

# **Translating the Untranslatable**

The Problem of Translating Shifting Linguistic Gender Expressions to Finnish

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Bachelor's Thesis

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This thesis examines the Finnish translations of shifting linguistic gender expressions by and about a genderfluid character in Rick Riordan's novel *The Hammer of Thor*. It focuses on problems that arise from Finnish having no grammatical gender, while the gender expression in translation is constructed mainly through grammatically gendered features, such as 3<sup>rd</sup> person personal pronouns. The strategies used to translate these so-called untranslatable instances are analyzed through the framework of foreignization, domestication and queer modes of translation to evaluate how the different problems were solved and what issues remain. The thesis concludes that only translating gender as far as Finnish language norms allow is not just domesticating but also risks effacement and foreignization of the gender identity itself. This calls for more care and creativity to be put into translating transgender texts and identities.

**Key words:** literary translation, queer translation, gender, transgender, untranslatability, personal pronouns

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# 1 Introduction

Translation and transgender are both crossings of a kind—from one language and culture to another; from what was assigned to what is right. But where leads a road crossed twice, even crossed back and forth, through grammar, words and concepts that are necessary but non-existent on the other side? This conundrum forces itself into the Finnish translation of Rick Riordan's young adult novel *The Hammer of Thor* (2016), where a character called Alex Fierro explicitly presents as "gender fluid and transgender" (Riordan 2016, 54) and both announces and affirms gender through gendered pronouns, a linguistic feature not part of the Finnish language system.

While some research on translating shifting linguistic gender identity exists to and from English and a language with even more marked linguistic gender, such as French, (Rose, 2021), a little can be found in the other direction, just as a Finnish term for 'gender fluid' or 'genderfluid' is yet to be properly established and widely understood. My research bridges this void through linking to discourse and research about feminist theory on gender and transgender translation, applying it to the Finnish context.

In this thesis, I use translations of Alex Fierro's shifting gender identity to highlight problems that arise when translating shifting gender to Finnish—and what linguistic, cultural and ethical issues need to be solved to succeed in doing so. I analyze both the translational strategies and effects involved to show why the emphasis of translating gender should be on the *trans*. I begin by defining what I mean by the many often equivocal terms and concepts used in this paper, such as gender, untranslatability, foreignization, domestication and queer translation, and link my research to a similar study conducted by Anna Merikallio.

In section 3, I introduce *The Hammer of Thor* and Alex Fierro and explain why Alex's gender is narratively important. I continue by explaining my method of data collection and categorization, and how said data is analyzed through the framework of Venuti's domestication and foreignization and Marc Demont's three modes of queer translation. In section 4, I use examples to showcase the beforementioned issues in translation, through an investigation of how the question of translating Alex's gender has been answered in each instance. In section 5, I review my analysis and compare its results to Merikallio's study, elaborating on some issues detected. I conclude with some remarks on how this topic could and should be researched further.

## 2 Theoretical background

This section introduces transgender translation and ‘gender’ in all meanings and contexts relevant to this study; linguistic and identity, as well as how these are done in both English and Finnish. The reasoning for using the wording ‘doing gender’ is also explained. Thereafter, I present the theories used to frame and analyze the data: untranslatability, foreignization, domestication and three modes of queer translation, as well as Merikallio’s article on translating nonnormative gender representation from English to Finnish.

### 2.1 Translating (trans)gender

Research on translations of transgender or otherwise gender diverse texts is a sphere of growing interest yet largely focused on translations between English and more linguistically gendered languages. The conundrum remains, though, even when the direction changes, as the question posed by Emily Rose still applies: how do translators deal with shifting linguistic gender identity when the source and target languages use gender in different ways, and what the way that is done reveals about the act of translation itself (2021, 2)? To answer this question, it is necessary to first define gender as both a grammatical category and identity.

#### 2.1.1 Gender in Linguistics

In linguistics, gender refers to the grammatical categorization of nouns. An often-cited definition comes from Hockett: “Genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words” (1958, 231). Corbett builds onto this in *Gender*, adding that languages can have two or more genders, often categorized under masculine, feminine and neuter, and that the classification can reflect real-world distinction of sex (1995 [1991], 1), as it does in English, for example. Many languages, Finnish included, are devoid of grammatical gender entirely.

