

Feminine nouns in the present-day English and Ukrainian: some aspects of gender-fair language translators should be aware of

Over the last hundred years, the steady movement for gender equality has not only brought about conspicuous results in terms of women's rights, social status and personal opportunities, but also launched a slow-going, but irreversible mental shift of the male-dominated society towards including women as fully-fledged, equal participants of both public and family life. Language as a mediator between our mind and reality could not stand aside these changes – understanding the potential of the language in defining our world view and attitudes (known as linguistic relativity concept), the advocates of gender equality deliberately turned their attention to language issues, particularly consistently since the last decade of the 20th century. As a part of conscious effort to do away with or at least reduce gender stereotypes and discrimination in language, the idea of gender-fair language (GFL), also referred to as gender-neutral, gender-inclusive or non-sexist language, was introduced and gained wide public support. Achievement of gender fairness in a language is commonly pursued through two major strategies, neutralization and feminization, the former consisting in replacing gender-marked forms with gender-neutral forms (e.g. *chairman* with *chairperson* or *chair* in English) and the latter relying on consistent use of feminine forms to make female referents visible. The choice of the strategy is primarily linked to the structure of the language in question. Thus, neutralization has been recommended especially for natural gender languages like English, Norwegian or Danish and genderless languages like Finnish, whereas feminization strategy has been recommended for grammatical gender languages, such as German, Spanish, Czech or Italian [1].

The content and scope of the effort aimed at amending gender asymmetry in a language has so far largely depended on whether or not and to what extent such effort was institutionalized in each given country. In 1999 UNESCO formulated its *Guidelines for Gender-Neutral Language*, which became the most widely recognized international standard for GFL. Similar guidelines were adopted in 2008 by the European Commission for all working languages of the European Union. These guidelines are advisory in their nature and have various degrees of impact on language policies in different countries. Ukraine, for instance, at least on the official level, so far has not been visibly engaged in the promotion of GFL, the campaign for better feminine representation in the Ukrainian language mainly being carried on today by mass media, human rights activists, feminist NGOs and a new generation of writers. One of the notable outcomes of this campaign which causes controversial reactions in today's Ukrainian society is the promotion of feminine nouns (also termed *feminitives* or *feminatives*).

In this paper we will look at the use of feminine nouns in the present-day English and Ukrainian to consider the following questions: what tendencies are under way in the both languages; how much GFL innovations are normalized (fixed in dictionaries); what is the public perception of these changes. We will also try to make some observations concerning the correlation between GFL-related innovations in the language and the real status of women in Ukraine's society.

These considerations might be of practical value for English-Ukrainian translators who, if and as the use of feminine nouns in Ukrainian grows more and more habitual, will be continuously facing the necessity to make deliberate word choices, taking sides either with what is traditional, deeply-rooted and androcentric, or with what is new and undiscriminatory, though divisive and objectionable to many speakers.

In recent decades, the English-speaking community has developed the awareness that words that specify a person's gender (unless this specification is relevant to the context of communication) are discriminatory against women – either because such words support men's social dominance, directly pointing to the male gender of the referent and thus excluding women (*businessman*, *postman*, *policeman* etc.) or because female words have developed negative connotations absent in the male equivalents and have come to be perceived by many speakers as belittling women's status (*actor/actress*, *author/authoress*, *poet/poetess*, *steward/stewardess*). This awareness has brought about a visible change in speech behaviour, restraining people from using sexist language.

The GFL shift in speech practices soon acquired the status of the language norm, having been fixed in dictionaries. The change can be tracked to have taken place within a decade. In 1995 Fifth Edition of A.S. Hornby's Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary such words as *mayoress*, *murderess*, *poetess*, *postmistress*, *proprietress*, *sculptress*, *shepherdess*, *usherette* are marked as feminine forms of the corresponding male nouns. In 2005 Updated Fourth Edition of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English these words are already marked as old-fashioned. If gender-specific nouns are currently in use, the dictionary (whenever relevant) refers the users to gender-neutral words, e.g. the entry *spokesman* includes reference to *spokesperson*, *steward* and *stewardess* to *flight attendant*, *chairman* to *chairperson* and *chair*, *fireman* to *fire-fighter*, *headmaster* and *headmistress* to *head teacher* and *principal* (AmE), *mankind* to *humankind*, *manmade* to *artificial*.

