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Misgendered in Translation?: Genderqueerness in Polish Translations of English-language Television Series

Abstract

In recent years, the English-speaking world observed growing awareness of the gender non-binary/genderqueer community. Among other things, this involved the issue of inclusive language, e.g. the *singular they* pronoun has been declared the word of the year by the American Dialect Society in 2015, and by Merriam-Webster in 2019. There is also growing media representation of characters using *singular they* in popular culture. This, however, poses a challenge to translators, as some languages – like Polish – are much more heavily gendered and lack an obvious equivalent of *singular they*. This article analyses Polish translations of three English-language television series featuring non-binary characters and discusses good practices one can employ when dealing with similar translation challenges.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, genderqueerness, grammatical gender, non-binary, transgender

1. Introduction

Over the last few years one could observe – both in social/political life and the academia – the growing visibility of the transgender community, including non-binary people. The term *non-binary* (or *genderqueer*) refers to these individuals who do not (fully) identify as men or women. It might function as an identity label of its own or as an umbrella-term for many diverse identifications, such as *genderfluid*, *bigender*, *agender*, etc. (cf. Kłonkowska and Dynarski 2016; Richards *et al.* 2016). The English-speaking world (meaning English-speaking communities but also, crucially, consumers of English-language media and those who follow and participate in the English-language discussions on online platforms such as Reddit, Tumblr, or Facebook) has seen numerous public figures and celebrities come out as non-binary, e.g. musicians Rae Spoon and Sam Smith, actors Bex Taylor-Klaus and Asia Kate Dillon, or television personality Jonathan Van Ness.

Non-binary characters have also started appearing in various texts of popular culture, three of which are discussed in this paper. The academic field of transgender studies has produced works inclusive of, or even centering on, non-binary perspectives (e.g. Monro 2005; Dynarski 2016; Finlay 2017; Kłonkowska 2017; Ziemińska 2018).

The titular *misgendering* is an act of referring to a person with incorrect gendered pronouns or other gendered terms (e.g. talking about a trans man as a *she* or calling a trans woman a *dude*).¹ As Derecka (2019a, 102) points out, although transphobic violence on the level of language is most often understood as the use of slurs and derogatory terms, more indirect forms of it, such as using incorrect pronouns or grammatical forms, can also be distressful, even when the distress is unintentional. Russel *et al.* (2018) show that language (in this case, the chosen name) used to talk to and about transgender people matters greatly and has impact on their mental health and well-being. Hence, it is vital to always aim at using validating and respectful language, attuned to the trans community's needs.

This paper analyzes Polish translations of three English-language television series including genderqueer characters. It demonstrates how the translators' decisions regarding gendered language erase the characters' identities, and moves on to propose good practices one can use while dealing with similar translation challenges. Throughout the text, *singular they* is used with reference to non-binary individuals.

2. Genderqueerness and language

English and Polish are differently gendered languages. In English, the most prominent – and most often discussed – gendered feature are the 3rd person singular pronouns. The most common alternative to the traditional *he* and *she* is now *singular they*, another option being numerous neo-pronouns (such as *ze*, *xe*, *ou* or *thon*). Baron (2018, 4) writes that the first attempts at creating a gender-neutral 3rd person pronoun date back to the end of the 18th century, but none of the neo-pronouns has ever gained mainstream recognition (Baron 2018, 91-92). Hord (2016, 16), who interviewed 182 non-binary people speaking English as their first or second language, reports that 34% of the respondents declared using *singular they* as their pronoun with only 1% admitting to using neo-pronouns (other responses included using *he* or *she*, using more than one pronoun, or no pronoun at all), which would suggest that *singular they* has become a certain standard in the non-binary community (Hord 2016, 17). Moreover, it has been gaining acceptance of language authorities. In 2015, it was named the word of the year by The American Dialect Society, who, in their verdict, recognized both the long tradition of its usage as a generic pronoun as well as a pronoun used specifically with reference to non-binary people.² Five years later, the same organization

declared the pronoun its word of the decade.³ Merriam-Webster has also declared *singular they* to be their word of the year (in 2019)⁴ highlighting that both its generic and specific uses are now widely accepted, also in formal contexts. The pronoun's newest sense (a reference to a specific person who does not identify as either a man or a woman) has been added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary.⁵ The American Psychological Association is recommending using *singular they* in the 7th edition of their *Publication Manual* pointing out to its greater inclusiveness than that of the generic *he or she*.⁶ However, *The Chicago Manual of Style* in its latest, 17th edition (published in 2017) recommends "avoiding *singular they* as a generic reference, at least in formal writing", even though it recognizes that some people use it as their specific pronoun.⁷

Polish, on the other hand, is much more heavily gendered. Every noun is assigned one of the three grammatical genders – masculine, feminine, or neuter (masculine nouns being further divided into three subgroups: personal, animate, and inanimate, based on their syntactic and inflectional properties) (cf. Laskowski 1998, 209). There are three gendered 3rd person pronouns in the singular (*on* 'he', *ona* 'she', and *ono* 'it'), and two in the plural (*oni* 'they', referring only to masculine personal nouns, and *one* 'they' – referring to all the other nouns). Additionally, adjectives, numerals, and verbs must agree with the (pro)nouns they modify in terms of gender. This means that non-binary speakers of Polish who do not wish to use uniformly masculine or feminine forms face a much greater challenge than their English-speaking peers. As of yet, no major studies have been conducted on this subject, but there are several smaller ones shedding some light on it. Rzeczkowski (2010, 206-207) recounts possible strategies of omitting gendered forms such as substituting active voice with passive, distorting verb endings in speech and omitting them in writing, or changing past tense to present (as gender is only marked in the past tense). Derecka (2019b) presents various strategies employed by non-binary people in writing (the material was collected on Internet forums and discussion groups), such as using neuter forms (*mówiłom* instead of *mówiłem/mówiłam* 'I was speaking'), changing vowels at the endings of words, e.g. into <æ> (*mówiłam*) or <u> (*mówiłam*) (the latter is inspired by the writing of Polish science-fiction writer Jacek Dukaj; see the next paragraph).⁸ My research (focused mainly on spoken language) showed that non-binary speakers of Polish may switch between masculine and feminine forms of pronouns, verbs, and adjectives. When it comes to nouns, there is a certain preference for masculine terms for professions, while in the case of terms denoting familial relationships, neutral forms (such as *dziecko* 'child' instead of *syn/córka* 'son/daughter') are preferred (Szy 2019).

