

Dora Maček,

Faculty of Arts, Zagreb University

Some Observations on Poetic *YOU*

Summary

One of the difficulties that may arise in translating poetry is the schematic character of personal pronouns. For this reason the identities of the speaker and addressee can be ambiguous, which is a problem in translating into languages that grammaticalize more semantic features than the source language. The article analyzes some ambiguous texts in some English and Danish poetry and suggests some translation strategies used.

Key Words: Discourse roles, poetry, translation

Nekaj opažanj o poetičnem *YOU*

Povzetek

Pri prevajanju poezije lahko eno od težav predstavlja shematični značaj osebnih zaimkov. Zaradi tega sta identiteti govorca in naslovnika pogosto dvomljivi, kar je še posebej problematično pri prevajanju v jezike, ki gramatikalizirajo več semantičnih značilnosti kot izvorni jezik. Članek analizira nekatera dvomljiva besedila iz angleške in danske poezije ter ponuja nekaj prevajalskih strategij.

Ključne besede: besedilne vloge, poezija, prevodoslovje

Some Observations on Poetic *YOU*

1. Introduction

Motivated by Meta Grosman's crucial concern with the links between literature, language and culture, and their interaction in practice, I would like to contribute to this volume some reflections on how a reader understands the singular of the second person personal pronoun; in other words, how the addressee is identified when the context is not transparent. I have become aware of this problem while translating Danish and English poetry into Croatian.

2.

One of those short and simple words we use hundreds of times a day, which belong to the first words acquired by children in their early years of life, and by learners of a foreign language right at the beginning of the course, are the pronouns classified in grammars as personal pronouns. They refer to participants in face to face interaction, which is one of the features that points to their great antiquity. The others are their great simplicity, frequency of usage and membership in a "closed system". Nevertheless, they do not seem to be indispensable; there is perhaps no language without them, as Lyons (1977, 639) speculates. Their frequent presence in languages must be the result of a tendency to economize in communication. In some non typical situations of communication, such as in poetry, they are likely to be ambiguous. My intention is to formulate some problems that can arise in translation.

First, I shall give an overview of the forms of the first and second person of the personal pronoun in English, Danish and Croatian and, next, give a brief account of them from two sources I consider relevant. I shall then show, through examples of poetry in English (Heaney 1990) and Danish (Jorn 2001, Læby, personal communication, Nordbrandt, personal communication, Tafdrup 1998), and finally formulate the strategies employed in disambiguation.

3.

The following table gives the inventory of forms of the first and second person personal pronouns in English (Quirk et al. 1972, 209), Danish (Allan et al. 1995, 140f) and Croatian (Barić et al. 1979, 121). They are the pronouns for the two participants in communication.

They reflect our awareness of ourselves as speakers and those we communicate with as the recipients of our messages. So normally, for a speaker in such a situation it is quite evident whom he or she is addressing, whether they are men or women, young or old, one or many, etc. This type of participation in communication being basic and frequent, words for the participants have been grammaticalized.

	1st person sg. Subjective/objective case	1st person pl. Subj./obj. case	2nd person sg. Subj./obj. case	2nd person pl. Subj./obj. case
English	I / me	We/us	You	You
Danish	Jeg/mig	Vi/os	Du/dig De/Dem	I/jer
Croatian	Ja/mene/meni/ mene/meni/mnom	Mi/nas/nama/ nama/nama/nama	Ti/tebe/tebi/ tebe/tebi/tobom Vi/Vas/Vama/ Vas/Vama/Vama	Vi/vas/vama/ Vas/vama/vama

It is evident that the three languages differ in several ways as far as the number of grammatical categories they explicitly express, or the way they grammaticalize various functions of participants in the communication.

In English no distinction is made between number in the second person, nor between subjective and objective case, and there are no specific “honorific” forms, thus making the English “closed system” of pronouns the simplest of the three shown in the table.