Thus, implementing gender fairness policy, English has been determinately pursuing the neutralization strategy. The theoretical background for this option consistently points to the connection between explication of gender in a word form and its representation as a salient category in a person's mind. This idea is summarized by Ute Gabriel and Pascal Gygax in their work "Gender and Linguistic Sexism": "The mere existence of morphological or semantic gender markers ... activates gender categories, suggesting that gender is relevant even when it is not, thus perpetuating differing expectations and gender stereotypes" [2, p. 1]. And further on: "... the necessity of marking the sex of human referents makes gender a meaningful category and contributes to overall sensitivity to gender" [2, p. 7]. In historical

perspective, feminine nouns, which used to be quite numerous at earlier stages of the English language history, have been done away with alongside the growing belief that “explicit reference to women has not served women well in the past” and that “equality is best achieved by taking sex/gender references out of contexts in which they are not essential” [3, p. 663].

In contrast to English, Ukrainian as a grammatical gender language is striving to achieve gender fairness through feminization strategy. The recent decade has seen an upsurge of nouns explicitly referring to women, especially the nouns denoting occupations and job titles. From the language system perspective, the easiness of creating feminine counterparts of androcentric nouns in Ukrainian is facilitated by the productiveness of gender marking word-building tools, above all, suffixation. The vigorous use of feminine word formation in the present-day Ukrainian has introduced into discourse an impressive number of feminine nominations, causing various reactions on the part of the speakers and scholars.

Ukrainian linguist Olena Synchak gives the following five major reasons for using feminine nouns: 1) the language encodes social schemata; 2) using grammatically masculine nouns to refer to women contradicts morphological and syntactical norms of the Ukrainian language; 3) banishment of feminine words from formal communication to everyday private speech understates women’s active social role; 4) masculine forms are not always functionally equivalent to their feminine counterparts; 5) making the choice between masculine and feminine forms we ourselves orient our language either towards northern east (this obviously implies Russia) or central Europe [4].

Another Ukrainian linguist Olena Malakhova points out three major factors that facilitate a more active use of feminine nouns in Ukrainian today. They are: 1) civil movement for women’s rights increasingly demands that women should be made more visible in social processes; 2) feminine words serve as markers or tools that allow speakers, consciously or subconsciously, to distance themselves from Russian-speaking totalitarian discourse; 3) from pragmatic perspective, feminine nouns explicate meaning much more accurately, “calling things by their name”, they indicate the role a woman plays in the society, her position in social hierarchy, demonstrate that women are significant in the Ukrainian society and participate in all its activities [5].

An overwhelming majority of voices in defence of feminine nouns come from socially active women, these lexical innovations are favoured by Ukrainian mass media, human rights activists, youth and female-oriented websites such as WoMo.ua, povaha.org.ua, femwork.org etc. The status of these nouns in the Ukrainian lexicon varies considerably – from normative to marginal. Such nouns as *авторка*, *активістка*, *акторка*, *викладачка*, *депутатка*, *директорка*, *директриса*, *журналістка*, *завідувачка*, *засновниця*, *заступниця*, *кандидатка* are recorded in academic dictionaries and their normative status is supported by decades of use in Ukrainian official and literary discourse (see e.g. [6]).

Some feminine neologisms of recent years have already found their way to dictionaries thanks to their use by modern Ukrainian authors and mass media. For instance, *Вільний тлумачний словник. Новітній онлайн-словник української мови (2013-2018)* has included the words *архітекторка* (with citations from historian Mykhaylo Mandryk and Ukrainian press) and *мисткиня* (with citations from Vasyl Stus and Oksana Zabuzhko) [7].

