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GRAMMATICAL GENDER AND THE POETICS OF UNTRANSLATABLE INTIMACY

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Abstract Grammatical gender is usually treated in linguistics as a formal agreement system, a matter of noun class and concord with limited semantic content beyond a small residue of natural-gender nouns. This article argues that in poetic and other highly wrought literary registers, grammatical gender frequently ceases to be semantically inert and instead becomes a resource for a specific, difficult-to-translate kind of intimacy: an implied relationship, address, or affective coloring between speaker, addressee, and object that depends on the target language's own gender system and has no stable equivalent in languages that either lack grammatical gender or distribute it differently. Drawing on comparative examples from Romance, Slavic, and Germanic poetic traditions, and on the theoretical literature on linguistic relativity, poetic translation, and untranslatability, the article develops the concept of gender-mediated intimacy: affective or relational meaning that a poem generates through the gendered agreement patterns linking speaker, beloved, object, and abstraction, meaning that is structurally dependent on a grammatical system rather than merely decorated by it. The article reviews the linguistic-relativity literature bearing on whether grammatical gender shapes habitual conceptualization, and situates its argument as a claim about poetic effect rather than about cognition as such: even where gender's influence on ordinary thought is contested, its availability as a compositional resource in poetry is not. Through close comparative analysis of translation choices in a range of published literary translations across gendered and non-gendered target languages, the article shows how translators consistently face a forced choice between preserving semantic content and preserving the gendered relational structure that generated the poem's intimacy, and that this trade-off is rarely made visible to readers of the translation. The article concludes by considering what a translation practice more attentive to gender-mediated intimacy, rather than to gender as mere grammatical noise, might look like.

Keywords: Grammatical gender, untranslatability, poetic translation, linguistic relativity, gender-mediated intimacy, comparative poetics, Romance languages, Slavic languages, literary translation theory, address and affect.

Introduction In languages with grammatical gender, a poem's nouns, adjectives, and often its verbs carry gender agreement whether or not the poet intends any particular meaning by it. A Spanish poem addressed to "la luna" inherits, automatically, a feminine grammatical frame for the moon; a German poem addressed to "der Mond" inherits a masculine one. In the ordinary run of prose, this agreement is usually treated, correctly, as semantically inert: a formal requirement of the language's morphosyntax, not a claim about the moon's nature. Comparative linguists studying grammatical gender have generally been careful to distinguish this formal, arbitrary function from any residual semantic or symbolic content, noting that gender assignment for inanimate nouns is overwhelmingly a matter of morphological class rather than meaning.

This article argues that poetry is a register in which this ordinarily inert system can become active again, recruited by poets, consciously or not, as a resource for constructing relationships between speaker, addressee, and the objects and abstractions a poem invokes. When a poem personifies the moon as feminine, addresses death as masculine, or sustains an extended metaphor in

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which grammatical gender aligns a beloved with a landscape, an emotion, or a season, the poem is drawing on a structural feature of its language that a poem in a genderless or differently gendered language cannot straightforwardly reproduce. This article calls the resulting effect gender-mediated intimacy: a relational or affective meaning generated by the alignment, contrast, or interplay of grammatical genders across a poem's speaker, addressee, and imagery, meaning that depends on the specific gender system of the poem's language rather than on lexical content that could, in principle, be carried over intact into another language.

The claim is deliberately narrower than a strong Whorfian claim about grammatical gender shaping ordinary cognition, a claim that remains genuinely contested in the linguistic-relativity literature. This article's claim concerns poetic composition and reception specifically: whatever the unresolved status of gender's effect on habitual, non-linguistic thought, its availability as a resource that poets can and do exploit compositionally, and that readers of the original language can and do perceive, is far less contested, and it is this compositional and receptive fact that creates the translation problem this article investigates.

The remainder of the article reviews the relevant linguistic-relativity and translation-theory literature, develops the concept of gender-mediated intimacy through comparative poetic examples, describes the comparative translation methodology used, and reports results concerning how consistently, and how visibly, translators navigate the resulting trade-offs.

Literature Review The linguistic-relativity literature on grammatical gender is extensive and genuinely divided. Experimental work by Boroditsky and colleagues reported that speakers of gendered languages describe inanimate objects using adjectives associated with the object's grammatical gender more than speakers of ungendered languages, suggesting some influence of grammatical gender on habitual description, though subsequent work has qualified and in some cases failed to replicate the strength of these effects, leaving the cognitive question open. Deutscher's synthesis of this debate argues for a moderate position, in which grammatical gender shapes available linguistic habits and associations without determining thought in any strong sense.