#### 2.1.2 Gender as Identity and Performance

In the 1970s, American feminists redefined the grammatical concept of gender to mean sex in a social sense (Widerberg 1998, 134). In other words, gender became the descriptor of sex beyond the body, a basis for multiple kinds of identity construction. A significant name in this reconstruction is Judith Butler, who introduced the idea of gender as a series of performative acts in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Leaning on her reading of Beauvoir, Butler suggests that gender is something done onto the body, making gendered bodies “styles of the flesh”, each rich with

but also limited by history (2002, 177). These performative acts are used to do things—do gender. These acts both create and necessitate socially established meanings, making gender an identity tied in time and place “through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 2002, 178–179; italicization as in the original). Thus, these performative acts, these gender attributes such as gestures, styles and speech are what create the identity instead of merely expressing it (id. 180). In this study, the focus will be on acts that construct gender through vocabulary and grammar, and how these acts are reconstructed in the Finnish translation.

### 2.1.3 Doing Gender in English

The English gender system is based on semantic criteria and only reflects gender in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular personal, possessive and reflexive pronouns (Corbett 1995 [1991], 12). The basic principle is that male humans are *he*, female humans *she* and everything else *it* (ibid.). This means that when discussing or presenting a human (character) in the third person using English, gendering said human is practically inevitable.

This strict gender binary has been widely contested alongside the assumption that someone’s outer look reveals their pronouns. A relevant practice related to this, pronoun specification, refers to the disclosure of one’s preferred pronouns (Darwin 2022, 53) and is becoming more and more common in English speaking contexts to avoid misgendering, to show allyship or to disclose pronouns most do not yet assume or use, such as *they/them*. To be referred to as *they*, the (often) nonbinary people must participate in a never-ending “coming out” process (ibid.), which also stands true for gender fluidity in Alex’s case, as Alex dresses and acts the same regardless of gender.

### 2.1.4 Doing Gender in Finnish

Similar to other Finno-Ugric languages, there is no grammatical gender in Finnish; its personal pronoun system desists distinguishing gendered forms, even in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronouns (Engelberg 2002, 112). With this absence of grammatical gender, Finnish is often considered gender-neutral, and it may be due to this that the issue of gendered language has received comparatively less attention in Finnish (Engelberg 2002, 111) despite gender being very much present in its lexicon and semantic system (id. 128).

In addition to grammatical differences, Finnish separates the whole conceptual space of gender and sex differently than English: while English nowadays separates anatomical sex from its

social aspects and calls it gender, Finnish refers to both with *sukupuoli* (Leino 2016, 450). Finnish public queer discourse is also much more recent than its Anglophone counterpart, with much terminology lacking adequate or established translations, and discourses such as pronoun specification mostly limited to contexts where English is used, for instance, the internet.

## 2.2 Untranslatability

These fundamental differences in linguistic and cultural gender construction could result in a judgement of untranslatability. This occurs when the TL [Target Language] lacks a corresponding situational feature to one that is functionally and textually relevant in the source text (Catford 1965, 94). Untranslatability is linguistic when “the functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the language of the SL [Source Language] text” (Catford 1965, 94). In *The Hammer of Thor*, this feature is gendered pronouns. Moreover, when translating gender, untranslatability is not just grammatical, but also cultural; meaning that a functionally relevant situational feature (such as pronoun specification) is missing from the TL culture entirely (Catford 1965, 99).

The question of untranslatability naturally expands beyond the scope of linguistics, as it also poses a philosophical paradox. As put by Jacques Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other*: “In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but *in another sense*, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible” (1998, 56-57). In the preface to *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, Emily Apter muses that perfect equivalence would not result in translation at all, but a replica (2014, xiv). Thus, the problem of untranslatability is what allows translation to exist at all.

The concept of untranslatable allows translators space to anguish over material they do not want to translate or see translated, as knowing both languages, they see what gets lost in translation. (Apter 2014, xiv) However, neither linguistic nor cultural untranslatability—much less the translators’ personal anguish—make it impossible to produce translations, as Rose argues in her study of transgender memoir translation (2019, 169). She states that the lack of equivalence does not make a concept impossible to express, it just calls for inventive and creative target language use (*ibid.*). Hence, I use the term ‘untranslatable’ to refer to a lack of direct equivalence, to instances where SL and TL texts seem to be telling different stories, not as judgement of impossibility or nonexistence.