However, dictionaries prudently lag behind bustling feminine word formation, obviously waiting for the neologisms to survive the test of time. Such feminine nouns as *адвокатка*, *археологиня*, *банкїрка*, *бойчиня*, *видавчиня*, *водійка*, *гідеса*, *доцентка*, *експертка*, *історикіня*, *канцлерка*, *консулка*, *координаторка*, *миротвориця*, *мистецтвознавиця*, *міністерка*, *мовкіня*, *мовознавиця*, *можновладиця*, *олігархіяня*, *пілотеса*, *політикіня*, *послиця*, *правознавиця*, *синоптикіння*, *старостка*, *творчиня*, *теоретикіння*, *тренерка*, *фахівчиня*, *філологіння*, *філософіня*, *членкіня*, coming from TV screen, radio and the Internet surprise us with their fresh form and new sound¹. The unstable position of these new formations in the Ukrainian lexicon is attested by the existing variation of forms, e.g. *мовознавка* / *мовознавиця*, *директриня* / *директорка*, *канцлерка* / *канцлериня*, *докторка* / *докториня*, and inconsistency of their use – we can often find a feminine noun and a traditional androcentric one used side by side, e.g.: *Історикіня*, *науковець* Інституту української археографії НАН України, програмний *директор* інтернет-радіо Chiriklo Наталія Зіневич стане *гідом* у ромську культуру [9].

Public opinion concerning feminine neologisms in Ukrainian was researched by A.M. Arkhangelska in [10]. The respondents in the research were students of Ukrainian universities from the west, centre and east of Ukraine aged 18-25 – the audience most open to language change. Out of 676 respondents only 18% of women and 12% of men believed that a woman should have a feminine name for her job title, occupation or social status, 76% of women and 80.5% of men answered that such names are not needed. Regionally, most supporters of feminine names were from western Ukraine, whereas respondents from eastern Ukraine mainly believed that they are not needed, which testifies to the relevance of the Russian linguistic and cultural influence. Answering the question about the motives behind emergence of feminine nouns, 49% of female and 43.5% of male respondents attributed their use to a fashionable trend in public discourse, 32% of women and 36% of men to women’s striving for equality. Notably, special regard for women in the Ukrainian society turned out to be the least relevant reason for using feminine words in the respondents’ opinion. Only 9% of female and 12% of male respondents believed that new feminine names raise the status of women; 30% of both women and men said they humiliate women; 61% of women and 58% of men answered that such words do not in the least affect the social status of Ukrainian women.

¹ These neologisms have been collected from Internet sites and [8, p. 27].

Unfavourable perception of feminization in language is not a unique Ukrainian phenomenon. Research in the Polish context showed that female applicants with a job title in the grammatically feminine form in their CV were evaluated less favourably than male applicants and female applicants who used a grammatically masculine form [2]. In Italian, masculine words used in reference to a female employee were associated with higher status than job titles with the feminine suffix *-essa*. In German, feminine nouns with the suffixes *-euse* and *-öse* (*Masseuse*, *Frisöse*) tend to evoke sexual or frivolous associations [1].

Research on the attitudes to GFL shows that in the initial phase it is hindered by its novelty which conflicts with speakers' linguistic habits and by the fact that initiatives for GFL arose from feminist movements [1]. Resentment, especially on the part of the male population, can come from the belief that women are no longer discriminated against and any policy promoting gender equality means a special treatment for women, which is not fair. This belief has got the name of "modern sexism".

Are feminine innovations in Ukraine indicative of the actual change of attitudes towards women and their social role? A stark answer can be found in 2017 report of UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: "The Committee remains concerned at the persistence in political discourse, in the media and in society of deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory stereotypes ... which perpetuate women's subordination within the family and society and are reflected in, among other things, women's educational and professional choices, their limited participation in political and public life, their unequal participation in the labour market and their unequal status in family relations" [11, p. 9].

Can the actual situation with women's rights be one of the reasons why new feminine names are met with irritation, condescension or hostility by a vast majority of Ukrainians? Maryna Symakova, a social researcher and culture critic, warns that "the use of feminine nouns can work one-way: correcting language and cultural manifestations of gender inequality they actually do not affect the inequality existing on material and institutional levels, on the level of relations between people ... Imagine we have tamed masculine language, found consensus on feminine names, invented a lot of women forms, published new dictionaries and forced everyone to obey new rules. It will only mean that instead of defeating inequality we disguised it" (*English translation is mine – S.S.*) [12].

Experimental findings confirm that it is more difficult to change attitudes than to promote speakers' actual use of gender-fair language [1]. Sadly, feminine word creativity in Ukrainian so far appears to be only a token of aspiration for a better future for Ukrainian women, aspiration which, in order to succeed, needs more than words – actions.

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