There are cases of neuter usage in Polish literature, e.g. a character in Marta Kisiel's urban fantasy novels *Dożywocie* (2010) and *Siła niższa* (2016) talks and is referred to in neuter forms. There is also a case of a neo-pronoun or, perhaps more accurately, a "grammatical neo-gender": in Jacek Dukaj's 2004 novel

Perfekcyjna niedoskonłość: numerous characters use forms employing the letter *u*, including verb forms (*mówiłam*), pronouns (*onu/jenu/num*), and a whole new adjectival and nominal declension paradigm. Furthermore, Polish translators of science-fiction novels by the Australian author Greg Egan invented two new sets of pronouns. In his novels *Distress* (1995) and *Diaspora* (1997) Egan uses the *ve/ver/vis/verself* pronouns, which Paweł Wieczorek rendered as *vono/vo/vu/viego/vim* in his translation of *Distress* (published in 2003), while Michał Jakuszczyński – as *ve/vir/vis/vir/ver/ver* in his translation of *Diaspora* (published in 2017). Both translators used neuter forms of verbs and adjectives.

Białas (2006, 51–53) postulates that in fiction and translation, it is impossible to escape (grammatical) gender, save for literary tricks aimed at “escaping language [...] and identity [translation mine]”. He quotes Jeanette Winterson’s 1992 novel *Written on the Body* as an example of prose employing said tricks. Winterson does not reveal the narrator’s gender throughout the text, which is fairly easy to accomplish in English (nobody talks about them in the 3rd person). Nota bene, the narrator is not said to be non-binary (Winterson does not refer to the topic of transgender identity in the novel); it is simply left unknown whether they are a man or a woman. Hanna Mizerska (1999, 8-9), the Polish translator of the novel relates how, after rejecting neuter or impersonal forms with the reflexive pronoun *się* as viable options, she decided for a male narrator, a decision vetoed by Winterson herself. Thus, finally, Mizerska made the narrator female and stated that despite the fact that assigning them a gender is “a necessary compromise [translation mine]”, this is a “minor issue” for the reader. Białas (2006, 57) disagrees with Mizerska pointing out that one of the central themes of the original novel cannot become a minor issue in its translation. He concludes by stating that Winterson’s novel simply cannot exist in Polish.

It is interesting to juxtapose Egan’s and Winterson’s writing. Even though the worlds envisioned by Egan are much more alien to the reader (in *Distress*, it is possible to rid oneself of sex/gender and sexuality and adopt a “gender-neutral” and asexual identity as a form of political statement, while in *Diaspora*, most of the characters are genderless artificial intelligences)⁹ than the one described by Winterson (*Written...* is a contemporary realistic novel), Egan’s experiments with gender lend themselves to translation much more easily, possibly because in both the source and the target language they are supposed to invoke a sense of novelty and certain strangeness. Egan uses neologisms to describe something that does not exist in our world while Winterson does not alter reality in any way; she simply uses the properties of her language. The fact that the narrator’s gender is never revealed seems like a mere accident, an accident that would not take place in Polish. Białas is right that this aspect of *Written...* is untranslatable. One might argue, then, that since Polish has no equivalent of *singular they*, which is used in the three series discussed in this paper, genderqueerness of the characters is doomed to be lost in translation. But genderqueer people do exist

in Poland (as in any other country), and, as it was shown above, they do express their identities through language.

The current Polish discourse about genderqueerness is heavily influenced by that of English speakers. The very phrases *osoba niebinarna* ‘non-binary person’ and *niebinarność płciowa* ‘non-binary gender identity’ – both being calques from English – have become standard terms to talk about genderqueerness and genderqueer people in Polish; they are used by LGBTQ organizations and activists, as well as the media.¹⁰ They also appear in the latest literature on the subject (e.g. Kluczyńska, Dynarski and Kłonkowska 2016; Kłonkowska 2017; Ziemińska 2018; Derecka 2019b; Mańkowska 2019). Non-binary speakers of Polish often use English words to describe their identities, either as direct loanwords (e.g. *agender* or *genderfluid*) or as calques (e.g. *osoba agenderowa* or *osoba bigenderowa*) (see Szy 2019). Moreover, lay linguists’ discussions concerning gendered language forms in Polish are often labeled as discussions about pronouns (mirroring the situation of English speakers, for whom, indeed, the pronouns are of main importance even though in Polish the issue is much broader); a person might say “I’m using masculine pronouns” meaning “I’m using masculine forms of (pro)nouns, adjectives, and verbs”. For example, Loë Fjorsigviss, a non-binary speaker of Polish who uses Dukaj’s <u> forms, invokes the terms *neutralne zaimki* ‘neutral pronouns’ and *dukajowe zaimki* ‘Dukaj’s pronouns’ in a press interview (Tomaszewicz 2020, 39-40); the creators of the Polish educational YouTube channel *TransBros* put “pronouns” in the titles of their videos talking about gendered language.¹¹ Also, an educational poster prepared by a Polish transgender non-governmental organization Fundacja Trans-Fuzja for the 2020 Day of Transgender Visibility urges viewers to “respect trans people’s pronouns [translation mine]”.¹²

