

Romaniuk Anastasiia, MA student
Topachevskyi Serhii, PhD (Philology), As. Prof.
Zhytomyr Polytechnic State University

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF NON-BINARY GENDER LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH AND APPROACHES TO ITS RENDERING INTO UKRAINIAN

This paper examines the linguistic features of non-binary gender language in English and analyzes the main difficulties and strategies involved in rendering such forms into Ukrainian. The increasing visibility of non-binary identities has revealed a significant “linguistic gap,” since many traditional linguistic frameworks were developed around the male/female binary and often lack stable mechanisms for expressing identities beyond it. As Ukrainian researchers note, this issue remains largely underexplored in Ukrainian linguistics, which makes the topic particularly relevant for contemporary translation studies [1, p. 317].

One of the most distinctive linguistic markers of non-binary gender language in English is the use of epicene pronouns. These include widely accepted gender-neutral forms, primarily the singular *they*, as well as less conventional neopronouns such as *ze*, *xe*, or *ey* [2, p. 127]. Scholars emphasize that such pronouns reflect broader social shifts in the understanding of gender and serve as an important tool of linguistic inclusion. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue that pronoun choice increasingly functions as a mechanism of identity expression, allowing speakers to represent themselves outside the binary gender system [1, p. 317]. Zimman similarly highlights that non-binary pronouns are not merely optional innovations but an essential resource for individuals who do not identify strictly as men or women, contributing to wider cultural and discursive transformation [1, p. 318].

A major contrast between English and Ukrainian emerges at the grammatical level. English lacks a pervasive grammatical gender system, which makes it comparatively flexible: gender neutrality can often be achieved through pronoun choice, gender-neutral vocabulary, or avoidance of gender-marked forms. Ukrainian, however, is a grammatical gender language in which gender is deeply embedded in morphology. Ukrainian linguistic research confirms that English, due to its analytical structure, provides more freedom in using gender-neutral pronouns, whereas Ukrainian, with its synthetic nature and high level of grammatical markedness, encounters substantial difficulties in maintaining non-binary reference [1, p. 319]. This structural asymmetry means that translating non-binary language from English into Ukrainian is not a matter of simple lexical replacement but a complex grammatical and pragmatic challenge.

The issue becomes especially visible when examining translation practices across different domains, such as media discourse, conference interpreting, and machine translation. In these contexts, translators often face tension between established linguistic norms and the communicative need for inclusivity. Sydorenko’s research on politically correct vocabulary demonstrates a particularly important divergence: while English politically correct language tends to move toward neutralization and avoidance of gendered terms, Ukrainian discourse often develops in the opposite direction, promoting a feminization strategy through the active creation of feminine nouns [3, p. 199–205]. This difference complicates direct transfer of

English non-binary strategies into Ukrainian, since a neutral form in English may require explicit gender marking in Ukrainian.

Despite the growing academic interest in gender-fair language, significant research gaps remain. Many studies on machine translation of gender-ambiguous texts focus on high-resource European languages, while Ukrainian is still comparatively understudied. However, recent research in Ukrainian natural language processing suggests promising technical directions. For example, Nahurna developed a gender-swapping pipeline designed to produce gender-balanced datasets and fine-tune a language model in order to reduce masculine-default bias in Ukrainian outputs [4, p. 147]. Such synthetic data augmentation may provide a potential technological pathway for improving inclusivity in automated translation.

Importantly, the difficulty of rendering non-binary language is shaped not only by grammar but also by social norms that influence language change. Ukrainian research notes that acceptance of linguistic innovations is closely connected to the social status of women and gender minorities, making public perception a critical factor in determining how inclusive forms are interpreted and whether they become normalized [1, p. 319].

In this context, scholars propose several main translation approaches for Ukrainian. One of them is the neutralization strategy, which relies on impersonal constructions and rephrasing in order to avoid grammatical gender. While effective in certain contexts, this strategy may result in stylistic awkwardness, particularly in sentences where gender agreement is unavoidable [1, p. 321]. Another approach is the innovation strategy, which involves introducing new linguistic forms, including experimental uses of “вони/ix” (they/them) as singular gender-neutral pronouns. This strategy supports the development of inclusive language but may require clarification for the target audience, since such usage is not yet fully conventionalized [1, p. 321].

Finally, a communicatively oriented strategy adapts translation decisions to the expectations of the target readership and the communicative function of the text, often relying on explanatory notes in academic or official contexts [1, p. 322]. At the same time, Ukrainian public discourse still tends to prioritize feminization strategies, which makes the integration of non-binary linguistic practices even more complex [3, p. 199–205].

Translation outcomes also differ significantly depending on whether the text is produced by human translators or machine translation systems. Human translators tend to demonstrate higher flexibility, since they must determine the appropriate extent of transformations while attempting to render gender-marked vocabulary in a minimally sexist and ethically responsible way. As Rebrii notes, translators must evaluate the “measure of the expediency of transformations” while maintaining both linguistic adequacy and social sensitivity [1, p. 320]. Machine translation systems, by contrast, frequently default to masculine forms when translating gender-ambiguous English input, which demonstrates the persistence of gender bias in automated language technologies [4, p. 147].

Some scholars argue that these translation challenges extend beyond linguistic mechanics and involve issues of representation and visibility. Since language can reinforce inequality and normalize exclusion, the inability to preserve non-binary reference in translation may lead to discursive erasure. In response, Ukrainian researchers emphasize the need for developing new grammatical conventions, improving technological tools, and encouraging broader societal acceptance of linguistic change. They also highlight the importance of

collaboration between linguists, gender experts, and representatives of the LGBTQ+ community in establishing practical translation recommendations [1, p. 322].

REFERENCES

1. Волобуєва А. М. Граматичні та соціолінгвістичні аспекти перекладу небінарних займенників з англійської на українську мову / А. М. Волобуєва, І. Киянка, С. Кушнір, Н. Ф. Остапенко, Н. М. Сидоренко, Т. І. Старченко, Р. І. Федосієва // Вчені записки ТНУ імені В. І. Вернадського. Серія: Філологія. Журналістика. – 2025. – Т. 36(75), № 1, Ч. 1. – С. 317–322.
2. Fusari S. Pronoun Wars or a Battle for Inclusion? The Use of Epicene Pronouns and Neopronouns in a Large Corpus of Contemporary English / S. Fusari // TEXTUS. – 2025. – Vol. 38, № 1. – P. 127–145.
3. Sydorenko S. Feminine nouns in the present-day English and Ukrainian: some aspects of gender-fair language translators should be aware of / S. Sydorenko // Фаховий та художній переклад: теорія, методологія, практика. – 2018. – С. 199–205.
4. Nahurna O. Gender Swapping as a Data Augmentation Technique: Developing Gender-Balanced Datasets for Ukrainian Language Processing / O. Nahurna, M. Romanyshyn // Proceedings of the Fourth Ukrainian Natural Language Processing Workshop (UNLP 2025). – 2025. – P. 147–161.