expresses habitual or characterizing aspect; the labels are retained for comparability with the wider Turkological literature.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. *Gender neutrality in the Uzbek lyric subject*

Uzbek verbal morphology marks person and number but not gender. The first-person singular ending -man attaches to the verb stem without any indication of the speaker's sex, and the same holds for possessive suffixes and case marking. A first-person lyric text in Uzbek is therefore grammatically neutral by default: nothing in the morphology reveals whether the speaker is a woman or a man.

This is not a marginal fact about the language but a structural condition of the classical Uzbek lyric. In the ghazal tradition the speaking subject is conventionally unmarked, and the identity of the beloved is likewise left open, which permits the simultaneous secular and mystical readings that the tradition values. A woman writing within this tradition inherits a grammatically neutral first

person and may either leave it neutral or specify it by lexical means.

Xudoyberdiyeva employs both strategies, and the choice is informative. In ‘Yo‘ldadirman’ the speaker remains grammatically and lexically unspecified throughout:

(1) *Sizkutasiz. Menamboraman.*
sizkut-a-siz men-am bor-a-man
you.PL wait-PRS-2PL I-also go-PRS-1SG
“You are waiting. I too am coming.”

Nothing in the Uzbek indicates the speaker’s sex, and nothing in the English gloss need indicate it either, since first-person pronouns are gender-neutral in both languages. The asymmetry does not arise here. It arises as soon as the text moves into third-person reference, or as soon as a reader or translator is required to characterize the speaker externally.

By contrast, in ‘Ayolo‘tibborar’ the sex of the figure is specified lexically, by the noun *ayol* “woman,” which appears in the title and in the refrain. Here the source text itself resolves the question, and translation is unproblematic. The interesting cases lie between these poles: texts in which the subject is grammatically neutral but contextually female, and in which English translation forces the neutrality to be abandoned.

4.2. *Forced specification in third-person reference*

The clearest instance of obligatory addition occurs in ‘Yolg‘izlik’ (‘Solitude’), a poem addressed throughout to an absent second person. The Uzbek second-person forms carry no gender information, and the addressee is never named:

(2) *Birvaqtshoshqinyonimgakelganedingyo‘ltopib,*
Kelganinggaqadar ham yashaganmanSenbilan.
birvaqtshoshqin yon-im-gakel-ganedi-ngyo‘l top-ib
one time impetuous side-POSS1SG-DAT come-PTCP AUX.PST-2SG road find-CVB
kel-gan-ing-gaqadar ham yasha-gan-man Senbilan
come-PTCP-POSS2SG-DAT until also live-PST-1SG you with
“Once, impetuous, you found your way and came to me;
even before you came, I had lived with you.’

Neither the auxiliary in *kelganeding* "you had come" nor the possessive in *kelganingga* "to your coming" conveys the addressee's sex, and English second-person forms are likewise neutral, so no addition is forced at this point. The asymmetry emerges only where the poem shifts into third-person reference, as it does in later lines describing the addressee as an ember that gave no warmth. Here the Uzbek retains the neutral pronoun u, whereas any English rendering must select he or she. A comparable case arises in 'Tomoqqirishi,' where a possessive suffix rather than a pronoun carries the reference:

(3) *Ayolendihushyor, qulog'iovda*
ayolendihushyorquloq-iov-da
woman now vigilant ear-POSS3SG hunt-LOC
"The woman is now vigilant, her ear on watch."

The possessive suffix -i in *qulog'i* marks third-person possession without marking gender; the form would be identical if the possessor were male. The English gloss must select her, and in doing so it makes explicit a relation that the Uzbek leaves implicit. In this instance the choice is uncontroversial, since the noun *ayol* "woman" appears in the same line; the structural point nonetheless stands, in that the English text asserts what the Uzbek text does not assert. Gender information is recoverable in the source, but recoverability is not encoding.

The consequence becomes visible where the noun is absent. Several passages in the corpus refer to a figure by pronoun or possessive suffix alone across multiple lines, and in each case the English gloss must repeat a gendered form that has no counterpart in the source. The cumulative effect is a text in which gender is grammatically foregrounded, whereas in the source it is lexically established once and thereafter allowed to recede.