This state of affairs seems to be quite a recent development. Writing about the linguistic invisibility of genderqueer people in Polish, Rzeczkowski (2012) used the term *genderqueer*; two years earlier they used *trzecie płcie* ‘the third genders/sexes’ (note the use of the plural) (Rzeczkowski 2010), a term which has been mostly used by anthropologists describing genders beside “man” and “woman” in non-Western cultures (see e.g. Agrawai 1997; Kuligowski 2005). An anthology *Postpłciowość? Praktyki i narracje tożsamościowe w ponowoczesnym świecie* [‘Postgender? Identity practices and narratives in the postmodern world’] (Banot, Barabasz and Majka 2012), in which the issue of transgressing the male/female binary (and the linguistic challenges this entails) is discussed, does not use the term *niebinarność płciowa* either. Similarly, the term does not appear in a series of interviews documenting the experiences of queer and gender non-conforming people in Poland collected in the book *Zakazane miłości* [‘Forbidden loves’] (Konarzewska and Pacewicz 2011) although some of the interviewees could be described as non-binary.¹³ Interestingly, this book is, so far, the only source in which I encountered two originally Polish coinages of nouns denoting persons who are not men or women: *kobieczyzna* and *mężbieta* (both are portmanteaus of

the words *kobieta* ‘woman’ and *mężczyzna* ‘man’) (Konarzewska and Pacewicz 2011, 103). These earlier texts used more descriptive language and talked about being “between genders” or “outside of gender”, while the newer ones introduce the more tangible category of *non-binary*. It could be argued that this mirrors a certain shift in the discourse about gender in general. Third wave feminism and queer theory, having moved away from more essentialist positions of second wave feminist theories, emphasized the complexity of gender as a category and its entanglement in power relations. If gender, as Judith Butler (1990, 32) wrote, is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts”, if it is performative, then different people can perform – and experience – their masculinity or femininity differently in different contexts, at different times. Note, however, that this approach, even though it views masculinity and femininity as complex and multilayered, may not account for those who experience their gender as essentially different.¹⁴ Thus, the emergence of *non-binary* as a stable, separate – and, perhaps, more politically potent – category beside “male” and “female” may be an answer to many people’s needs, even though a framework with three (more or less strictly defined) gender categories has its own potential perils (see Dynarski 2016 and Ziemińska 2018, 121–147 for a detailed discussion).

The following sections discuss the Polish translations of three television series – *Degrassi: Next Class*, *Billions*, and *She-Ra and The Princesses of Power*. In the case of the first two, the original English dialogues are compared with Polish subtitles, whereas in the case of *She-Ra...*, it is English and Polish voice-overs (the series is animated) that are juxtaposed. One may note that Polish subtitles for *She-Ra...* are available, and although there are some minor differences between the dialogues in them and those in the voice-over, the approaches to the characters’ genders are the same.

3. *Degrassi: Next Class*

The Canadian series aimed mainly at teenage audiences (a part of a bigger *Degrassi* franchise existing since 1979) depicts adventures of a group of high-schoolers. It was first aired on Family Channel in Canada and later distributed internationally by the Internet streaming platform Netflix. Four seasons were created in 2016 and 2017. In the last season, one of the characters, Yael Baron (portrayed by Jamie Bloch) discovers their non-binary gender identity.

For the major part of the series, Yael identifies as a woman, and others refer to them as one (i.e. using *she/her* pronouns). Naturally, the Polish translation uses feminine forms of nouns, adjectives, and verbs. When Yael starts questioning their identity, feminine forms are still used in Polish, e.g. in the scene when Yael tells a friend about their feelings:

- (1a) YAEL. I feel... **inbetween**. I'm not a girl. [...] But I don't feel like a boy, either.
YAEL. Czuję się **rozdarta**. Nie czuję się dziewczyną. [...] Ale nie czuję się też chłopcem.
- (1b) LOLA. **My favorite vlogger** did a thing about this. **They identify** as genderqueer. Or, I think there's another name for it. Um... Genderfluid. **They feel like they're** between a boy or a girl. Or both. Or neither.
LOLA. **Mój ulubiony vlogger** nagrał o tym filmik. [Ø] **Identyfikuje się** jako genderqueer. Nazywa się to płynnością płciową. **To ktoś** pomiędzy chłopcem a dziewczyną. Albo oboje. Albo żadne z nich.
(*Degrassi: Next Class*, season 4, episode 6)

The continued use of feminine forms might seem reasonable here – as of now Yael has not voiced a desire to be referred to differently than before.

In Lola's part, the translation tries to avoid gendered forms: the pronoun is omitted, and later it is substituted by the phrase *to ktoś* 'it's someone'. Only the originally gender-neutral phrase *favorite vlogger* becomes *ulubiony vlogger*, which is grammatically masculine, its feminine counterpart being *ulubiona vloggerka*. It may be argued that, out of the two, the former is more neutral (not just masculine, but also generic), but one could imagine using a phrase like *osoba vloggująca* 'vlogger (lit. a vlogging person)' akin to forms *osoba prezesująca* 'president (lit. a person presiding)' or *osoba studiująca* 'student (lit. a person studying)' which are used by some non-binary people (see Szy 2019). The problem with such a solution, however, is that these descriptive forms are considerably longer – with its 16 characters, *osoba vloggująca* is over twice as long as *vlogger* (7 characters), and so it takes up nearly a half of the recommended maximum of 37 characters per line of subtitles (cf. Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007, 84).