## 2.3 Domesticating and Foreignizing translation

Both Rose (2021, 14) and Venuti (2008, 14) define translation as “the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text with a text that is intelligible to the translating-language reader”. For Rose (2021, 10), “translation is always a betrayal”, with the connotation that meaning is not inherent but rather consciously reconstructed. Understanding translation as such highlights the translator’s significance, ‘translator’s visibility’, as Venuti puts it in his compilation of the history of translation, where he also introduces the translation ethical appraisals of foreignization and domestication (2008).

Venuti describes the goal of translation to be “to bring back a cultural other as the recognizable, the familiar, even the same” (2008, 14), while simultaneously warning about the risk of total domestication of the foreign text (ibid.). This clear contradiction is an indication of Venuti’s own stance in the matter. He designates domestication and foreignization as fundamental indications of translation’s ethical dimensions (2008, 19), applicable to many aspects such as how the source text and culture are viewed, the translator’s choices, and what effects the translated text produces. In other words, the concepts can be used to bring forth translation ethical questions such as ‘to what extent should source language or culture specific (untranslatable) aspects be translated?’ and ‘how?’.

Despite the extensive use of these concepts, many challenges pertain, as argued by Igor Kudashev (2017, 64-65): Venuti does not explicitly define these terms, nor does he provide exact criteria to differentiate between the translation strategies. Thus, each researcher is left to define the concepts themselves. Furthermore, evaluating the degree of domestication and foreignization depends on the reader’s or researcher’s own position, regarding both expertise and expectations, and with language being as complex a phenomenon it is, Kudashev deems it better to focus on individual, important aspects (2017, 70). This is why my study focuses exclusively on translations of untranslatable expressions of gender and the implications of the translational choices involved.

In her article “Sukupuolen käännöksiä” (gender in translation) (2022), Merikallio uses domestication and foreignization to appraise translational choices that either highlight or repress nonnormative gender representation. Merikallio’s focus is on strategies used to translate 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronouns and gendered expressions in Ursula K. Le Guin’s science fiction texts. The article shows how a domesticating translation can easily stifle gender diversity by

replacing it with normative representations of gender when said nonnormativity is not considered important enough to preserve. (Merikallio 2022, 67)

In this thesis, domestication is utilized similarly to refer to translational choices that confine expressions of shifting linguistic gender identity to what natural-sounding Finnish language use allows, and foreignization to choices that highlight it instead. The terms are also used to analyze the translations' effects: do they appear domestic and familiar or remain feeling strange and foreign? As stated before, this analysis heavily reliant on my own position as a reader, researcher and someone fluent in both Finnish and English.

## 2.4 Queer translation

As queer texts pose even more—and unique—challenges to translation, Marc Démont proposed three strategies to categorize different approaches to translating queer texts, using Venuti's concepts as a springboard. To put it simply, *misrecognizing translation* disregards queerness, *minoritizing translation* forces the drifting queerness into a mold, makes it a denotation, whereas *queering translation* is a stance taken against this suppressive history, a technique developed to preserve queerness (2018, 157). Similar to foreignization, queering mode defies appropriation, but it also goes further, refusing to “close the translation on itself” – putting the ambiguity of queerness above achieving “ultimate” translation (2018, 168).

This is Merikallio's main analytical frame, and I use it to produce comparable analysis of my data. The separation to misrecognizing and minoritizing also provides a way to analyze domestication deeper, as it offers a way to differentiate translations that efface expressions of gender entirely from those that translate them as far as the language, and possibly the translators' own knowledge and interest, allows. Queering translation, after all, demands quite the expertise from the translator, as one cannot intentionally queer a thing without knowing how queering is done and understood in that time and place.

### **3 Materials and methods**

In this section, I present both the book and character this study concerns, as well as a brief explanation for why it's important to research this translation specifically. In subsection 3.2, I explain my method of collecting and defining data for analysis. I then introduce my four analytical categories and how they were formed and provide a brief overview of how the analysis is later conducted.

#### **3.1 *The Hammer of Thor* and Alex Fierro**

The source material for this paper is Rick Riordan's young adult novel *The Hammer of Thor* from 2016, and its Finnish translation *Thorin Vasara* by Ilkka Rekiaro from 2017. It is the second book in the Magnus Chase series, but for the scope of this study the other books need not be considered, as the character the study is focused on, Alex Fierro, is introduced in this one. Alex is gender fluid and transgender (henceforth referred to as 'she' in this paper) and expresses her fluid identity through announcing what pronouns she should be referred to each time, he/him or she/her. This fluidity is not only a part of the character but also plays a key role in driving the narrative and some plot points rely on Alex being a specific gender or confusing others about her gender. Thus, it left me wondering how this had been achieved in the Finnish translation, where the whole pronoun discourse is absent from the language.

