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GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE STRATEGIES IN TRANSLATING HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE: PRAGMATIC AND COGNITIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with the issues based on analyzing the gender-neutral language strategies in translating human rights discourse from pragmatic and cognitive perspectives. Human rights texts are expected to promote equality, dignity, and non-discrimination; therefore, the translation of gender-related expressions requires special linguistic and ethical attention. The study focuses on how translators avoid gender bias, reduce stereotypical representation, and preserve inclusive meaning across languages. The article discusses gender-neutral pronouns, inclusive lexical choices, avoidance of masculine generics, reformulation, explicitation, and context-sensitive translation strategies.

Keywords: gender-neutral language, human rights discourse, translation strategies, pragmatic approach, cognitive approach, inclusive language, gender bias, legal translation, discourse analysis, English-Uzbek translation.

Introduction

Human rights discourse occupies a special place in legal, political, and social communication because it is based on the principles of equality, dignity, justice, and non-discrimination. International human rights documents aim to protect all individuals regardless of gender, race, nationality, language, religion, or social status. For this reason, the language of human rights must be inclusive, precise, and ethically responsible. Translation plays a crucial role in this process, as human rights norms are transmitted across languages, cultures, and legal systems through translated texts.

One of the most important issues in translating human rights discourse is the problem of gender-neutral language. In many languages, traditional legal and institutional discourse has often used masculine forms as general references to all people. For example, expressions such as *man*, *mankind*, *chairman*, or *he* were historically used in English as generic forms. However, such usage may create implicit gender bias because it presents the male subject as the default human subject. In modern human rights discourse, this tendency conflicts with the principles of equality and inclusiveness.

Gender-neutral language refers to linguistic forms that avoid unnecessary reference to gender and include all individuals equally. In translation, this means that translators must not only transfer legal meaning but also preserve the inclusive and non-discriminatory function of the original text. For instance, *Everyone has the right to education* should not be translated in a way that implicitly narrows the subject to men or a specific gender group. The translator must choose forms that represent the universality of human rights.

The pragmatic approach to gender-neutral translation focuses on communicative intention, context, audience, and social effect. A translator must ask not only "What does this sentence mean?" but also "What does this sentence do in a human rights context?" If a phrase promotes equality in the source text, the translation should perform the same function in the target language. Therefore, gender-neutral translation is not a purely grammatical operation; it is a pragmatic strategy.

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The cognitive approach emphasizes how gender meanings are mentally represented and reconstructed during translation. Words activate conceptual frames. For example, the word *man* may activate the image of a male person even when it is intended generically. Therefore, replacing such terms with *person*, *individual*, or *human being* can change the cognitive representation of the subject and make the discourse more inclusive.

Literature Review

The study of gender-neutral language in translation is based on several theoretical fields: translation studies, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, feminist linguistics, discourse analysis, and legal linguistics. Scholars have emphasized that language is not a neutral instrument of communication; it reflects and shapes social relations, including gender relations.

Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence is important for understanding gender-sensitive translation. According to Nida (1964), translation should not be limited to formal correspondence between words but should aim to produce an equivalent effect on the target audience. In human rights discourse, this means that inclusive meaning must be preserved even when grammatical structures differ between languages. If a literal translation creates gender bias, the translator should use a more functionally equivalent form.

Newmark (1988) distinguishes between semantic and communicative translation. Semantic translation focuses on the exact meaning of the source text, while communicative translation emphasizes the effect on the target reader. Gender-neutral translation often requires a communicative approach because the translator must preserve not only legal content but also the ethical and inclusive purpose of the text.

Baker (2018) argues that translation is shaped by equivalence at different levels, including word, grammar, text, and pragmatics. This is especially relevant to gender-neutral translation because gender may appear not only in individual words but also in discourse structures and cultural assumptions. For example, a sentence may be grammatically neutral but pragmatically biased if it repeatedly associates leadership, authority, or citizenship with male subjects.

Feminist translation theory also provides an important foundation. Simon (1996) explains that translation can either reproduce dominant gender ideologies or challenge them. From this perspective, translators are not passive transmitters of meaning; they participate in the construction of gender representation. Similarly, von Flotow (1997) discusses strategies such as supplementation, intervention, and rewriting, which can be used to make gender meanings visible or more inclusive.

