

On some gender-related difficulties in translating nouns from Romanian into Italian

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Abstract: *The paper aims at pointing out some illustrative examples of nouns which have different grammatical genders in Romanian and Italian, and at discussing some of the difficulties encountered by Romanian speakers when translating such nouns into Italian.*

Key words: *grammatical gender, nouns, gender dissimilarities.*

1. Gender, as a noun category, is generally considered not to create many problems to people speaking different languages. Such a statement holds valid especially in those cases in which the grammatical gender of a noun corresponds to the natural gender of the reality it denotes, and those in which a noun has the same grammatical gender in different language cultures (LCs). Other aspects which may support such a view are the common origins of certain languages (Romanic, Germanic, etc.), and the fact that either certain words in different languages are borrowed from the same language(s) (e.g. Latin, Greek, English, French, etc.) or one of the two languages brought in contact is the source of certain words borrowed and quite extensively used in the other language (e.g. the Italian nouns *pizza*, *spaghetti*, *espresso* borrowed and used as such in Romanian, and in many other languages worldwide).

1.1. Considering Romanian and Italian, the common origins of these languages and the fact that the corresponding civilizations have constantly been in contact along the centuries would normally lead us to the conclusion that there are hardly any differences between the grammatical gender of nouns in Romanian and Italian. Nevertheless, a closer analysis of the way in which this noun category functions in the two LCs makes it clear that the situation is quite different from what one might expect.

In spite of the numerous similarities identifiable when comparing the grammatical gender of certain Romanian nouns and of their Italian equivalents, there are instances in which gender-related dissimilarities in these two languages ‘give a hard time’ to fluent, but unaware Romanian speakers of Italian.

Many of these problems seem to originate in the absence of the neuter gender in Italian, but there are also numerous problems due to fact that certain nouns in Romanian have a different grammatical behaviour in terms of grammatical gender as compared to the corresponding Italian equivalents.

2. Starting from the realities which nouns denote and from the way in which their plural is formed, linguists refer to the existence of three grammatical genders in Romanian, i.e. the **masculine** (*un băiat/ doi băieți*), the **feminine** (*o fată/ două fete*) and the **neuter** (*un tractor/ două tractoare*), and of only two, namely the **masculine** (*un ragazzo/ due ragazzi*) and the **feminine** (*una donna/ due donne*), in Italian.

2.1. The neuter gender in Romanian is most frequently associated with inanimate entities, and the corresponding nouns are known to always take the masculine **un** in the singular and the feminine **două** in the plural. Since the neuter is absent in Italian, the nouns denoting inanimate entities are either masculine, or feminine in this language, their grammatical gender being established merely in terms of language use and conventions. That is why, as Marrinucci (1996: 89) suggests, there is no logical explanation for the fact that the noun *cuore* is masculine in Italian, and nouns such as *mano*, *sedia*, *pianta* are feminine. However, mention should be made that the alternation between masculine and feminine in relation to the category of number is also traceable in a series of isolated Italian nouns. For example, the singular of the noun *eco* (*ecou* in Romanian) is traditionally feminine in contemporary Italian and its plural is masculine, despite the fact that in certain older texts the masculine is associated with the singular form, as well.

2.2. Since neuter nouns in Romanian have no corresponding neutre nouns in Italian, most differences between these two languages originate in the necessity for Romanian speakers of Italian to switch from the neutre gender in their native language to the masculine or feminine in Italian:

- **neuter** in Romanian → **masculine** in Italian: e.g. *un pod/ două poduri* → *un ponte/due ponti*
- **neuter** in Romanian → **feminine** in Italian: e.g. *un cântec/ două cântece* → *la canzone/ le canzoni*
- **neuter** in Romanian → **a unique masculine form** in Italian: e.g. *un calculator/ două calculatoare* → *uno/due computer, un sport/ două sporturi* → *uno/due sport*.

Nouns which are neuter in Romanian and masculine in Italian are unlikely to favour mistakes in the plural Italian form if the numerals **un/ due** (*un ponte/ due ponti*) are used, but if the same nouns have to be preceded by the definite article **il/i, lo/gli, la/le**, then forms such as *il ponte/ *le ponti* may be created and wrongly used by unaware Romanian speakers of Italian under the influence of their native language.

In much the same way, nouns which are neuter in Romanian and feminine in Italian are likely to be the source of a wrong singular form in the Italian noun. For example, when translating the Romanian noun *un cântec/ două cântece* into Italian, the Romanian speaker might be tempted to select the masculine singular form used in Romanian for the corresponding noun in Italian, thus replacing the grammatically correct *la canzone* with the wrongly created masculine **il canzone*.