The Danish system is comparable with the English in the first person, but the second person does not only have distinctive forms for singular and plural and for the subjective and objective cases, as well as a specific “honorific pronoun” for the addressee (identical in form to the third person plural, except for the spelling with a capital letter). It stands between the English minimalistic system and the more elaborate Croatian one.

The elaboration in Croatian appears in the case forms other than objective. The “honorific form” does not formally (except in spelling) differ from the second person plural. Additionally, Croatian grammaticalizes the category “person,” both singular and plural in the form of the verb. Moreover, it grammaticalizes the sex of the participants in the communication in such parts of the predicate as the participle (active and passive), determiners, adjectives and nouns.

From these preliminary remarks it can be gathered that a translation from either English or Danish into Croatian (and for that matter into other Slavic languages) will need more interpreting on the part of the translator than between English and Danish (and the other Nordic languages) or, in those rare instances, in translating from Croatian into English or Danish.

4.

Discussing personal pronouns from a semantic and pragmatic point of view Lyons (1977, 636-46) and Halliday and Hasan (1976, 43-52) point out that the term “pronoun” is misleading and that it is a deictic identifying “persons”, more precisely participants in a speech situation and specifying their “roles” as speaker, addressee, etc. It is at the same time clear, that in most communicative situations, the roles of speaker and listener repeatedly switch from one side to the other.

These are the roles of speaker and addressee, the canonical situation (Lyons 1977, 638) being a single speaker and at least one addressee, i.e. one-one, or one-many participants. He further says that the canonical situation is egocentric, in that the speaker “relates everything to his viewpoint”. This is why both speaker and addressee have to be considered in interpreting such a situation. The addressee is a “person designated by the speaker as recipient of the communication, as distinct from one who *chooses to listen or happens to hear the communication*” (Halliday and Hasan 1976, 45). In literary texts the reader, or in translating the translator, is the person who “chooses to listen”, but does not in fact see the participants in the communication. If the speaker/author is known to him or her, i.e. the role of the speaker is by default understood to be the author, this fact can be helpful in identifying the second person or addressee in ambiguous texts.

The “speech roles” (ibid., 44) are grammaticalized also with regard to the social role, and express equality or inequality, depending on the social status of the participants. In English, as we can see from the table, this does not apply to the pronoun, but to other linguistic means. In Danish and Croatian this indeed is the case.

Lyons makes another important point, and that is that “many utterances which would be readily interpretable in a canonical situation-of-utterance are subject to various kinds of ambiguity or indeterminacy if they are produced in a non-canonical situation” (Lyons 1977, 638). The non canonical situations are, amongst others: written rather than spoken, if the participants are widely separated in space and time, if they cannot see what the other can see. So since the participants in the event are supposed to have “shared knowledge of the speech-act participants” as well as of the context, the ambiguities for the reader arise from the schematic character of the pronouns. (Taylor 2002, 346-51)

To sum up, what we usually term the first and second person of the personal pronoun are grammaticalizations of the roles participants in a speech situation take and often their social roles are grammaticalized as well.

To reformulate the table above, in the category of “roles”, in the relation of speaker and addressee, English recognizes only number difference in the category of “speaker”, but it makes no distinction as to the number of addressees, their social status, or social distance between addressee and speaker. (Halliday and Hasan 1976, 46). In Danish these distinctions are clearly made, as they are in Croatian.

5.

What we propose to examine here is the situation which pretends to be a face-to face communication, with the reader as a passive participant, occasionally addressee, without the possibility of taking a turn in the role of speaker. The reader chooses to “listen” but can “see” the addressee as well as the speaker and the whole context of discourse only through the words of the poet, who often plays the role of speaker as well (first person). The poet chooses the words and with them he or she chooses what to disclose to the reader. Any ambiguity that may arise from

an incomplete or insufficient clarification of the situation, is frequently desirable in literature, especially poetry, since it allows for multiple interpretations. In translation, however, this is likely to pose a problem for the translator, if the target language grammaticalizes some categories that demand a more explicit expression than the one offered by the schematic pronouns. The following examples will illustrate the possible difficulties.