In pragmatics, Grice's theory of implicature helps explain how gender bias may be implicit rather than explicit. Grice (1975) shows that speakers often communicate more than what is directly said. In human rights texts, gender bias may arise not from direct discrimination but from repeated masculine generics or culturally loaded terms. For example, *the rights of man* may be historically accepted, but it can imply male-centered universality.

Levinson (1983) also emphasizes that meaning depends on context and inference. This is important because gender-neutral translation requires sensitivity to how readers infer gender roles from language. A term that appears neutral to one group may activate gendered assumptions in another cultural context.

Cognitive linguistics contributes through the concept of framing. Lakoff (2004) argues that words evoke frames that shape interpretation. In translation, a gender-marked term may activate a male or female frame even if the legal message intends universality. Therefore, gender-neutral translation involves cognitive reframing: the translator selects terms that activate inclusive conceptual structures.

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Legal translation studies also highlight the importance of precision and consistency. Cao (2007) notes that legal translation requires accuracy, clarity, and awareness of institutional context. In human rights discourse, however, accuracy must be combined with inclusiveness. A formally accurate but gender-biased translation may fail to reproduce the normative purpose of the source text.

Discussion and Analysis

Gender-neutral language strategies in translating human rights discourse can be analyzed through several major mechanisms: lexical neutralization, pronoun reformulation, avoidance of masculine generics, pluralization, explicitation, contextual adaptation, and cognitive reframing. Each strategy has a specific communicative and pragmatic function.

The first strategy is lexical neutralization. This involves replacing gender-marked words with gender-inclusive alternatives. For example, *chairman* may be translated or reformulated as *chairperson*, *head*, or *presiding officer*. In human rights discourse, such neutralization is important because official roles should not be associated with one gender only. Example: *Every chairman must respect the rights of participants* can be improved as *Every chairperson must respect the rights of participants*. The second version avoids implying that leadership is male.

The second strategy is avoiding masculine generics. Historically, English used *he* and *man* to refer to all people. However, modern inclusive language prefers *they*, *person*, *individual*, or plural constructions. For instance, *Every citizen must know his rights* may be changed to *Every citizen must know their rights* or *All citizens must know their rights*. The latter forms are more inclusive because they do not represent the male citizen as the default subject.

The third strategy is pluralization. Translators often avoid gendered singular pronouns by changing singular forms into plural forms. For example, *A person has the right to express his opinion* can become *People have the right to express their opinions*. This strategy preserves meaning while avoiding gender-specific pronouns.

The fourth strategy is explicitation. Sometimes the source text contains a gender-neutral idea, but the target language may require clarification to avoid ambiguity. For example, *All persons are equal before the law* may be translated in a way that clearly includes both women and men if the cultural context tends to interpret legal subjects as male. In such cases, explicitation helps protect the inclusive function of human rights discourse.

The fifth strategy is pragmatic adaptation. A translator must consider the communicative effect of the translation. For example, *the rights of man* is historically connected with early human rights documents, but in modern contexts it may sound gender-exclusive. A pragmatic translation may use *human rights* instead of a literal equivalent. Example: *The rights of man are universal* can be rendered as *Human rights are universal*. This version better corresponds to contemporary human rights principles.

The sixth strategy is cognitive reframing. This strategy changes the conceptual image activated by a word or phrase. For example, *mankind* may activate a male-centered frame, while *humanity* activates a broader inclusive frame. Thus, *The dignity of mankind must be protected* is better expressed as *The dignity of humanity must be protected*. The meaning becomes cognitively inclusive.

In human rights discourse, gender-neutral translation also requires attention to implicit bias. A text may not contain openly discriminatory language, but repeated use of male examples may create a gendered worldview. For instance, *A judge must be independent in his decisions* suggests a male judge. A better version is *Judges must be independent in their decisions*. This reformulation removes gender bias without changing legal meaning.

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Gender-neutral translation must also avoid overcorrection. In some contexts, gender-specific terms are necessary, especially when the document addresses women's rights, maternity protection, gender-based violence, or discrimination against women. For example, *Women have the right to equal participation in political life* should not be neutralized because gender is legally relevant. Therefore, the translator must distinguish between unnecessary gender marking and legally necessary gender reference.