The Hammer of Thor and Alex Fierro's gender expression provide a jumping off point for examining and prompting discussion for Finnish translations of transgender and other diverse gender identities and presentations. Additionally, Rick Riordan is a vastly popular author, meaning his books get translated despite the so-called untranslatability, and they also sell well. Therefore, it is highly likely that this book might be many young readers' first introduction to genderfluidity—as it was for me, too. Thus, the translation unavoidably carries with it the responsibility of presenting this marginalized identity favorably and fairly, arguably even more so than in translations in general.

#### **3.2 Data collection and categorization**

The data was collected through a close reading of the SL and TL texts, by going through the books simultaneously and collecting all instances of Alex's gender expression and Alex being gendered, as well as other instances where gender (diversity) is discussed, both those with

explicit translations and those without. I gathered these to Excel, to lay both SL and TL data side by side to conduct comparative analysis. With the focus of my study being on the untranslatable, I sorted the instances based on whether the gendering was directly translatable or untranslatable, extracting the problematic translations from those that had found Finnish equivalents for their gendered terms or expressions.

Through examining the problematic translations further, I discovered four different types of instances of gender translation, which I used to categorize my analysis. The first are untranslatable performances of gender nonetheless translated into Finnish. Instances where Alex introduces her gender with her pronouns fall under this category, for example. The second type are instances where gender is left untranslated. This type was by far the most common, as every instance where gender is present through pronominal reference in English but absent in translation falls into this category.

The third category consists of just one instance titled ‘gender made explicit’. This means that the gendering was more explicit in the Finnish translation than in the original. Similarly, the fourth category only consists of two instances, which both involve some or all the untranslatable gender-related words or phrases getting left out of the translation completely.

The data is analyzed category by category, each analysis beginning with providing and explaining the relevant example(s) and contextualization for how the Finnish translations come across. An analysis of translational strategies is then conducted based on the preceding explanation, designating each translation strategy as either domesticating or foreignizing, as well as misrecognizing, minoritizing or queering translation. The implications and problems of the translational choices made are elaborated on in the Discussion in section 5, where the results are also compared to those of Merikallio’s study.

It is important to note that by defining my focus thusly, I am leaving out many interesting and important translational issues present, such as the blatant mistranslation of “transgender” as “muunsukupuolinen” (Finnish translation of *nonbinary*) (Riordan 2016, 54, 79, 94; 2017, 62, 85, 99-100) and other discrepancies in translations of discussions of gender identities. With the data being collected and tabulated by hand, there also remains a possibility of human error.

## 4 Analysis

In this section, I analyze the data as explained above. Each category of analysis is supported by one or two relevant examples. The points of analytical interest, such as pronouns and their corresponding translations, are marked by underlining.

### 4.1 Translating the Untranslatable

The instances where Alex introduces her gender through pronoun specification or corrects others' use of incorrect pronouns fall under this category of untranslatable but translated. This subsection presents two examples of how that was achieved.

#### 4.1.1 Pronoun specification

In instances where excluding untranslatable pronoun specification would hinder the narrative, linguistic untranslatability was tackled by substituting gendered pronouns for gendered nouns, as in example 1 below. 'He' is translated as 'poika' (boy) and 'she' as 'tyttö' (girl).

(1)

"He doesn't even have a weapon."

"Pojalla ei edes ole asetta."

"She," Alex corrected.

"Tytöllä", Alex oikaisi.

"Call me she—unless and until I tell you otherwise."

"Sanokaa minua tytöksi, kunnes ilmoitan toisin."

"She it is!" T.J. interceded. "I mean, she *she* is."

"Tyttö eikä poika, selvän teki", T.J. keskeytti.

(Riordan 2016, 51-52)

(Riordan 2017, 58-59)

Translating pronouns as such is the most straightforward way of making it understandable to Finnish readers that Alex's gender does not correspond to what people around her assume it to be. It is common to refer to someone whose name is unknown with a noun fitting their assumed gender and age, such as 'boy' (poika) or 'woman' (nainen), and this applies to both Finnish and English. Therefore, the first two lines of the exchange come off as perfectly natural language use.