In another scene, Yael and Lola actually discuss language:

- (2a) LOLA. **Have you thought** about pronouns?
LOLA. **Myślalaś** już o zaimkach?
- (2b) YAEL. What do you mean?
YAEL. Co masz na myśli?
- (2c) LOLA. Most people like you use different pronouns. Like “**ze**” instead of “he” or “she”.
LOLA. Większość takich jak ty używa innych zaimków. Na przykład “**oni**” zamiast “on” i “ona”.
(*Degrassi: Next Class*, season 4, episode 6)

Interestingly, the neo-pronoun *ze* mentioned by Lola is rendered in Polish as *oni* 'they (masc.)'. This makes the translation slightly inconsistent, as in the original, Lola mentions *ze*, but later Yael decides to use *they* (so, the viewers hear

about two alternatives to *he* and *she*). In the Polish version, both *ze* and *they* are rendered as *oni* (cf. (5) and (6)). An alternative choice for translating *ze* in (2c) could be Dukaj's *onu* or *vonno/ve* from the translations of Egan's novels. One might argue that these are less mainstream in Polish than *ze* is in English; still, if one of the Polish neo-pronouns were used here, Polish viewers would hear about two alternatives to traditional gendered pronouns rather than just one.

Even when Yael is already out as non-binary, and other characters refer to them with *singular they*, the Polish translation continues to use feminine forms:

- (3a) YAEL. I'm not going back. Not for him, nor for anyone else.
YAEL. Nie wróćę do **starej** Yael. Ani dla niego, ani dla kogokolwiek innego.
- (3b) LOLA. You're a **total badass**, you know that?
LOLA. **Twardzielka** z ciebie, wiesz?
(*Degrassi: Next Class*, season 4, episode 6)
- (4) YAEL. **I was wrong** and probably **racist**.
YAEL. **Mylilam się i zachowałam jak rasistka**.
(*Degrassi: Next Class*, season 4, episode 9)

The nouns seem particularly interesting here. Note that in (1b) a masculine/generic form was used with reference to a non-binary person (*vlogger*); however, in (3b), in the case of a character who used to function as a woman (and is portrayed by a woman actor), feminine forms are used: *twardzielka* 'badass (fem.)' and *rasistka* 'racist (fem.)'.

The sole exception are situations where people talk about Yael (in the 3rd person) when in English *singular they* is used. It is rendered as *oni* 'they (masc.)' with masculine plural forms of verbs in the Polish version:

- (5) HUNTER. [looking at Yael]: I'll leave if **they wants** [sic!].
HUNTER. [patrzając na Yael/a]: Pójdę, jeśli **oni chcą**.
(*Degrassi: Next Class*, season 4, episode 9)
- (6a) YAEL. [to Hunter] Wait... I think I know something [about it].
YAEL. [do Huntera] Moment... Chyba coś [o tym] wiem.
- (6b) LOLA. [to Hunter] No, **they don't**. [to Yael] You don't.
LOLA. [do Huntera] Nie, **nie wiedzą**. [do Yael/a] Nie wiesz.
(*Degrassi: Next Class*, season 4, episode 9)

This may be confusing to Polish viewers; such a rare, and quite inexplicable, use of plurals might rather seem like a translation error. This is not to say that plural forms can never be a viable translation choice. They might, if used consistently. Although using plural forms does not seem to be a particularly popular choice

among Polish genderqueer people, some do opt for them. E.g., in social media, there is at least one person using plural masculine personal forms, including 1st and 2nd person pronouns (*my* ‘we’ and *wy* ‘you (pl.)’) as well as past tense verbs (*zrobiliśmy* ‘we did’, *powiedzieliśmy* ‘we said’ and *zrobiliście* ‘you (pl.) did’, *powiedzieliście* ‘you (pl.) said’). Krzysztof Bożejewicz, a Polish pop-culture blogger (who also happens to be a non-binary person) lists them among other gender-affirming options for translating genderqueerness into Polish (Bożejewicz 2019).

4. *Billions*

The series, produced by the American network Showtime (and distributed in Poland by the Internet streaming platform HBO Go), follows the legal battles between US attorney Charles Rhoades and a hedge fund executive Robert “Axe” Axelrod. Taylor Mason (portrayed by Asia Kate Dillon), an employee of Axe’s, who appears in the second season of the series, is considered the first non-binary character in mainstream American television (in addition, the actor is non-binary themselves).¹⁵

Taylor functions as non-binary from the very beginning. They introduce themselves with *they* pronouns while meeting Axe:

- (7) TAYLOR. Hello, I’m Taylor. My pronouns are **they, theirs and them**.
TAYLOR. Jestem Taylor. Mówi się o mnie “**oni, ich, nimi**”.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 2)

Like in *Degrassi’s* case, *singular they* is rendered as *oni* ‘they (masc.)’ in the Polish translation. Interestingly, the trend to call a conversation about gendered forms a conversation about pronouns (discussed in section 2) is, in a way, reversed here. *My pronouns are* becomes *Mówi się o mnie* (lit. ‘The way to talk about me is’) even though in both languages Taylor is, in fact, sharing only their pronouns. In another scene, Axe corrects another employee who uses the wrong pronoun:

- (8a) AXE. [It is] just as Taylor anticipated.
AXE. Trzeba było słuchać Taylor.
(8b) BILL. **She spotted** that from outer space?
BILL. **Wypatrzyła** to w gwiazdach?
(8c) AXE. **Not she. They**.
AXE. **Nie ona. Oni**.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 2)

