



Subtly Sexist Sources: What's a Woke Translator to Do?

10 Practical Pointers for into-English Translators

By Rachel Pierce

First things first: *everyone* is sexist. According to a 2020 gender study by the United Nations Development Programme, “close to 90% of men and women hold some sort of bias against women.”¹ Sticking people into neat categories is a subconscious strategy that served our ancient ancestors in the survival-of-the-fittest scenarios they faced. But the world is evolving, and we should be too.

Societal expectations around gender are codified in different languages in barely perceptible ways. And the documents we translate were written by people, with all their flaws and preconceived ideas. So, when

gender bias reveals itself in a source text, what's a woke² translator to do?

The subtle sexism we usually encounter in our work isn't mean-spirited, it's lazy. But just because your client didn't bother to think outside the gender box doesn't mean you should follow suit. This is actually an area where translators can add great value. The line between lazy and offensive is very thin, and your nuanced understanding of the source and target languages might just save your client—from themselves.

“Fortunately,” subtle sexism follows certain patterns, and once you see them you can't unsee them (sorry, not sorry!). Here I break down the 10 most common ones you're likely to run across in your work, color-coded by severity to help you decide what, if anything, to tell your client.

Green Light: The Coast Is Clear

The first four examples aren't sexism per se—they're linguistic pain points in the source language, usually because of gender markers for which English has easy workarounds. There's no need to draw your client's attention to these issues.

1. **Embrace the singular “they.”** “There's a new CEO. I heard *they* start Monday.” Grammar sticklers may balk, but the fact is there's no longer a need for *he* or *she* or, worse still, *s/he*, when a person's gender is unknown or irrelevant. The singular *they* is a deft solution long used in everyday speech. With the

exception of a few partial holdouts (we're looking at you, *Chicago Manual of Style!*³), all the major style guides and dictionaries now endorse it because it essentially takes gender out of the equation.

2. **Let the ladies lead now and again.** Writers in most languages tend to mention men first except in situations involving chivalry (*ladies and gentlemen*) or presumed maternal instincts (*mothers and fathers* gets roughly twice the Google hits as *fathers and mothers*). Translating a paragraph about a crack team of financial planners made up of women and men? Make your writing more engaging by alternating the order in which they're introduced.
3. **What's good for the goose is good for the gander.** Even if it's clear from the source language that a woman is married, always, always, always use Ms. (or Dr. or Professor, if applicable) when translating her title into English, unless you know her preferred form of address. Because marital status shouldn't matter, period.
4. **Be aware of the grammatical gender gap.** One of the advantages of English is that it's a *natural gender* language, meaning gender distinctions are only made in pronouns. But in Romance languages, for example, animate and inanimate objects have gender and the adjectives used to describe them

have to agree in gender. When the source is laden with gender information, translating it is tempting—but often unnecessary. Ask yourself: What's gender got to do with it in English? If the answer is “nothing,” leave it out.

Yellow Light: Proceed with Caution

The next three subtle sexism patterns affect the source and the target and may need to be brought to your client's attention, depending on the nature of the project, your relationship with your client, the deadline, and other real-world factors. Whether you raise the flag to your client or not, you should feel empowered to move away from the sexism you see in the source.

5. **Watch for weak verbs.** Many writers save powerful, task-oriented verbs for men and weaker, people-oriented verbs for women. Just because she's *taking care* and he's *taking charge*⁴ in the source doesn't mean you have to replicate it in the target. This is another good reason to use strong verbs in your translations across the board.
6. **Watch for loaded adjectives.** Similarly, adjectives can be a real minefield. Don't use descriptors that fit only one gender. Have you ever heard a man described as wearing something *revealing*, or being *bossy* or *emotional*? On the flip side, adjectives like *assertive* and *confident* are

compliments for men but thinly veiled insults for women. Women are also more likely to be saddled with adjectives bestowing faint praise, like *helpful* and *conscientious*, which certainly don't scream “star performer deserving of a raise!” Stick with strong adjectives that aren't gender-charged, carry the same connotation, and actually convey meaningful information.

7. **Watch for non-neutral nouns.** The generic *he* is a thing of the past, so avoid using gender-specific nouns to refer to all humans and don't assume certain occupations are held by people of a certain gender. Think *chairperson* (not *chairman*), *flight attendant* (not *stewardess*), and *housekeeper* (not *cleaning lady*). English has plenty of neutral nouns to draw on instead.
One caveat: Sometimes it's a good idea to make gender *more* visible. For instance, in a job description for a traditionally male-dominated position, consider using *his or her* (or why not *her or his*?) instead of the singular *they* to encourage female applicants. (“The faculty chair will fulfill *his or her* role by....”) Hopefully this more inclusive wording will resonate with non-binary candidates as well. And a word to the wise: If you ever need to write or translate a job description in English, run it through the Gender Decoder⁵ to make sure

it doesn't inadvertently sound sexist.