The latter half of the exchange, on the other hand, comes off as anything but natural language use for the Finnish reader. A direct translation for “Sanokaa minua tytöksi” is ‘call me a girl’, which no girl would arguably ask for—getting called ‘a girl’ is considered talking down to the (assumed) girl, after all. Finnish even has a term for this, ‘tytöttely’, and thus a character practically asking to be talked down to strikes the reader as odd.

The last line of example 1 highlights the many nuances lost in translating pronouns with nouns. “She it is” and its correction to “she *she* is” utilizes the human/other distinction in the English pronominal system. ‘X it is’ is a common phrasing for summarizing a result of discussion or inquiry, but here Riordan used the fact that the subject is human to make the speaker overcorrect himself: Alex had just asked to be called ‘she’, and TJ used ‘it’, which he then corrected to ‘she’ despite it having been part of a set phrase. Using ‘it’ of humans is considered dehumanizing in English, after all.

Interestingly, that same human/other distinction is also a feature of Finnish the pronominal system, where ‘hän’ refers to humans and ‘se’ (it) to anything else. Still, the nuance of gender would not have been salvageable with just that. Instead, the translation again relies on nouns, bringing in more than was in the source text with “[t]yttö eikä poika” (a girl not a boy) as its translation. The conversation-finishing connotation is separated from the discussion of gender, with “selvän teki” that could be translated as ‘roger that’, for example. Thus, the translation both loses in creative language use and transforms the discussion itself.

This highlights the other glaring issue with translating pronoun specification with gendered nouns: it brings the discussion into a whole another level of language. Where pronoun specification is about how the subject wants to be referred to in language, using nouns transforms it to a declaration of gender itself. This is an important distinction, as pronouns do not necessarily go hand in hand with gender identity itself. (Darwin 2022, 48) Pronouns can be part of someone’s gender presentation and performance despite the pronouns not being the one’s usually associated with the gender that someone identifies as. Or someone can use all or none of the pronouns.

Thus, pronoun specification can be, but is not necessarily, about declaring what gender you are. Example 2 below showcases again how translating pronoun specification with nouns changes the discussion:

(2)

"My pronouns are he and him," Alex confirmed.

(Riordan 2016, 239)

"Minä olen nyt poika", Alex vahvisti.

(Riordan 2017, 243)

"My pronouns are he and him" is translated as "Minä olen nyt poika", which directly translates back to 'I am now a boy'. The difference between the nuances of these two is clear: the original is an act of doing gender through pronoun specification, while the translation is practically equivalent to a gender reveal. In other words, the act of doing gender is translated to a statement of being gender. While one could argue that this is the only way to achieve an alike denotation, the fact that the context changes remains. In "Translating gender", though, Widerberg poses that translating gender entails exactly that: replacing contextual understandings and concepts of gender with those of the translating language. (1998, 133)

#### 4.1.2 Translational strategies

Translating gendered pronouns with the closest and easiest counterpart to get the point across is a domesticating translational choice. It brings the discussion into terms familiar to the Finnish language reader and does not challenge Finnish language norms and practices. It is notable, though, that despite the domestication, the translation remains strange and unfamiliar since gender is not usually discussed or declared in this manner in Finnish, and thus the translation feels more foreignizing than domesticating.

For queering modes of translation, this choice could be argued to be both misrecognizing and minoritizing in nature. After all, simply substituting pronouns with nouns, acts of doing with acts of being, is a misrecognition of the nature of pronoun specification and shifting gender identity presentation. On the other hand, the translation preserves gender despite its untranslatability, relying on denotation, like Démont defines typical for minoritizing translations, where the primary concern is finding equivalents (2018, 163). With gender surviving translation, the choice is thus more minoritizing.

## 4.2 Gender untranslated

This subchapter covers the instances where gender was not explicitly discussed, but instead present in narration through pronominal reference, presenting one example of such an instance. 'Untranslated' here refers to both untranslatability and the act of not translating, as the gendered

pronouns were translated according to Finnish linguistic norms and practices, meaning that gender, and sometimes the pronoun itself, too, is absent in translation, as Finnish also shows possessive form in inflection.

#### 4.2.1 Untranslated gendered pronouns

Example 3 below demonstrates how most instances of gendered pronouns used to refer to Alex in narration are translated in the book:

(3)

Alex kicked up his rose high-tops on the opposite chair. He twiddled his thumbs, his two-toned eyes scanning the room.