Axe’s line might seem ambiguous in both languages; more so, in Polish, in which the use of plurals is a much less established practice. But mainly, because the use of plurals is – again – inconsistent:

- (9a) SACKER. You were trying to warn [Taylor] about the place **they're working**.
SACKER. Ostrzegalesz **ja**, gdzie pracuje.
- (9b) CONNERTY. Yeah, I think **they know**.
CONNERTY. **Oni wiedzą**.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 10)

In two consecutive lines Taylor is referred to with the feminine pronoun *ja* and the plural (masculine personal) pronoun *oni*. This might make the viewer believe that Connerty is not saying that Taylor knows what kind of place they work in but rather that some group of people know about his conversation with Taylor, which completely alters the original meaning.

When it comes to situations when Taylor speaks in the 1st person or other characters address them in the 2nd person, feminine forms are used:

- (10a) TAYLOR. I was 12 when I **started** playing online.
TAYLOR. **Zaczęłam** [grać], mając 12 lat.
- (10b) AXE. I bet you were one of those multi-table prodigies.
AXE. I **przeszłaś** do turniejów wielostolikowych.
- (10c) TAYLOR. But then I **quit** poker.
TAYLOR. Potem **zrezygnowałam**.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 3)
- (11) CONNERTY [to Taylor]. [Y]ou're an **intelligent... A good person**.
CONNERTY [do Taylor/a]. [J]esteś **inteligentna... Porządna**.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 10)

But the nouns used with reference to Taylor are not all feminine:

- (12) TAYLOR. What makes you think I'm a **vegan**?
TAYLOR. Czemu sądzisz, że jestem **weganką**?
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 1)
- (13) MAFEE. My [**intern**] analyst caught it.
MAFEE. Mój **stażysta** to wyłapał.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 2)
- (14) TAYLOR. You are going to make me the **chief investment officer**.
TAYLOR. Mianujesz mnie **następcą**.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 10)

Both *stażysta* 'intern (masc.)' and *następcą* 'successor (masc.)' are masculine nouns, but one can easily imagine using them with reference to a woman, which

is not uncommon in Polish, especially for names of professions (cf. Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska 2005, 35–40); they could also be used generically. Plus, as mentioned in section 2, there may be a certain preference among non-binary speakers of Polish for masculine names of professions. Considering all this and the fact that neutral descriptive forms like *osoba stażująca/osoba na stażu* (lit. ‘an intern person’) and *osoba następcza/osoba następująca* (lit. ‘a successor person / a person succeeding’) are considerably longer, *stażysta* and *następca* seem to be the most viable choices. *Weganka* ‘vegan (fem.)’, on the other hand, leaves no doubt about its referent’s gender. Its masculine counterpart, *weganin* ‘vegan (masc.)’ is less neutral than *stażysta/następca* – it might be used generically, but it is rather unlikely someone would use it with reference to a woman specifically. In this particular case, however, there is an easy way out: the translation could use the adjective *wege* ‘veg(etari)an’; it is a rare case of a non-inflecting adjective, so the utterance would be unmarked for gender.¹⁶

In the end, the nouns chosen would strongly suggest a female referent (perhaps even more so, since it is Taylor herself to use the word *weganka*). Therefore, except for the selected scenes where *singular they* is rendered as a plural pronoun, Taylor – just like Yael – is treated as a woman by the Polish translation.

The last noteworthy example is the scene when one of the characters tries to humiliate Taylor by referring to them with the words *it* and *what*:

- (15a) KRAKOW. I’m not getting a good read on **it**.
KRAKOW. Nie potrafię rozgryźć **tego czegoś**.
- (15b) WENDY. That’s not your issue.
WENDY. To nie twoje zmartwienie.
- (15c) KRAKOW. It seems to me that it is since that’s **what** stands between me and winning.
KRAKOW. Przeciwnie. **To-to** stoi mi na drodze do wygranej.
(*Billions*, season 2, episode 3)

There is not much to discuss regarding the translation itself, as it is perfectly faithful in this case – both *to coś* (lit. ‘this thing’) and *to-to* (a reduplication of the neuter demonstrative pronoun *to* meaning ‘something/someone unimportant’)¹⁷ correspond with the original and well capture Krakow’s intentions. However, looking at this example can lead to a sad conclusion that, as opposed to linguistic manifestations of genderqueerness, transphobic slurs are very easy to render in Polish.

5. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

The series, produced by DreamWorks and Netflix (and distributed internationally by Netflix), is a 2018 reboot of the original 1980s children’s animation following Adora,

a teenage girl who leads a group of magical princesses against invaders who want to conquer their planet. The fourth season of the reboot introduces Double Trouble (voiced by Jacob Tobia, who is non-binary themselves) as a recurring character; they are a shape-shifting mercenary infiltrating the princesses' alliance. Although their gender identity is never openly discussed (all characters simply use *singular they* pronouns while referring to them), Double Trouble gained some publicity as one of the first non-binary characters in English-language mainstream children TV shows.¹⁸

The Polish translation, unlike in the previously discussed examples, does not aim to render Double Trouble's genderqueerness in any way. Instead, they are simply turned into a male character. Their name was translated as *Kłopotowski*, which is an adjectival surname typical of Polish (cf. *Kowalski*, *Wiśniewski*, *Andrzejewski* as opposed to feminine forms *Kowalska*, *Wiśniewska*, *Andrzejewska*, etc.). This seems surprising as none of the other characters' names throughout the four seasons were translated, including aptronyms such as *Shadow Weaver*, *Castaspella* (for a sorceress) or *Bow* (for an archer). *Kłopotowski* is derived from the noun *kłopot* 'trouble', so it is apt, but it leaves no doubt that its owner is a man.