The translation-theory literature offers a separate but complementary foundation. Jakobson's classic distinction between intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation, and his observation that languages differ essentially in what they must convey rather than in what they can convey, provides a natural frame for treating grammatical gender as an obligatory rather than optional feature of gendered-language poetry, one a translator cannot simply omit without altering the text's grammatical possibility space. Venuti's work on the translator's invisibility and Bassnett's broader introductions to translation studies both address the general problem of untranslatable form, though neither develops grammatical gender specifically as a poetic resource in the sense proposed here. Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* project, and the broader philosophical literature on untranslatability it represents, offers the closest precedent, treating untranslatability not as a failure but as a site where a language's particular structuring of meaning becomes visible.

What remains underdeveloped across both literatures is a sustained account of grammatical gender specifically as a compositional resource for relational and affective meaning in poetry, as distinct from its role in ordinary cognition or in prose translation more generally. This article aims to fill that gap.

Main Body The clearest evidence for gender-mediated intimacy comes from poems that construct sustained personification or address around a grammatically gendered noun, such that the poem's emotional logic depends on the noun's grammatical gender aligning, or pointedly failing to align, with the gender of the speaker or the beloved. In the Romance poetic tradition, feminine nouns for abstractions such as death, night, or the soul recur across Spanish, French, and Italian poetry in

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ways that allow poets to construct an implied feminine interlocutor or antagonist without ever stating her gender lexically; the grammatical gender of the noun does the relational work that an explicit pronoun or description would otherwise have to do. A poem that addresses "la muerte" as a seductive or intimate presence draws directly on Spanish's feminine grammatical gender for death, an effect unavailable in German, where death, "der Tod," is grammatically masculine, and unavailable in English, which assigns no grammatical gender to the word at all.

This asymmetry becomes especially consequential when a poem's central relationship depends on a contrast or alignment between two or more grammatically gendered nouns. A poem that pairs a feminine noun for the soul with a masculine noun for the body, sustaining an implied romantic or antagonistic relationship between them across several stanzas, is exploiting a structural feature specific to its language's gender assignment for those two particular nouns. Translating such a poem into a language where both nouns share the same grammatical gender, or into a language without grammatical gender at all, does not simply lose a decorative flourish; it removes the mechanism by which the poem generated its central relational meaning in the first place. The translator is left with the poem's semantic content, an assertion about soul and body, but not the intimate, quasi-narrative relationship between them that the original's grammar quietly staged.

Slavic poetic traditions add a further layer of complexity because Slavic languages typically mark grammatical gender not only on nouns and adjectives but, unlike most Romance languages, on past-tense verb forms as well, meaning that a first-person speaker's own grammatical gender becomes audible in the verb morphology of ordinary narration, not only in address to others. A Russian or Polish poem written by, or voiced as, a female speaker carries this marking through its verbs regardless of whether the poem ever states the speaker's gender explicitly, producing an embodied, intimate quality of self-reference that a genderless target language such as English cannot reproduce without adding explicit lexical markers the original never needed and, in adding them, altering the poem's economy and tone.

Germanic languages occupy an intermediate position, retaining grammatical gender for nouns while, in the case of English specifically, having lost it almost entirely except in pronouns. This makes English poetry an especially informative limit case: English poets seeking gender-mediated effects must reintroduce them through explicit personification, most visibly the long tradition of addressing abstractions like Death, Time, or Fortune with a capitalized, pronoun-marked gender that other languages achieve automatically through grammatical concord. This suggests that gender-mediated intimacy is not unique to grammatically gendered languages as a poetic effect, but that grammatically gendered languages achieve it structurally and economically, embedded in ordinary agreement, whereas ungendered languages must achieve a comparable effect through additional, marked lexical and rhetorical work, a difference in cost and visibility that matters for translation even when the target effect is broadly comparable.

The translation problem, then, is not simply that gender is "lost" in translation, a formulation this article treats as imprecise. What is lost is the specific relational architecture that a poem's original gender system made available without added marking, an architecture that a translator can sometimes reconstruct through compensatory means, such as explicit personification or added imagery, but only at the cost of making visible, and therefore altering the register of, a relationship the original conveyed implicitly and economically through grammar alone.

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Research Methodology This article uses a qualitative comparative-translation methodology, examining published literary translations of poems in which gender-mediated relational structure is plausibly central to the poem's effect, based on close reading of the source text. Source poems were selected from Spanish, French, Russian, Polish, and German poetic traditions specifically because these languages combine robust grammatical gender systems with a substantial body of published, professionally translated poetry into English, a language that allows the clearest possible test of the trade-offs this article is concerned with, given its almost complete loss of nominal grammatical gender.

For each selected source poem, the analysis compared at least two published English translations where available, examining how each translator handled the grammatically gendered relational structure identified in the source: whether the gendered relationship was reconstructed through added personification or imagery, simplified into an explicit but ungendered statement of the same relationship, or effectively dropped from the translation's relational logic entirely, leaving only the poem's more literal semantic content. Where translator's notes, prefaces, or published commentary were available, these were consulted to determine whether the translator explicitly acknowledged the gender-related trade-off or handled it silently.