(Riordan 2016, 264)

Alex nosti jalkansa vastapäiselle tuolille. Hän pyöritteli peukaloitaan, ja hänen eriväriset silmänsä tarkastelivat salia.

(Riordan 2017, 267)

Language or readability-wise there is nothing to critique in the translation. As the underlining shows, the possessive ‘his’ merges onto the nouns ‘jalkansa’ (his feet/legs) and ‘silensä’ (his eyes) in the Finnish text, and the pronouns that remain are as gender neutral as ever. Telling Alex’s gender looking at just the translation would be impossible, though a Finn could probably guess it correctly in this instance, as Alex is generally considered a male name in Finland.

Obviously, a reader is going to read this in context and thus know that Alex’s gender shifts due to the explicit discussions of gender present elsewhere in the book. Still, considering how much of the book is narration not about Alex’s gender, it is noteworthy that her gender is not ever-present in the Finnish text as it is in the original. It only comes up when some directly translatable gendered term, such as ‘daughter’ or ‘chaperone’ is used of Alex, or when she is referred to as ‘girls’ alongside her sister.

Example 3 was chosen amongst many due to another interesting choice made in translation, which was translating “his rose high-tops” as “jalkansa” (his feet/legs), omitting both the shoes and their color. It begs the question of if this was done because ‘ruusunpunaiset varsilenkkarinsa’ is a fair bit lengthier, or if the omission is an attempt of misguided gendering; rose is still widely considered a girly color, after all.

## 4.2.2 Translational strategies

Translating pronouns as such and leaving gender untranslated is a blatant domestication. Where in English Alex's gender is a constant part of the narrative, the Finnish text can go entire chapters without mentioning it at all. This implies that it is not recognized or considered important enough to preserve, making this a misrecognizing translational strategy. As the three modes of queer translation were developed precisely to highlight the translation ethical issues in translations that erase or minimize queerness, this choice, especially with how pervasive it is throughout, could be called breach of "the ethical contract of trust" between translator and reader (Démont 2018, 15).

Domesticated as it is, the translation is easy to read and follow, as the language sounds and feels natural. It is quite typical of Finnish texts to go long without mentioning gender, and thus translating all pronominal references with gendered nouns, for example, is not a viable option; it would be just as clunky and awkward as substituting each 'he' with 'boy' in English. Nonetheless, this does not mean that nothing should have been done to preserve gender at least in every chapter or so.

## 4.3 Gender made explicit

This subchapter explores the one instance where the translation is more gendered than the source text.

### 4.3.1 Gendered expression in translation

This instance takes place before the book's narrator gets introduced to Alex, meaning that his narration of Alex is entirely based on what he has heard of Alex from others and how he perceives her in the situation the exchange takes place. Before this, Alex is referred to as "brother", (Riordan 2016, 29; 32) "wildcat son" and "Cheetah Boy" (Riordan 2016, 37) by other characters, so it would make sense for the narrator to assume her male. Still, especially with how so much of Alex's gender is left untranslated, the translational choice presented in example 4 is an enigma:

(4)

"Yeah, yeah," the kid told the bird.

(Riordan 2016, 51)

"Joo, joo", poika sanoi linnulle.

(Riordan 2017, 58)

'Kid' translates directly to 'teini' (teenager) (MOT, s.v. "kid", n.), which could have just as well been used in the translation. It is impossible to determine if this is a conscious translational choice or just the first word the translator produced, but it can be dismantled, nonetheless. The original text very carefully restricts gendering of Alex to just dialogue before she gets to introduce herself, while the translation takes a narrative stance that soon turns out to be misgendering. As explained, it makes sense that the narrator would assume Alex to be male, but the important distinction here is how the original ensures that the narrator does not, at least explicitly. This is even reflected in the surrounding translation, where 'the kid' is indeed translated as 'teini' twice on the same page.

#### 4.3.2 Translational strategies

This is the most ambiguous translational choice in the book when it comes to analyzing the strategy involved, largely because the translator's intent is impossible to deduce by just analyzing the text. However, as despite the difference, it does not challenge or disrupt Finnish cultural codes or linguistic norms, it does not count as foreignizing. (Venuti 2008, 15) Thus again, the translation is a domesticating one.

The crux of the ambiguity lies in where this choice falls within the queering modes of translation. As the only instance where gender is more explicit in Finnish than in English, this could have been the translation's strongest contender for achieving queer translation. Unfortunately, the context deflates it, as this explicit gendering is in fact explicit misgendering: only a few lines later Alex corrects that she should be referred to as 'she'.