From a pragmatic perspective, the main purpose is to preserve the illocutionary force of human rights discourse: protection, recognition, equality, and non-discrimination. From a cognitive perspective, the translator must ensure that the target text activates inclusive mental representations. Thus, gender-neutral translation is both a linguistic and ethical practice.

Comparative Analysis

English and Uzbek differ significantly in their grammatical treatment of gender, and these differences influence gender-neutral translation strategies. English contains gendered third-person singular pronouns such as *he* and *she*, as well as gender-marked lexical items such as *chairman*, *policeman*, *businessman*, and *mankind*. Uzbek, however, does not have grammatical gender in pronouns. The Uzbek pronoun *u* can mean both *he* and *she*. This feature makes Uzbek structurally more gender-neutral in some contexts.

For example, the English sentence *Every person has the right to express his opinion* contains a masculine pronoun. In Uzbek, it can be translated as *Har bir shaxs o'z fikrini bildirish huquqiga ega*. Here, *o'z* does not specify gender. The Uzbek translation naturally avoids gender bias.

However, Uzbek is not completely free from gender stereotypes. Gender bias may appear through lexical choices, cultural assumptions, or examples. For instance, if *leader* is repeatedly translated or contextualized as *erkak rahbar*, it creates male-centered representation. Therefore, Uzbek translation requires not grammatical gender correction but discourse-level sensitivity.

In English, one common strategy is the use of singular *they*: *Every individual has the right to protect their dignity*. In Uzbek, this may be translated as *Har bir shaxs o'z qadr-qimmatini himoya qilish huquqiga ega*. The Uzbek version does not need a gender-neutral pronoun because gender is not grammatically marked.

Another example is the translation of *mankind*. In older English texts, *mankind* was used to mean all humanity. However, in modern human rights discourse, *humanity* or *humankind* is preferred. Uzbek equivalents such as *insoniyat* or *bashariyat* are gender-neutral. Example: *The dignity of humanity must be respected — Insoniyat qadr-qimmati hurmat qilinishi kerak*.

Occupational terms also require attention. English has moved from *chairman* to *chairperson*, *fireman* to *firefighter*, and *policeman* to *police officer*. Uzbek equivalents such as *rais*, *o't o'chiruvchi*, and *politsiya xodimi* are generally gender-neutral. Example: *A police officer must respect human rights — Politsiya xodimi inson huquqlarini hurmat qilishi shart*.

Nevertheless, cultural framing may still create implicit gender bias. For example, *The head of the family must protect his family* may be translated neutrally as *Oila boshlig'i oila a'zolarini himoya qilishi kerak*. Yet in Uzbek cultural context, *oila boshlig'i* may often be cognitively associated with a man. Therefore, a more inclusive formulation may be *Har bir oila a'zosi oilada o'zaro hurmat va himoyaga mas'uldir* depending on context.

Thus, English-Uzbek translation shows that gender neutrality is not only a grammatical issue. English often requires pronoun and lexical reformulation, while Uzbek requires careful attention to cultural frames, examples, and implicit assumptions.

Conclusion

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Gender-neutral language strategies in translating human rights discourse are essential for preserving equality, dignity, and inclusiveness across languages. Since human rights texts are based on the principle of non-discrimination, their translation must avoid unnecessary gender marking and implicit gender bias. The analysis shows that effective strategies include lexical neutralization, avoidance of masculine generics, pluralization, and use of inclusive pronouns, explicitation, pragmatic adaptation, and cognitive reframing.

These strategies help translators maintain both the legal accuracy and ethical purpose of human rights texts. From a pragmatic perspective, gender-neutral translation protects the communicative intention of human rights discourse. It ensures that the target text does not exclude or marginalize any group. From a cognitive perspective, it reshapes the mental frames activated by language and promotes inclusive representation. The comparison of English and Uzbek demonstrates that gender neutrality depends on the structure and culture of each language. English often requires grammatical and lexical reformulation, while Uzbek requires attention to cultural assumptions and discourse-level meanings. In conclusion, gender-neutral translation is not merely a linguistic technique. It is a socially responsible practice that supports equality, inclusive communication, and the accurate transmission of human rights values.

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