4.3. *The maternal-national compounds*

A second type of loss is lexical-semantic and concerns a set of compounds in which *ona* "mother" functions as a modifier: *onatili* "mother tongue," *ona yurt* "motherland," *onatuproq* "mother soil." These are not poetic coinages but ordinary items

of the standard lexicon, used in unmarked registers including administrative and educational discourse.

Their significance for translation lies in their register. English possesses mother tongue and motherland, but the two languages distribute them differently: in English motherland is marked, elevated, and used sparingly, whereas in Uzbek *ona yurt* is stylistically neutral. A translator who renders *ona yurt* as motherland produces an item that is lexically accurate and register-inappropriate; the English reader encounters an elevated patriotic term where the Uzbek reader encounters an ordinary word.

The effect is compounded in poems that address the homeland in intimate terms. In 'Onaelim' the speaker addresses the country as one addresses a mother, and the syntax of the address is that of personal devotion:

(4) *Onaelimdo'stinggado'stu*
Dushmaninggaxavfuxatarman
ona el-imdo'st-ing-gado'st-u
mother country-POSS1SG friend-POSS2SG-DAT friend-and
dushman-ing-gaxavf-u xatar-man
enemy-POSS2SG-DAT danger-and peril-COP.1SG
"My mother country, I am friend to your friend and danger to your enemy."

An English rendering must choose between a maternal register and a national one, since the language offers no single item in which the two are neutrally fused. Whichever is chosen, the text loses the feature that makes the Uzbek possible: the availability of a vocabulary in which intimate and collective reference are not opposed. This is a lexical gap in Baker's (1992) sense, but one that arises from differences in stylistic distribution rather than from the absence of a concept.

4.4. *Ethical-religious lexis*

A third type concerns terms of moral evaluation drawn from the Islamic cultural sphere: *sabr* "patient endurance," *muqaddas* "sacred," *qadr* "worth, dignity," *halol* "permitted, morally

clean." Each has a conventional English equivalent, and each equivalent is narrower than the source term.

Sabr illustrates the pattern. English patience denotes a temperament or a capacity to wait; *sabr* denotes an active moral discipline that is religiously meritorious and that carries an implicit reward. When a poem describes a woman as exercising sabr, the Uzbek reader recognises a positively valued moral act; the English reader recognises passive endurance. The two readings differ not in denotation but in evaluative orientation, and the difference is systematic rather than incidental.

Muqaddas presents the sharpest case, since it carries the argument of an entire poem. In 'Muqaddasayol' the refrain asserts the woman's sacredness against a catalogue of social injuries, and the force of the assertion depends on the term belonging to a religious register that the injuring community cannot dismiss. Rendered as sacred, the term retains its denotation but enters an English religious vocabulary with different associations; rendered as holy, it acquires connotations of personal piety that the Uzbek does not carry. The loss is not of meaning but of authority.

4.5. *Evidentiality and reported judgement*

A fourth type is grammatical and concerns the marking of reported speech. Uzbek possesses a well-developed system for indicating the source of information, including the quotative construction with the verb de- "say." The second stanza of 'Muqaddasayol' exploits this system:

(5) *Avval: "Kel-ey, quchog'imgato'l, balq", dedilar,*
Unamading, ayolo'ziters "xalq", dedilar.
avvalkel-eyquchoq-im-gato'lbalq de-di-lar
firstcome.IMP-EXCL embrace-POSS1SG-DAT fill.IMPshine.IMP say-PST-3PL
una-ma-di-ngayolo'z-itersxalq de-di-lar
agree-NEG-PST-2SG woman self-POSS3SG contrary people say-PST-3PL
"First they said: "Come, fill my embrace, shine." You did not agree; they said women are a contrary people by nature."

Every line of the stanza terminates in *dedilar* "they said," with the result that the entire content is grammatically marked as reported. The speaker offers no counter-assertion; the judgment is presented and left unendorsed. The construction thus performs an evaluative act through grammatical means alone: by refusing to integrate the reported material into the speaker's own assertive stance, the text withholds assent without stating dissent.