The choice of translating 'a kid' as 'poika' could be deemed both minoritizing and misrecognizing depending on how much leeway the translator is given: minoritizing as the queer dimension of Alex's gender, its shifting nature, is overlooked in favor of following along with characters' previous assumptions (Démont 2018, 163); misrecognizing as it fails to recognize context (2018, 158), putting misgendering into the narrators mouth unprompted. Both imply a lack of consideration of context and content from the translator.

#### 4.4 No translation

This subsection presents the two instances of gendered expressions or exchanges that had no Finnish translation at all.

#### 4.4.1 Untranslatability exemplified

The first instance of untranslatable gender expression that has no Finnish translation involves pronouns, more specifically the gender-neutral pronoun ‘they’. The lines in example 5 presented below are the final two sentences of a longer account Alex is giving of her gender identity, and other than the part left out, the translation is again done through substituting gendered pronouns for gendered nouns:

(5)

When I'm she, I'm she

Kun olen tyttö, olen tyttö.

When I'm he, I'm he. I'm not *they*, Get it?

Kun olen poika, olen poika. [Ø] Tajuatko?

(Riordan 2016, 273)

(Riordan 2017, 276)

In addition to the left out ‘they’, the translation also leaves out the source text’s emphasis on the repeated pronouns through italicization. Of these, the former is considerably more important in this context. The characters discuss nonbinary gender in the conversation these lines are a part of, and the instances where nonbinary is explicitly mentioned do get translated. Therefore, including some mention of gender identities beyond ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ would have both fit the narrative flow and come across less like intentional erasure.

Leaving out the untranslatable ‘they’ when other untranslatable gendered pronouns get translations comes across as an enforcement of the gender binary; the idea that there are only two genders, male and female. This is an easy enforcement to make both intentionally and unintentionally in Finnish, as even the Finnish word for sex and gender ‘sukupuoli’ contains the word ‘puoli’ (half), which indicates that sex and gender are one whole that consists of two different halves. Doing so in a book that explicitly stands against this is a contestable choice.

Interestingly, the second instance not receiving a translation is an exchange consisting of gendered nouns that do have, at least in their dictionary definition, direct Finnish translations. In this case, though, the words are used to make a joke utilizing the fact that ‘man’ can be used as an interjection in American English, with a meaning similar to ‘oh boy’, for example. Alex then jokingly corrects this ‘man’ to ‘woman’:

(6)

"Man," I said. [Ø]

"Woman, today," Alex corrected. [Ø]

"No, I mean..." I stopped, realizing she was teasing me. [Ø]

(Riordan 2016, 299)

(Riordan 2017, 301)

The direct translation of ‘man’, ‘mies’ would not have worked here, as its semantic field does not include this same function as an interjection. In this sense, it could be considered untranslatable, but the dictionary definition of man argues otherwise: the interjection has the translation ‘voi pojat’ (oh boys) (MOT, s.v. “man,” inj.). This interjection is natural Finnish language use and would have allowed for translating Alex’s retort as ‘girl, today’, leaving only the slight issue of the interjection being plural while the retort is not.

#### 4.4.2 Translational strategies

These translations are severely domesticating, as they involve leaving out things entirely to adhere to what Finnish allows without challenging its linguistical or cultural conventions. Leaving out ‘they’, especially combined with how ‘transgender’ gets mistranslated as ‘nonbinary’, highlights a translation ethical issue specific to queer translation: the translator’s knowledge and understanding, or interest in learning it, inevitably color the translation and in this case the color is both domesticating and erasing.

In terms of the queer translation modes, these translations are misrecognizing, as they fail to even try translating the queerness present and instead seem to disregard it as not worth translating. After all, that is how it appears to someone looking just a bit deeper into this, especially as even a translation student like me immediately wondered why the abovementioned interjection-wordplay was not translated with ‘voi pojat’.

## 5 Discussion

As Butler puts it in *Gender in Translation*, “gender only arrives in any language as a result of a difficult translation”, and thus never carries within quite the same meaning (2021, 18). This difficulty is also what prompted this study, and at least based on my analysis, Butler’s claim stands true. Translating words, concepts and meaning relying on grammatical features to a language that both lacks and considers them differently—if at all—is a complicated task, and despite best attempts the meaning changes when translated. This change can be minimal, as in the first two lines of Example 1 where the translation reads just as natural as the original, or extensive, as in Example 3 where the presence of gender disappears in translation entirely.