This methodology is interpretive and comparative rather than corpus-quantitative, appropriate to a question about compositional and receptive effect rather than about distributional frequency. Its principal limitation is that judgments about which poems exhibit gender-mediated intimacy, and how central that intimacy is to a given poem's overall effect, rest on the author's close reading rather than on an independently verifiable measure, a limitation shared by most work in comparative poetics and translation criticism. Where a poem's relational structure was ambiguous or only weakly tied to grammatical gender, it was excluded from the comparison in favor of clearer cases.

Results Across the cases examined, translators overwhelmingly resolved the gender-mediated intimacy problem through one of three strategies rather than through a single dominant convention. The first, reconstruction through added personification, was most common in translations of poems addressing prominent abstractions such as death or the soul, where translators frequently reintroduced a gendered relationship through capitalization, pronoun choice, or explicit imagery not present, in that explicit form, in the source. The second, semantic flattening, in which the relational structure was rendered as explicit statement rather than implied grammatical relationship, was common in translations aiming for maximal literal fidelity to denotative content, particularly in scholarly or bilingual editions oriented toward readers comparing the translation against the original. The third, silent loss, in which the gendered relational structure was neither reconstructed nor explicitly flagged, appeared most often in translations not accompanied by translator's notes or critical apparatus, suggesting that this outcome correlates with the absence of paratextual space in which to address the trade-off rather than with a considered editorial choice to omit it.

Translator's notes and prefaces, where available, rarely addressed the specific gender-mediated relational structure identified in this article's close readings, even when the translator's chosen strategy indicated clear awareness of a gender-related translation problem in the broader sense. Discussion of gender in available translator's commentary tended to focus on lexical gender-marked nouns such as kinship terms, rather than on the structural, relational use of grammatical gender across a poem's imagery this article is centrally concerned with.

Discussion These results suggest that gender-mediated intimacy is a real and consequential feature of translation practice, but one that remains largely under-theorized and under-communicated to readers, even among translators who clearly recognize and actively compensate for it in their actual translation choices. The gap between translators' evident practical awareness, visible in their compensatory strategies, and the near-absence of explicit discussion of this specific effect in

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translator's notes indicates a discourse gap rather than a practice gap: translators are handling the problem, but the critical and paratextual vocabulary for naming and discussing it explicitly has not caught up with translators' actual practice.

This has consequences for how readers of translated poetry, who typically have no access to the source language, understand what they are reading. A reader encountering a translation that reconstructs gender-mediated intimacy through added personification receives a poem whose relational architecture resembles the original's effect but arrives by a different, more marked compositional route; a reader encountering a translation that flattens or silently drops that structure receives a poem whose semantic content is preserved but whose central relational and affective logic may be substantially diminished, without any signal that this has occurred.

The findings also bear on the linguistic-relativity debate discussed in the Literature Review, though indirectly. Even setting aside unresolved questions about grammatical gender's effect on habitual, non-linguistic cognition, this article's results show that grammatical gender demonstrably functions as an active compositional resource in poetic language and that translators treat it as such in practice, which is itself evidence, independent of the cognitive debate, that grammatical gender carries genuine functional weight in at least this specific literary register.

Conclusion This article has argued that grammatical gender, ordinarily treated as a semantically inert agreement system, becomes an active poetic resource in literary registers, where it can generate a specific and structurally dependent form of relational meaning that this article calls gender-mediated intimacy. Poems that personify abstractions, stage relationships between grammatically gendered nouns, or, in Slavic languages, mark a speaker's own gender through verb morphology, are drawing on grammatical resources unavailable, in the same economical and implicit form, to poems composed in ungendered languages such as English. Translating such poems therefore requires more than finding semantic equivalents for individual words; it requires deciding what to do with a relational architecture that the target language's grammar may not support in the same way, if at all.

The comparative translation analysis undertaken here shows that professional translators consistently face, and consistently resolve, this problem through one of several identifiable strategies, ranging from reconstructive personification to semantic flattening to silent loss, but that this trade-off is rarely made explicit to readers through translator's notes or critical apparatus, even when the translator's own choices show clear awareness of it. This represents a genuine gap between translation practice and translation discourse, one with direct consequences for how readers without access to the source language understand the relational and affective content of the poems they read in translation.

Addressing this gap does not require a new translation method so much as a more precise critical vocabulary, one that would allow translators and critics to name gender-mediated intimacy explicitly, distinguish it from simpler lexical gender problems such as gendered kinship terms, and discuss the specific trade-offs a given translation has made with respect to it. Bilingual editions, critical introductions, and translator's notes are the natural sites for this kind of explicit discussion, and this article's comparative results suggest there is considerable room for such discussion to expand. More broadly, this article suggests that untranslatability in poetry is not usefully treated as a single undifferentiated phenomenon; grammatical gender's specific contribution to it, as a structural rather than merely lexical resource, deserves recognition as a distinct and analyzable category in its own right, one that comparative poetics and translation studies are well positioned to develop further.

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