Consequently, in the Polish version, all adjectives and verbs referring to Double Trouble are masculine:

- (16) DOUBLE TROUBLE. Pleasure to meet you. The name's **Double Trouble**.
 KŁOPOTOWSKI. Miło poznać. **Kłopotowski**. Jestem **aktorem**.¹⁹
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 2)
- (17a) CATRA. Lord Hordak, I'd like to introduce you to **Double Trouble**. **They**'re our newest asset in taking down the Rebellion.
 CATRA. Lordzie Hordak, chcę panu przedstawić **Kłopotowskiego**. To nasz najnowszy nabytek w walce przeciwko Rebelii.
- (17b) DOUBLE TROUBLE. Apologies for being rude. **I was getting into** character. Did it work? Be honest. As always, I'm **open** to constructive criticism.
 KŁOPOTOWSKI. Proszę wybaczyć moją bezczelność, lecz **wczuwałem się** w postać. Udało się? Szczerze, proszę. Zawsze jestem **otwarty** na konstruktywną krytykę.
- (17c) HORDAK. **A shape-shifter**? Impressive indeed.
 HORDAK. **Zmiennokształtny**? Doprawdy imponujące.
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 3)
- (18) DOUBLE TROUBLE. I knew there was a reason **I liked** you.
 KŁOPOTOWSKI. Wiedziałem, że nie bez powodu cię **polubiłem**.
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 4)
- (19) DOUBLE TROUBLE. I thought I'd come check on you.
 KŁOPOTOWSKI. **Wpadłem** sprawdzić, co u ciebie.
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 4)

- (20) CATRA. I don't know what I would've done if **you hadn't shown up**.
 CATRA. Nie wiem, co bym zrobiła, **gdybyś się nie pojawił**.
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 4)
- (21) BOW. We captured **Double Trouble! They're refusing** to talk to us, but... still!
 BOW. Pojmaliśmy **Kłopotowskiego! Nie chce** z nami gadać, ale... jednak!
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 8)
- (22) SHADOW WEAVER. [about Double Trouble] Don't let **them** distract you.
 SHADOW WEAVER. [o Kłopotowskim] Nie pozwól się zdekoncentrować.
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 10)
- (23) DOUBLE TROUBLE. **I've never told** anyone that before.
 KŁOPOTOWSKI. Nigdy wcześniej nikomu tego **nie mówiłem**.
 (*She-Ra...*, season 4, episode 10)

There are only three nouns used with reference to Double Trouble in all the season's episodes: *asset* (rendered as *nabytek* (cf. (17a)), which is grammatically masculine, but since it is a non-animate noun used metaphorically, there is not much to discuss), *shape-shifter* (rendered as an adjective *zmiennokształtny* (cf. (17c)), literally 'shape-shifting (masc.))' and, in the Polish version, *aktor* 'actor' (cf. (16)), which is a masculine form, the feminine counterpart being *aktorka*). As it was discussed above, Double Trouble's genderqueerness is completely erased in Polish.

This erasure gained some publicity in Polish media. Michał Ochnik, the author of a pop-culture blog *Mistycyzm Popkulturowy*, wrote a post on his Facebook fanpage, where he called Double Trouble "a milestone when it comes to representation of a minority group which has long faced discrimination, also at the hands of other minorities [translation mine]" and said that although he believes gendering the character as male "wasn't due to anybody's ill will, but (most likely) confusion of the translating team, who has never faced this type of a challenge before [translation mine]", it is still an example of discrimination.²⁰ *Noizz.pl*, a Polish society and culture website, published a piece about the issue (Korzeniowski 2019), and later, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of the major Polish newspapers, published an interview with the Polish translator of *She-Ra...*, Agnieszka Wagner, on its website (Dłużewska 2019).

Wagner pointed out to precarious working conditions of audiovisual translators. Since Double Trouble's identity is never discussed (its only "textual trace" being their pronouns) and they are only a recurring character, it is easy to mistake the use of *they* in the dialogue transcript for a simple error, especially if one is working on a few translations at the same time and the deadlines are tight. Wagner said she received the producers' guidelines (including the information

about Double Trouble's identity) only after the translation was completed, and that she was assured no correction was needed. She also underlined the difficulty of achieving gender-neutrality in Polish (Dłużewska 2019).

Many of the commenters of the original Ochnik's Facebook post proposed the use of neuter forms. Yet, when asked about this, Wagner was very critical of the idea, saying that neuter forms were "not approved by the Polish Language Council" and that, as a translator, she uses only the "existing Polish language [translation mine]".²¹ Despite these claims, the Polish Language Council (although, not unanimously) has, in fact, declared 1st and 2nd person singular neuter verb forms as "systemically correct" even though they are not used in everyday language²² (it should be stressed that the latter observation is actually untrue as there are people who use neuter forms in Polish with reference to themselves). Be it as it may, it is not the Polish Language Council's (or any similar body's) role to somehow "certify" all linguistic forms that exist and are used, especially in fiction (Dukaj's and Kisiel's writing, as well as translations of Egan's works seem to be doing just fine). Various non-masculine translations of the character's name were also offered such as *Tarapaty* 'trouble(s)',²³ *Kłopoty* 'troubles'²⁴ or *Ence-Pence*²⁵ (Dłużewska 2019).