In poetic discourse the poet often speaks to one addressee, most frequently using *you* in English and *du* in Danish (or other languages that grammaticalize the number of addressees). Alternatively, a multiple audience is addressed, again with *you* in English and *I* in Danish (or other languages that grammaticalize the number of addressees).

In this situation the poet is perfectly familiar with the addressees sex, age, position in space, his or her relationship to the poet, etc. The reader, on the other hand, creates an impression of the person being addressed by interpreting the poet's text. In order to do so, the reader relies on the words the poet uses, and interprets them in relation to his or her knowledge of the language and knowledge of the world. In translating a poetic text, no greater problems will be posed by possible ambiguities that arise from the schematic nature of the pronouns in the text, but a translation into languages requiring additional overt features will require more careful interpreting. In such cases, of course, there is a greater possibility that an erroneous interpretation becomes apparent.

Pragmatically speaking the likely addressees are the following:

- a. the audience in general, anyone
- b. the reader
- c. one addressee, male or female other than the reader
- d. the poet himself/herself
- e. a personified object, abstract idea etc.
- f. several addressees

It can be predicted that a translation into English would be least problematic if it is the target language of translation from Danish or Croatian. Next come translations from Croatian into Danish, somewhat more complex from English into Danish, because of the lack of honorific forms. Most demanding would be the interpretations from Danish into Croatian, and particularly from English into Croatian. Most difficulties will arise from the often ambiguous reference to the gender of the addressee, in both English and Danish, which has to be disambiguated in the Croatian translation. For example in lines as the following:

C Mudar si/Mudra si > E You are wise D Du er klok
 or: Ti si mudar/mudra

when translated from Croatian into English or Danish, no decision has to be made as to the gender of the adjective, no matter which one appears in the Croatian text. Differently, however, when the Danish lines (Jorn, 19) are translated:

D	Stilhed Stilhed	>	E Stillness Stillness	C Mir Mir
	Du er rolig		You are calm	Miran si / Mirna si
				Ti si miran/mirna

No special forms are needed in English, but in Croatian the second line must contain the adjective in either masculine or feminine form.

If it is not quite evident who is addressed it is not easy to decide whether to use the masculine or the feminine form of the gendered words in translation. The first move in interpretation is to look at the context, which can provide a clue. If there is no satisfactory indication in the context, a wider knowledge of the discourse situation, or of the poet himself/herself will have to be relied on.

The most explicit identification of the addressee is in poems where he or she addressed by name, e.g.

I know you Simon Sweeney (Heaney 1990, 163-4)

or is, for example, mentioned in the dedication of the poem, as in Heaney's (98):

Strand at Lough Bay,
In Memory of Colum McCartney.

In the line:

There you once heard guns fired...

“you” is Colum McCartney, and the masculine form of the verbal adjective in Croatian *čuo si* or *ti si čuo* can be safely used.

Similarly in the title, where the number and sex of the addressees is made evident:

A Kite for Michael and Christopher (ibid., 158)

provides a clue for the line:

You were born fit for it. – C Rođeni (masc. Pl.) ste sposobni za to.
D I er født duelig til dette.

Likewise, in another poem with the title “Otter” (ibid., 120), the animal is the personified addressee, and the grammatical feminine gender of the noun “vidra” in Croatian will govern other gendered forms, here the participle:

“Did you ever hear tell”,
Said Jimmy Farell,
“Of the skulls they have in Dublin?...”

