Translation and Gender

Dr. Bill Mounce

I am a white, middle-aged male, raised in Minnesota, Kentucky, and California. I was born into an educated family with minimal influence from the secular world; the first movie I ever saw was the cartoon Bambi when I was 16 years old. Many family dinner conversations were about the meanings of words: dad liked to read through the dictionary and challenge us with his latest word. (My favorite was "arglebargle.") I enjoyed school, and stayed within the walls of the academy from my years in a private high school, through university, seminary, and graduate school. And then I taught at a Christian university and seminary. It is within this cultural context that I understand words and grammar and meaning. But not everyone is like me.

One of the things I enjoy on the CBT is translating with fourteen other people—men and women from different continents and in some cases significantly different backgrounds. The fact is that we often hear words differently. Doug Moo tells the story of a discussion over the translation of *erēmos* as "wilderness" or "desert," and Ken Barker's objection that "wilderness" is a heavily wooded area. Ken was raised in the hills of eastern Kentucky and hears the word decidedly differently than I do; I was raised in western Kentucky.

I still smile when I think back to my first days in Scotland as I was headed to begin my Ph.D. studies in Aberdeen. I asked the conductor on the train where the bathroom was, and he responded (without smiling), "Why? Do you want to take a bath?" Obviously, we were having a failure to communicate. It is challenging to translate for a worldwide audience.

I am reminded of how the word "deacon" means decidedly different things depending on whether you are from the northern or the southern part of the United States. In the north, a deacon is closer to being a trustee and takes care of the building and grounds. In the south, however, historically preachers traveled from church to church, and it was the deacons who ran the church when the preacher was not present. So, is Phoebe a "servant" or a "deacon" (*diakonos*) in the church in Cenchreae (Romans 16:1)? "Deacon" means decidedly different things depending on one's cultural or geographic background. This is why it is important to have a diverse translation committee

THE PROBLEM OF GENDER LANGUAGE

But the greatest challenge in terms of style is how to handle gender language. For some people, "man" and "he" can still be understood generically, referring to men and women alike. But for many others, they only mean "male." We may not like this; we may think it should be different, going back in time. But it is a fact that many people do not hear "man" and "he" generically, and saying "man" and "he" will make it difficult for them to hear the message of the Bible. Remember, grammar is descriptive as well as prescriptive; to insist that language not change is naïve.

I will never forget walking into my daughter's bedroom when she was 8 years old. Kiersten had copied a verse out of the Bible, pinned it to her bulletin board, had crossed out "he" and wrote "she." After I complimented her on her desire to read and memorize the Bible, I asked why the alteration. I will never forget her innocent response: "The Bible is for me too and not just Tyler, isn't it?" (Tyler is her big brother.)

We are in the middle of a sea change in language where "they" is becoming the third person pronoun that can refer to women or men. Many people decry this, but this is what is happening to English. "They" was not marked for gender in Elizabethan

English (check out Shakespeare), and the "indefinite they" is coming back in vogue.[1] I smile when I hear proponents of using "he" generically do so using "they." Part of the issue is that spoken language is always ahead of written language in terms of its evolution, so hearing "they" and reading "they" can produce two different results. And once you have committed to "they," you have also committed to using "them," which is still strongly plural, as is the reflexive "themselves." "Themself" is not a word in English, yet.

Since the issue of gender language is front and center these days, let's be sure we are using the words properly. There is frequent misunderstanding about the meaning of these three gender terms. I have learned that they are rarely used accurately, especially in the blogosphere.

1. GENDER NEUTRAL

A "gender neutral" translation would seek to neutralize or eliminate gender-specific references as much as possible, even when the Greek is referring specifically to a man or a woman. "Parent" would be used instead of "father" or "mother," "ancestor" for "forefather," "child" for "son," and "person" for "man" without regard for the actual referent. When my daughter writes a bio about herself for a Ph.D. symposium, she is forced by the academic community to refer to herself as "they." My daughter is a female person, and she cannot refer to herself as "she." This is being gender neutral. I am not aware of any translation that intentionally does this.

Having said this, it is amazing to me how many times I hear someone say (or blog) that the NIV is gender neutral. This is simply wrong, and people need to use words that mean what they say. In the NIV, the pronoun "he" occurs 8,526 times, "him" 4,822 times, and "man" 1,290 times. If nothing else, those statistics prove the point.