Dłużewska quoted Wagner as saying that she was asked to prepare a new version of subtitles for *She-Ra...*, and that Netflix was unsure whether to commission a new voice-over. As of 26 January 2020, there has been no changes to the subtitles, but the voice-over has been partly updated. First, the character's name is now simply *Double Trouble* (except for episodes 2 and 8, where they still introduce themselves as *Kłopotowski*). It seems that the strategy Netflix decided on was to avoid gendered forms in lines of/referring to Double Trouble, e.g.: *wczuwałem się w postać 'I was getting (masc.) into character'* from (17b) became *to dla dobra postaci* 'it was for the character', and *Nigdy wcześniej nikomu tego nie mówiłem. 'I never told (masc.) this to anyone'* from (23) became *Nikt wcześniej nie poznał tego sekretu*. 'Nobody has learnt this secret before'. Yet, *gdybyś się nie pojawił* 'if you hadn't shown up (masc.)' from (20) remained unchanged.

It appears that the Polish version of *She-Ra...* is undergoing a certain "make-over"; hopefully, in the end, all the masculine forms will be substituted and the subtitles will be changed accordingly. Unfortunately, the end result still seems to be a poor representation (or rather, no representation at all) of genderqueerness. Since it all boiled down to language, a naïve viewer (i.e. one who has not watched the original version or has not read about the translation controversy) is most likely to assume that Double Trouble is a man (as they are voiced by a male voice-actor). Obviously, such solution is better than outright misgendering of Double Trouble, but the great potential the series had (especially in Poland, where there had been no non-binary characters in children's media before) is lost.

6. Concluding remarks and propositions of good practices

Sadly, all three of the discussed translations erase the non-binary characters' identities. This might well have been unintentional, but even so, misgendering remains a harmful behavior. Interestingly, Yael and Taylor, who are characters portrayed by AFAB²⁶ actors, are gendered as women, while Double Trouble, who is voiced by an AMAB actor, was (originally) gendered as a man, which might further the stereotype that non-binary people are *really* their assigned gender and declaring a genderqueer identity is just a whim.

The attention *Kłopotowski* has garnered indicates that accurate media representation of non-binary people is becoming an important issue for the community itself as well as for the general public.

The obvious first step when one has to render the way a genderqueer individual speaks in Polish would be to ask the person in question whether they have any preferences – e.g. the author of an interview with Mx. Enigma, an American non-binary artist and film-maker uses feminine forms throughout the text after making sure the interviewee agrees to this (Jonas-Kowalik 2018). Obviously, in the case of fictional characters, there is no way to “ask” the person, and, as the story told by the *She-Ra*'s translator shows, sometimes there might be no way of obtaining information from the creators and/or producers of the translated text. But one might, and presumably they should, at least consult the non-binary community members, whether by reaching out to one of the non-governmental organizations supporting trans people in Poland (e.g. Fundacja Trans-Fuzja), Internet genderqueer communities, or translation guides created by the community (such as the one written by Bożejewicz (2019)).

There is no one “non-binary mode of speaking” in neither English nor Polish, so no advice along the lines of “a translator should always use” e.g. neuter forms, forms with <u>, plural forms, etc., can be proclaimed. Most probably, every solution has potential to be a subject of critique and to be rejected by some viewers/readers/listeners. In Polish, for instance, neuter is often associated with immaturity or “negatively evaluated genderlessness [translation mine]” (cf. Pieciul-Karmińska 2018, 118); neuter forms have also been used as terms of abuse against transgender people (cf. Derecka 2019a; Rzeczkowski 2012). Some cisgender²⁷ translators/authors might be afraid, then, of furthering this abuse by using neuter. On the other hand, both existing research and voices from the community itself suggest that neuter forms might be reclaimed by the non-binary community and gain positive evaluation, a process similar to that the English word *queer* underwent (cf. *queer* in *Oxford English Dictionary*). Dukaj's <u> forms may seem less controversial than neuter, but at the same time they are arguably much more alien to a regular Polish speaker's ears.²⁸

Since the issue of consistency is very important (note that it is the lack of consistency that seems to be the greatest fault in *De Grassi*'s and *Billion*'s translations), we must take a closer look at nouns, since even though the consistent use of

neuter, Dukaj's "neo-gender", or plural in verbs and adjectives is achievable in Polish, there are no corresponding noun forms. Dukaj himself uses masculine nouns (with "neo-gender" endings), while Egan's translators use mostly masculine forms with their traditional endings; Wieczorek, however, coins one neuter form – *bioetyko* 'bioethicist' (Egan 2003, 10) in his translation of *Distress*. I have encountered examples of neuter forms of nouns, such as *dziennikarko* 'journalist', *nauczycielko* 'teacher', *elektryczko* 'electrician', *hydrauliczko* 'plumber', *murarzę* 'bricklayer', *kucharzę* 'cook', in social media.²⁹ Neologisms like these, along with descriptive forms with the word *osoba* 'person' and perhaps masculine forms treated as neutral/generic are among the possibilities. Again, it seems that there is no universal preference among non-binary Polish speakers, so the key would be to at least remain consistent within one text (or the context of one character) having chosen one of the available options.

The fact that alternatives to masculine and feminine gendered forms in Polish are still rather niche and language authorities (such as the Polish Language Council) seem unaware of their existence and, what is more, usage, indicates that further research into the linguistic experiences of genderqueer people is much needed. Crucially, it has to be research that would adopt a descriptivist, rather than prescriptivist, perspective and center on the voices of the genderqueer community. Individuals who use non-standard forms as well as cisgender people who discuss them are often met with ridicule, condescension, or even aggression. Perhaps, research into these issues would not only serve as a source of information but also help legitimize non-normative experiences and identities.