That the poet is being addressed is suggested several lines further where he says:

My words lick around cobbled keys...go hunting...over the skull-
capped ground (ibid., 61)

The tone of the poem in general appears to reflect the poet's experience of Viking Dublin. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine that a larger audience, in a pub perhaps, is addressed by one of the guests. The translation into both Croatian and Danish will have to interpret it either way, since in both languages the number of addressees is relevant, thus:

D	Har du hørt fortælle...	C	Jesi (sg) li čuo da se priča...
or:	Har I hørt fortælle...		Jeste (pl) li čuli da se priča...

perhaps even the honorific:	D	har De hørt fortælle...
	C	Jeste li čuli da se priča...

with no difference between this form and the plural in Croatian. In distinction to English and Danish the addressee's gender in the singular must be marked, i.e. *čuo* (masc.).

Number in English is often disambiguated by adding “all, many, few,” etc. E.g. (ibid., 151)

<i>Come to me, it says, all you who labour ...</i>	– C	<i>svi vi</i>
	D	<i>I alle</i>

In dialogues the roles of the speakers are understood from the context. For example, in a dialogue between the poet and his wife (ibid., 119), the gender is evident, so when the poet's wife says: “You weren't the worst” – *Nisi bio najgori* (**najgora*, **najgore*), the masculine form of the adjective is selected.

A very common type of communication is that of the poet with him- or herself. Speaking of their experience they look at themselves from outside as it were. In a poem where the poet (Jorn) describes the Nordic nature and says: *Du er ét med landskabet* – *You are one with the landscape*, it is her personal experience. The poet is a woman, (Susanne Jorn) which fact determines all gendered forms as in the last line, which says: *Du er rolig* – in Croatian translation *Mirna* (fem.) *si*. The English translation of the same poem remains uncommitted as to gender: *You are calm*, and thus open to other interpretations, such as an experience of the poet observing someone in the Nordic landscape, becoming part of it.

Anonymous poetry is, of course, uncertain even with respect to the gender of the poet/addressee,

which will therefore be interpreted by default. Traditionally the default form would be masculine, but contemporary translators with a feminist leaning will choose the feminine.

In the canonical type of communication, however, the poet addresses one addressee, but quite frequently there are no obvious hints as to who the person could be. For example in the following lines (Jorn 2001, 25) it is clear that it is a dead or dying person:

D	Pludselig faldt temperaturen i dagligstuen Med ét mistede du livet forvandlede til en afsjæle skabning med ligblå læber
E	Suddenly the temperature in the living room fell At once you lost life transformed into an inanimate creature with corpse blue lips
C	Odjednom se u sobi spustila temperatura Smjesta si izgubio/izgubila život pretvoren/a U bežživotnog stvora poput leša modrih usana

The author is familiar or close to the dead or dying person, and from a wider context it can be gathered that it is a parent. It is not evident though whether it is the father or the mother of the poet. Without knowing who the poet is referring to, which can be clarified only from the knowledge of the poet's private background, the translator must revert to the default interpretation, and opt for either the masculine or feminine form of the past participle. Either solution may turn out to be the intended one, particularly if the poem is read as a general expression of an encounter with death, or with the death of a close person, in which case the gender is irrelevant. In some texts, as in this one, it is also possible to avoid a gendered form by using the second person singular of the old-fashioned aorist, which is gender neutral: *izgubi život* (or: *Ti smjesta izgubi život*). A drawback of this solution is the archaic tense form which stands in contrast to the general style of the poem, and is thus unintentionally marked. Finally, the translator can seek information from the author, if he or she is alive. If the poet is deceased there is, of course, rich ground for different interpretations and scholarly discussion.

More frequently a living person is addressed, and in the form of address the poet usually evokes his or her relationship with that person. The context and/or information about the identity of the poet facilitate a decision about the gender of the addressee. The title of the following poem

(Læby, Din eneste):

Din eneste	Your only one	Tvoj jedini/tvoja jedina
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makes for an unclear situation, as do the concluding lines:

Jeg var ...	I was...	Bio/bila sam...
Din eneste...	your only one	Tvoj jedini/tvoja jedina

so the entire text has to be carefully searched for a clue. Two elements in the poem point to a man addressing a woman. The first being the poet himself, who is a man, and the poem his intimate experience. Next is the context in which *he* asks *her* to bring him the child, imagines her travelling, and himself running or jogging. Now neither of these is foolproof evidence for the interpretation suggested above, but the translator can imagine that it is a woman leaving with the pair's child, and it is imaginable that the man would be jogging in such a situation, rather than the other way round, i.e. a mother addressing the man who left her, taking their child. This again, need not be a personal experience by the poet, but an observation by a third person, who then plays the role of the speaker, which seems not quite in agreement with our experience of poetry.