---

[1] See bit.ly/gender-language

2. GENDER INCLUSIVE

"Gender inclusive" is the more common term used with reference to gender language in translation, yet it can be vague and misleading. A "gender inclusive" version would make everything inclusive, whether the original makes gender specific statements or not. So biblical statements about men would consistently be translated as if they were referring to both men and women.

I am also not aware of any translation that consistently does this, but it is the effect of changing third person singulars to second person or to plurals such as in the NRSV. Listen to the different translations of Rev 3:20

> "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (ESV).2

I guess all the Christians in Ephesus were male? I have to admit that the overly "literal" translation of "come in to him" reminds me more of an alien movie that deposits foreign beings into the human body that later break out through the stomach.

> "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (NRSV).

This actually works, I think, in this context, since Jesus is speaking directly to the church in Ephesus.

> "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (NIV).

Awkward English, but at least using "that person" keeps the focus on the individual, which is the point. Jesus is holding out the offer to any individual who would repent.

---

[2] I have to admit that the overly "literal" translation of "come in to him" reminds me more of an alien movie that deposits foreign beings into the human body that later break out through the stomach.

> "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends" (NLT).

Any of these are better than the potluck envisioned by the TNIV.

> "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me" (TNIV).

Again, the term "gender inclusive" means that the referent, whether male or female, is presented in a way that speaks to men and women alike.

3. GENDER ACCURATE

These are translations that intentionally clarify gender. They refer to "men" using male language, "women" using female language, and use inclusive terms when referring to both men and women. Their goal is to be accurate and specific with reference to gender. They are not "gender neutral" or "gender inclusive"; they are "gender accurate." I would assume that most translations would claim to be gender-accurate, but how they achieve gender-accuracy is quite different. Let me make four points.

1. Anaphoric. Where the translations frequently differ is on the pronoun used to refer back to an indefinite noun or pronoun (e.g., "person," "someone," "anyone"). Consider Psalm 1.

> "Blessed is the *one* who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. _____ is like a tree planted by streams of water …."

The ESV and CSB will refer back to an indefinite antecedent with the anaphoric "he"; "He is like a tree planted by streams of water." The NIV often uses the singular "they," although in the case of Psalm1 they write, "That person is like a tree." The NRSV has other ways (much like the now-defunct TNIV) such as using plurals or second person; "They are like trees." The NLT is committed to not using "he" in this type of situation; however, because it is a natural language translation, they are able to rearrange verse so

much that it is not immediately obvious they aren't saying "he," although here they use plurals.

2. Representative. Another decision all translators have to make is how to handle references to a male where that male stands as a representative for men and women. Proverbs 3:11–12 is the classic passage. "My son, do not despise the LORD'S discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the *son* he delights in" (NIV, emphasis added). "Son" preserves a classic form of wisdom literature, and the expectation is that the reader will understand that what is true of the son is also true of the daughter. Compare this to the NLT: "My child, don't reject the LORD'S discipline, and don't be upset when he corrects you. For the LORD corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a *child* in whom he delights."

3. "Brother." The third situation affected by gender issues is the translation of ἀδελφός. The CSB of Matthew 18:16 reads, "If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private; If he listens to you, you have won your brother." With whom do we have to reconcile—only our male Christian friends, our "brothers," or all our Christian friends, men and women alike? It depends (at one level) in whether you hear "brother" as "male" or as "fellow believer." The NIV reads, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you."

4. "Men." The relevant word is ἄνθρωπος. Should we translate ἄνθρωπος as "men," or with words that mean "men and women"? 1 Timothy 2, which I discussed elsewhere, is a good illustration.

The NIV is committed to using broadly understood English, and by "broad" I mean world-wide. After all, it is the New *International* Version. This commitment controls much of the language the CBT chooses, including our preferred gender-accurate terms. The members of the translation team all hear things slightly differently, and it is in the discussion that we come to understand each other and settle on a translation (but not always a spelling) that can be understood across the continents. For those times the

Brits can't agree with the Americans, they laugh and say they will "fix" it in the Anglicized version of the NIV.

English is in a constant state of flux, as are most languages. This includes not only gender language but also things like the demise of the subjunctive and the predicate nominative, changes I decry. I like the difference between "may" and "can," and I answer the phone "It is I," but those differences are going away, like it or not. This is one of the reasons why the CBT was originally formed with the mandate to meet every year and keep the NIV up-to-date with current English and biblical scholarship. We are the only translation team to do so; and while it means your favorite verse may get changed, it also means that your favorite verse will be kept current with the English spoken around the world.

Translating for a large swath of people, and not just a certain physical locale, has been a learning experience.