Red light: Danger Ahead

The last three are not-so-subtle examples of sexism that could potentially alienate or even offend the target audience, so they warrant an explanatory comment or email to your client every time.

8. **Ditch the dichotomy.** Be on high alert for stereotypes slipping in any time a woman and a man are mentioned in the same sentence or paragraph (a sister and brother, a father and mother, female/male coworkers). We tend to think of men and women in opposition, even though studies have shown we're more alike than different.⁶
This is all too common in marketing contexts. As early as our toddler years, we're indoctrinated to believe that girls like certain toys (pink aisle) and boys like others (blue aisle), and never the twain shall meet. Marketing aimed at adults often draws on trite stereotypes in the division of labor, with women stuck inside (cleaning products, child rearing) and men outside (tools, cars).⁷
But gender “norms” are a social construct, so if you have the poetic license—maybe you're translating a fictional training scenario or a creative marketing piece—switch up the gender roles and leave your client a note explaining why.

9. **Nix wording that sexualizes or infantilizes women.** Two recent translation projects come to mind. The first was a corporate dress code that frowned on spaghetti straps and low-cut blouses. Simply put, this is formalized gender discrimination. We changed the wording to something less inflammatory (“Dress professionally” did the trick!) and let our client know.

The other was a branding piece that described a veterinarian’s social media presence as *feminine*. Tracking down their Facebook posts to get a visual, we found photos of adorable pets (picture an inspirational “Hang in There” poster). We opted for *cute and cuddly* and included a note to the client patiently explaining that *feminine* could be controversial and distract from their message.

10. **Speak up—again and again and again.** I’m a firm believer in client education. Typo in the source text? Let the client know. Vague wording? Let the client know. Problematic language that makes them sound tone-deaf—or worse? *Let the client know.*

Companies operate as closed systems. They have their own culture and parlance, so you may find that some are more prone to using non-neutral, non-inclusive language because they can no longer objectively hear what they sound like. They may even

be resistant to constructive criticism coming from the outside.

When you take the time to insert a comment in your translation or type up an explanatory email, don’t expect an immediate response. As we all know, being a translator sometimes feels like being stranded on a desert island. Think of every comment and every email like a message in a bottle. Keep on sending them, and eventually someone out there will hear you.


Bottom Line

The bottom line is that translators have agency over their work and should make it as gender-neutral and inclusive as possible without impacting readability or undermining the author’s intention. Ask yourself how egregious the error is (play Red Light, Green Light). If it comes from gender marking in the source language, keep moving. If it’s a subtlety that could be improved in the source as well, consider letting the client know (especially if that particular client is a repeat offender). And if it’s a verbal misstep that could have far-reaching consequences, definitely don’t let it slide.

We’re witnessing social progress on an unparalleled scale. What we (and our clients) say and how we say it has never mattered more. As Amanda Ruggeri, senior editor of *BBC Future*, mentioned in a 2019 editorial: “Mirroring gender imbalance [...] isn’t a benign act. It perpetuates the problem.”⁸ Accustomed to playing a supporting role, professional linguists have an unprecedented opportunity to

leverage our insight and skills in unobtrusive yet impactful ways. After all, how many other occupations consume, process, and rephrase *thousands* of words a day? We have a considerable amount of control over those words,

and we have the ear of clients large and small, across every industry. We can and should be champions for change.

Have you found sexism or questionable language in a source text (or MT/AI context)? Email me! 

NOTES

- ¹ “Almost 90% of Men/Women Globally Are Biased Against Women,” United Nations Development Programme website (March 5, 2020), <https://bit.ly/UNDP-bias>.
- ² My definition of “woke” is being aware that we all carry unconscious bias and making a concerted effort to mindfully combat it whenever possible.
- ³ To read *The Chicago Manual of Style’s* stance on the use of the singular “they,” see: <https://bit.ly/CMS-pronouns>.
- ⁴ “Women ‘Take Care,’ Men ‘Take Charge’: Stereotyping of U.S. Business Leaders Exposed,” Catalyst (2005), <https://bit.ly/Catalyst-stereotyping>.
- ⁵ Gender Decoder, <http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com>.
- ⁶ “Men and Women: No Big Difference,” American Psychological Association, www.apa.org/research/action/difference.
- ⁷ For more on the pitfalls of marketing to the sexes, watch the “Why Gender-Based Marketing Is Bad for Business” TED Talk by Gaby Barrios: <https://bit.ly/Gaby-Barrios>.
- ⁸ Ruggeri, Amanda, “How We’re Tackling Gender Imbalance,” *BBC Future* (January 17, 2019), <https://bbc.in/3zknAOC>.

ADDITIONAL READING

Berger, Miriam. “A Guide to How Gender-Neutral Language Is Developing Around the World,” *The Washington Post* (December 15, 2019), <https://wapo.st/3eSKMcR>.

American Psychological Association Bias-Free Language Guidelines, <https://bit.ly/APA-bias-free>.

List of Sexist Adjectives (Sacraparental), <https://bit.ly/Sacraparental>.



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