In other poems there may be just the information on the gender of the poet that decides the gender of the addressee, as in the following lines from poems (a.) by a man (Nordbrandt: Ønske) and (b.) by a woman (Tafdrup: Kun en kniv)

- a. Jeg ville ønske, jeg kunne se dig, som du var
 I wish that I could see you as you were
 Želio bih da te mogu vidjeti, kakva si bila.
 Nej! Jeg ville ønske, jeg kunne se dig
 som jeg ville ønske, du var...
 No! I wish I could see you
 as I wish you were ...
 Ne! želio bih da te mogu vidjeti
 kakva želim da si bila....

A woman is spoken to, hence the feminine forms of the relative pronoun *kakav* i.e. *kakva* and the active participle of the verb “to be” *biti*, i.e. *bila*.

Conversly, the poet, a woman, speaks to a man:

- b. Du træder ind som en fremmed,
 taler til mig som en ukendt...
 You walk in like a stranger,
 talk to me like someone I don't know...
 Ti ulaziš kao stranac (masc.)
 govoriš mi kao netko nepoznat (masc.)

The noun “stranger” and the adjective “unknown” are here masculine.

In homosexual relationships, the information on the gender of the poet would be an important clue, as well as the context and general knowledge. At worst, as with anonymous poetry, the gender would have to be decided on by default. In anonymous poetry, however, if gender is not signalled from the context, the canonical relationship between two sexes would be taken by default.

When the addressee is not a person in close relationship with the speaker/poet, it is much more difficult to decide on his or her gender. A clue is difficult to find in the person of the poet too. The context and knowledge of the general circumstances, current events, etc. is then the only source of information. For example in (Læby, Landene):

du hentede dem ved bådene
 you brought them (some people) with boats.
 dovodio (masc.) si ih čamcima

It seems more likely that a man would collect people by boat than a woman. In this poem however, it is not impossible, that the poet, a man, is telling of his own experience by placing himself in the role of addressee. In the Croatian translation this disambiguation is needed for parts of the text, such as *du hentede* would be interpreted as masculine

6. Conclusion

We may sum up now the various strategies a translator into Croatian (or other languages that grammaticalize gender) uses to interpret the vagueness of gender (and sometimes number) of the speaker, often the poet, and the person spoken to. The various strategies will follow in the order sketched below:

- a. the text of the entire poem, as well as a wider context is searched for clues;
- b. one interprets the second person pronoun you/du as I/jeg, i.e. identifies the speaker with the poet; if the poet is not anonymous, the speaker's gender is taken to be the gender of the poet, and the addressees will depend on the relationship between the poet and the one spoken to;
- c. one considers whether in texts rendering the poet's experience, the addressee could be the poet;
- d. if the second person pronoun is paraphrasable by an indefinite pronoun or passive, the addressee is the public in general, including the reader/translator; in that case various solutions are tested, such as: default gender, i.e. masculine, which (still) has generic meaning, forms not marked for if applicable;
- f. research into other work by the poet, his or her biography etc. is a prerequisite in translation, but sometimes greater detail may be needed than normally;
- g. gender will be assigned by default.

The advantages for the translator into a minimal system of "second person personal pronoun" are obvious. With less effort an effect of open interpretation is achieved. On the other hand, a translation into an "elaborate system" of pronoun, syntactically and semantically dependent members of the sentence will not only pose problems for the translator, but force certain meanings

which have to be made explicit. Since these depend on the translator's judgment, they are often likely to be mistranslated.

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