The neuter gender of Romanian nouns is also worth discussing in relation to examples such as *un calculator/ două calculatoare* → *uno/due computer, un sport/ două sporturi* → *uno/due sport, uno/due yogurt* which have a unique masculine form in Italian, both for the singular and for the plural. When confronted with such nouns, Romanian speakers of Italian might have problems in correctly selecting the masculine or the feminine. Moreover, even if the masculine gender of nouns such as *sport* and *yogurt* is correctly identified, unaware speakers of Italian may still make mistakes related to the choice of the definite article. This is due to the fact that, depending on the classes they belong to, masculine nouns in Italian take either the **il/i**, or the **lo/gli** definite articles. In our case, Romanian speakers who are not familiar with the restrictions in the use of the definite articles **lo/gli** are likely to wrongly associate **il/i** with the nouns *sport* and *yogurt*, thus using **il sport /i sport* and **il yogurt/ i yogurt* instead of the grammatically correct forms *lo sport /gli sport* and *lo yogurt/gli yogurt*, respectively.

2.3. Nouns denoting animals and insects which have a unique form and grammatical gender in Italian, both for the feminine and for the masculine (e.g. *la farfalla, la pantera, la balena, la cavaletta, la mosca, l'aragosta, la faina, il falco, il serpente, lo scorpione, il topo, lo scarafaggio*) represent another source of problems. When confronted with such nouns, non-native speakers of Italian should be aware of the fact that, in spite of the specific gender-related restrictions, such nouns allow for a distinction between the masculine and feminine by means of the nouns *femina* and *maschio* which have to be added to the nouns denoting the animal or insect. Since the same procedure for gender distinction is used in the case of most Romanian nouns denoting animals, the more problematic will remain the cases in which this aspect combines with gender differences. A case in point is the noun *fluture* which is masculine in Romanian (*un fluture/ doi fluturi*) and feminine in Italian (e.g. *una farfalla/ due farfalle*).

The list of nouns which have a unique form for the masculine and feminine (common gender) in Italian can be completed by examples such as: *il/la collega, il/la psichiatra, il/la pediatra, il/la atleta, il/la maratoneta, il/la barista, il/la brigatista, il/la specialista, il/la dentista, il/la suicida, il/la parricida, il/la omicida, il/la partner, il/la leader, il/la premier*,

il/la fan, il/la coniuge, il/la erede, il/la parente, il/la testimone, il/la consorte, il/la nipote, il/la custode, il/la preside, il/la vigile, il/la cantante, il/la amante. However, these nouns are different from the ones denoting animals and insects in that their combination with the definite articles corresponding to the masculine (**il/i**) and feminine (**la/le**) allows for a distinction in terms of the natural gender of the person denoted by the noun. Since some of these nouns in Italian have different forms for the masculine and feminine in Romanian (e.g. *un/una collega* → *un coleg/ o colegă*, *il/la atleta* → *un atlet/ o atletă*, *un/una barista* → *un barman/ o barmaniță*, *un/una specialista* → *un specialist/ o specialistă*, *un/una partner* → *un partener/ o parteneră*, *un/una erede* → *un moștenitor/ o moștenitoare*, *un/una nipote* → *un nepot/ o nepoată*, *un/una cantante* → *un cântăreț/ o cântăreață*, *un/una amante* → *un amant/ o amantă*), the Romanian speakers translating them into Italian may find it difficult to stick to the unique noun form in the target language (TL)

2.4. Last but not least, reference could be made to nouns such as *o sămânță/ două semințe* → *un seme/ due semi*, *o valoare/ două valori* → *un valore/ due valori*, *o temă/ două teme* → *un tema/ due temi*, *o problemă/ două probleme* → *un problema/ due problemi*, *o carte/ două cărți* → *un libro/ due libri*, *o pereche/ două perechi* → *un paio/ due paia* which are feminine in Romanian and masculine in Italian. When confronted with such nouns, unaware Romanian speakers of Italian are most likely to switch grammatical genders. That is why forms such **la problema*, **la tema*, **la valore* are quite frequently used by Romanian speakers who do not have solid knowledge regarding the grammatical gender of nouns in Italian.

Instead of a **conclusion**, I should say that the present paper covers only some of the difficulties that Romanian speakers of Italian have to cope with when translating nouns from Romanian into Italian. As illustrated in the examples analysed, most of the gender-related problems faced by Romanians communicating in Italian are likely to be due to the speakers' unawareness regarding the grammatical specificity of the TL and lack of experience in translation. These aspects are probably the ones which prevent them from surpassing an important barrier in translation, i.e. their tendency of translating their thinking in the native language without adapting to the requirements, in our case grammatical, of the TL.

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