The disappearance of pronominal gender representation in translation was just as rampant in the novellas researched by Merikallio, who discovered in her study that there were no instances where gendered pronouns were translated in a way that the nonnormative gender representation survived the translation (2022, 67). While collecting my data, I also discovered that in many chapters, Alex’s gender performance was completely absent from the Finnish text, and most times when an active correction of misgendering or a discussion of Alex’s gender was not taking place, the only gendered features left in the translation were the directly translatable ones, not to mention the instances where there were no translations at all.

My data differed from Merikallio’s in that in *The Hammer of Thor*, translating the nonnormative shifting gender was in places unavoidable despite its untranslatability. Thus, it became possible to analyze *how*. Unfortunately, the answer I found was *in the easiest way possible*, without challenging either Finnish language norms or the reader. In each instance explored, the strategy cries domestication, and in terms of queer modes of translation, minoritizing and misrecognizing. Merikallio’s study showed identical results, and this statement of hers could just as well be my own: “Even though gender is central to these stories, the remarkability of translating gender is partly sidelined in the Finnish translation” (2022, 70; my translation).

Because it truly is remarkable just as much as it is a challenge. Translating (trans)gender can pose difficulties on all levels from grammar to cultural understandings and conventions, and the translator needs to figure out how to translate the untranslatable. Furthermore, every choice made while doing so is anything but neutral; the translator cannot opt out of the ideological impact of gender connotations in neither the source nor the target text (Di Sabato and Perri 2020, 369) any more than of translating or leaving untranslated. The continuous domestications,

misrecognizings and minoritizings in the translation of *The Hammer of Thor* indicate that these issues of translating gender to be addressed more when it comes to Finnish translations.

For me, regarding what I have discovered, I want to raise a question: Why even bother sticking to domesticating strategies, when the effect is going to be at least somewhat foreignizing anyways? Gender fluidity is yet to find its Finnish shape, so any domesticated discussion of it is going to feel foreign to readers not used to discussing gender as such. The reason why most likely has to do with commission guidelines, translator's competence (regarding the subject) and the fact that, as Démont put it, queering a translation is inherently disruptive (2018, 163). After all, mainstream literature is unfortunately an unlikely avenue for experimenting with disruptive expressions of gender.

I say unfortunately, as wide understanding and acceptance of nonnormative gender expressions is only achievable through it breaking into the mainstream. This is why I advocate for emphasizing the *trans* in translation, too, and why highlighting the problems through studies like mine and Merikallio's is needed. To reiterate on Rose's take on untranslatability: translating untranslatable gender is not impossible, it just requires creativity and invention (2019, 169).

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis examined four types of ways the question of translating gender was answered in the Finnish translation of *The Hammer of Thor*, concluding that in each instance, the answer was domestication. The translation never challenges Finnish norms or conventions, at least linguistically, and translates the untranslatable through finding the closest equivalent with a similar denotation, thus minoritizing the translation, or leaves gender untranslated or out completely, misrecognizing the translation.

The translation is only explicit discussions of gender and directly translatable gendered nouns away from erasing gender from the translation completely, which highlights the importance of considering this a translation ethical issue. Transgender and gender diverse identities are contested, questioned and invalidated enough already, and this vulnerability gets exemplified in translation when enough care and expertise is not put into it.

This study is limited to just one book and a handful of examples, as well as the vocabulary available in the 2020s, and thus it remains possible that this translation ages out as soon as gender fluidity finds its Finnish linguistic shape and cultural understanding. Some of my analysis could also be rendered null if that language found were to include doing the equivalent of pronoun specification with nouns, which I deemed strange and foreign—or if for example the gender-sex distinction were to find its home in Finnish through new vocabulary instead of the current practice of adding the word ‘identity’ to differentiate the two.

Either way, the research ought to continue. More extensive research on larger amounts of data might provide more varied translational choices, and comparing translated expressions of gender fluidity to native Finnish explorations of the subject could reveal both interesting differences and similarities. It would also be interesting to ask different translators, more and less versed in transgender translation, as well as transgender people how they would solve the problems noted here. After all, though “trans people, translators and translations occupy a position in-between” (Rose 2021, 168), no two people or texts stand in the exact same place, which makes transgender translation a cornucopia of research questions.

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