English can report speech but cannot mark it with comparable economy or regularity. The gloss requires they said in initial or medial position, which loses the anaphoric weight of the line-final repetition, and it cannot reproduce the effect whereby the repeated verb accumulates across the stanza. What is lost is not the propositional content but the grammatical signal of non-endorsement, which in the source carries the poem's critical force.

5. A Typology of Translation Asymmetry

The four phenomena described above differ in linguistic level and in the direction of the difficulty. They are classified below as types of translation asymmetry rather than of loss, since in one of the four cases information is added rather than lost.

Type I, obligatory addition, arises where the target grammar requires specification that the source grammar does not. Pronominal gender in third-person reference is the instance examined here. The characteristic of this type is that information is added rather than lost, and that the addition is invisible in the target text: an English reader has no means of knowing that the source left the matter open.

Type II, register displacement, arises where lexical equivalents exist but occupy different stylistic positions in the two languages. The maternal-national compounds illustrate this type. The characteristic here is that accurate lexical substitution produces inaccurate stylistic effect.

Type III, evaluative narrowing, arises where the source term carries an evaluative or authoritative charge that the target equivalent lacks. The ethical-religious lexis illustrates this type, and the loss is of illocutionary force rather than of denotation.

Type IV, grammatical signal loss, arises where the source encodes through morphology what the target can express only lexically or periphrastically. The quotative construction illustrates this type, and the loss is of economy and of the systematic character of the marking.

The four types are not equally tractable. Types II and III admit compensation through paratextual means or through careful selection among near-synonyms. Type IV can be partially compensated by syntactic reorganization. Type I is the least tractable, since the addition is required by the target grammar and cannot be withheld; the only available strategies are avoidance of third-person reference where the source permits, or explicit annotation.

6. Discussion

The findings bear on a question that extends beyond the language pair examined. Descriptions of translation difficulty conventionally proceed from the assumption that the source contains something the target lacks. The present case reverses this assumption: the difficulty arises because the target requires something the source does not contain. Gender neutrality in Uzbek is not an absence to be supplied but a structural property with expressive consequences, and translation that silently supplies gender information misrepresents the source not by omitting but by adding.

This has a practical implication for translation into English from Turkic and other languages without pronominal gender. Where the text foregrounds the position of the speaking subject, as lyric poetry characteristically does, the translator's pronominal choices are interpretive acts of the first order. Venuti's (1995) distinction is relevant here in a specific sense: a domesticating strategy will resolve the neutrality without remark, producing a fluent English text in which the addition is undetectable, whereas a foreignising strategy will mark the resolution and thereby preserve the reader's access to the structural difference.

A second implication concerns the study of women's writing in languages without grammatical gender. Analyses developed

for European languages frequently treat the grammatical marking of the female speaker as a datum available in the text. In Uzbek this datum is not grammatically present; it is established lexically, contextually, or not at all. Any methodology transferred without adjustment will therefore either fail to identify female-voiced texts or will identify them by criteria different from those it supposes itself to be applying.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the consequences for translation of a structural asymmetry between Uzbek and English: the absence of pronominal gender marking in the former and its obligatory presence in the latter. Working from Jakobson's (1959) principle of obligatory categories and Corbett's (1991) typological criteria, and using a corpus of eight poems by Halima Xudoyberdiyeva, the paper identified four types of loss and addition and proposed a corresponding typology.

The central finding is that translation from Uzbek into English involves obligatory addition of gender information in third-person reference, and that this addition is structurally invisible in the target text. Three further types of loss were identified at the lexical and grammatical levels: register displacement in maternal-national compounds, evaluative narrowing in ethical-religious lexis, and the loss of grammatical marking in reported judgment.

Two directions for further work follow. The typology proposed here was derived from a single-author corpus and should be tested against a wider body of Uzbek poetry and against published literary translations, where the strategies of practicing translators can be observed. And the same asymmetry obtains between English and other Turkic languages, so comparative work across Turkic-English translation would establish whether the patterns described here are language-specific or general to the family.

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