Notes

- 1 This applies mostly to the nominal use of such terms (e.g. *That dude thinks he's a woman*). It is true that words like *dude* or *man* are more and more often considered gender-neutral when used as interjections, similar to *guys*; the word *girl*, often spelled as *gurl* can also be used in this manner, especially in the queer community. Nonetheless, many trans women may find being called *dude* hurtful, as well as many trans men would not like to be called *girl*. More so if these feelings are dismissed by appeals to the words' apparent neutrality (much like when someone refuses to use a trans person's chosen name by claiming "well, that's not your *real* name").
- 2 See: <https://www.americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they>
- 3 See: <https://www.americandialect.org/2019-word-of-the-year-is-my-pronouns-word-of-the-decade-is-singular-they>
- 4 See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year/they>
- 5 See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they>
- 6 See: <https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they>

- 7 See: <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Pronouns/faq0018.html>
- 8 In a private conversation they commented that neuter forms seemed most common in the analyzed material.
- 9 It must be noted that these literary visions, characteristic of the so-called feminist science-fiction writing, have nothing to do with real-life genderqueerness and/or asexuality.
- 10 See, e.g.: <https://www.facebook.com/FundacjaTransFuzja/posts/10163140712245319>
<https://www.facebook.com/FundacjaTransFuzja/photos/a.10154116473385319/10160688573600319/>
<https://www.facebook.com/Transowisko/photos/a.320872078299044/469413423444908>
<https://www.facebook.com/AngryTrans/photos/a.351093698729739/544509689388138/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB3wuCGVc5I>
<https://www.facebook.com/ReplikaKPH/posts/10156593121539994>
- 11 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XojYIYvPBNQ>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XadL_hBI3s
- 12 <https://www.facebook.com/FundacjaTransFuzja/photos/a.10150170464820319/10163263011655319/>
- 13 For example, Wiktor Dynarski, who appears as one of the interviewees, and who later publicly identified himself as a non-binary person.
- 14 As Ziemińska (2018, 129) writes “Butler underlined that bodies gain meaning only through discourse. But this does not mean, as Butler’s work has been misread to say, that bodies can be reduced to discourse. The critics of queer theory, though, rightly pointed out to the bodily limitations to the social construction of gender. [translation mine],” especially when it comes to representing transgender and/or intersex experiences. For further discussion on transgender criticism of feminist and queer theory, see Prosser (2006), Namaste (2009), Finlay (2017).
- 15 See, e.g.: <http://ew.com/tv/2017/02/19/billions-non-binary-asia-kate-dillon/>
- 16 It should be admitted that there are two possible problems with this solution. First, *wege* has a slightly different register (it is more colloquial) than *weganin/weganka*. The context for the utterance, though, is a conversation between two colleagues who are on the first name basis with one another, so this should not be an issue. Another thing is that *wege* is ambiguous – it can mean either ‘vegan’ or ‘vegetarian’. It does not seem, however, that absolute clarity is needed in this case.
- 17 See, e.g.: <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/toto;2530163.html>
- 18 See, e.g.: <https://deadline.com/2019/10/jacob-tobia-she-ra-and-the-princesses-of-power-non-binary-double-trouble-lgbtq-netflix-1202765255/>

- 19 The last sentence means ‘I am an actor (masc.)’; it does not appear in the English version.
- 20 <https://www.facebook.com/MistycyzmPopkulturowy/photos/a.388445924557109/2465431250191889?type=3&permPage=1>
- 21 The original passage from the article reads: “«Poszłom» jej [Wagner] zdaniem też odpada, bo nie zatwierdziła go Rada Języka Polskiego. – Poruszam się na gruncie polszczyzny istniejącej. Jeśli każdy zacznie używać takiej formy, jaka mu przyjdzie do głowy bez oglądania się na innych, skończy się to wieżą Babel. Nikt się z nikim nie dogada” (Dłużewska 2019). Curiously, this passage was quickly removed from the article on the website of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. I created a PDF print of the text on the day it was published.
- 22 See: http://www.rjp.pan.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=317:byom-byo&catid=44&Itemid=145
- 23 The noun is a plurale tantum in Polish.
- 24 The plural form of *kłopot* – the noun is masculine inanimate, so in the plural it would agree with non-masculine forms of verbs and adjectives.
- 25 *Ence-pence* is a nonsensical phrase used in Polish counting-out rhymes, thus in itself it has no grammatical gender (as it is not a noun). Although it is definitely unusual for a name, it is rhythmical and it rhymes, just like *Double Trouble*.
- 26 *AFAB* and *AMAB* stand for *assigned female at birth* and *assigned male at birth* respectively. Both terms are most often used with reference to transgender people.
- 27 The term *cisgender* refers to non-transgender people (akin *heterosexual* for non-queer people or *dyadic* for non-intersex people).
- 28 I have, however, come across a text employing Dukaj’s <u> forms in translation. Namely, they were used in the subtitles for the English-language 2019 film *Seahorse* (a documentary by Jeanie Finlay, following a trans man’s pregnancy) shown at the *Her Docs Film Festival* in Warsaw on 8th March 2020. CJ, an ex-partner of the film’s protagonist is a non-binary person using *singular they* pronouns. Polish subtitles consistently used <u> forms of pronouns, adjectives, and verbs (in all persons). A small trace of this translation decision can be seen in the film’s description on the festival’s website, where CJ’s name is given an *-u* ending in the instrumental case (<https://www.herdocs.pl/seahorse>).
- 29 https://www.facebook.com/chirurgzka/photos/a.1099584323563896/1130385643817097/?type=3&__tn__=-R

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