

Words Matter, Identity Matters: Translating the Vocabulary of Diversity

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Does identity play a role in how we translate? The short answer is yes.

(Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect U.S. Department of State policy.)

In early 2021, a debate erupted in several European countries about who was qualified to translate “*The Hill We Climb*,” a stirring poem delivered at the inauguration of U.S. President Joe Biden by the young African American poet Amanda Gorman. After the task of translating the poem had been assigned to a White Dutch translator, there was a backlash from those who argued that a person of color should do the translation. Similar criticisms were voiced in other countries where translations were being undertaken, while some voices decried the role of “identity politics” in the selection of translators.¹ The story continued to generate interest the following year when a Hungarian Roma translator recounted how belonging to a marginalized community gave her deeper insight as she translated Gorman’s poem into Hungarian.²

Around the same time this translation controversy was hitting the press, I came across the translation of a document aimed at educating readers on issues of diversity. As I read it, I was pretty shocked to encounter an instance in which the English word *straight* (as in heterosexual) was rendered in the target language as “normal or natural man/woman.” Aside from taking offense at the suggestion that as a gay man I was somehow not normal or natural, I found myself asking if a translator who identified as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and others) would ever render the word *straight* in this way.

One might view Amanda Gorman’s poem as a simple text without any difficult vocabulary or concepts that would make translation challenging. Yet the poem emerges from experiences of racial inequality and marginalization that underlie every

line. Can a translator render a faithful rendition without being deeply in touch with the poet’s worldview? More importantly, isn’t it possible for translators who don’t personally have to deal with racism or discrimination on a daily basis to inadvertently insert personal beliefs or ideologies in their choice of vocabulary or in the way they express certain concepts?

Does identity play a role in how we translate? The short answer is yes. As we go about the work of translation, we bring far more than the skills we’ve learned. We bring a lifetime of experiences along with attitudes that were formed in childhood and beyond. We come to our work with assumptions and biases embedded in the cultures of our families and communities beyond what we may realize. The way in which we render words in a target language is affected by our histories, perspectives, and biases, whether we’re aware of them or not.

Identity plays a particularly crucial role today in translating texts that deal with or include vocabulary related to race, women’s issues, or LGBTQ+ persons. Most translators who are women, who identify as LGBTQ+, or who come from communities of color are already sensitive to how words are used—both positively and negatively—in relation to their own experiences. Other translators need to deepen their awareness of the nuances of words in the source text so that terms can be expressed appropriately, faithfully, and respectfully in the target language.

For instance, how would you translate the term *woke*? As it’s used in the U.S. today, the term has come to mean more than one thing. In marginalized communities and among allies, the word originally signified a deep awareness of racial, economic, and gender disparities. Over time, however, it has also come to be appropriated by others as a pejorative term suggesting knee-jerk political correctness.³ Translators who come across this word need to understand its context and the nuances of the author’s intent.

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June 2022 Calendar

National Caribbean-American Heritage Month
National LGBT Pride Month

- 3 – National Gun Violence Awareness Day (US)
- 4-6 – Shavuot (Judaism)
- 5 – National Cancer Survivors Day (US)
- 8 – Race Unity Day (Baha’i)
- 12 – Multicultural American Child Day (US)
- 12 – Trinity Sunday (Christian)
- 14 – Flag Day (US)
- 14-20 – Learning Disabilities Week (US)
- 19 – Juneteenth (US)
- 19 – Father’s Day (US)
- 24 – Stonewall National Monument Day (US)
- 24 – Lithia (Pagan, Wiccan)

Here's another example. Texts dealing with issues of race, gender, and other areas of disparity often include the term *intersectionality*. This term is used to describe overlap within various social identities of the ways in which the concerns of different marginalized communities often intersect and relate to one another. How do translators find the right word(s) to convey the complex social, economic, and political dynamics implied by this term? Let's turn now to some specific examples related to race, women's issues, and LGBTQ+ persons. How can we find translation solutions that take into account the nuances of the following terms?

Black: In "*The Hill We Climb*," Amanda Gorman wrote this memorable line: "where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president only to find herself reciting for one." This one simple word, *Black*, has been used in the U.S. with both derision and pride. How can a translator discern the author's intent and contextualize it in such a way that the author's or speaker's intent is communicated in the target language? One can only create an authentic translation after gaining a deep familiarization not only with the source text, but with the author, their life story, their concerns, and their context.

Karen: Unfortunately for people named Karen, this word has become a symbol of racism attributed to entitled White women who call the police on Black people entering their own homes or engaging in other normal, everyday activities.⁴ The term came into wider use in the wake of videos portraying appalling racist behavior, such as the woman who called the New York City police and made a false accusation against a Black birdwatcher in Central Park.⁵ Translators face the challenge of finding the word(s) that describe the satirical character of this term and express its various elements. In Spain, at least some of the nuances of the American "Karen" are being expressed with the name "Charo."⁶ It's important to know if a similar phenomenon is happening in your language combination.

Mansplaining: I'm completely aware that as a man, I may be on shaky ground in trying to explain this term and its implications. *Words We're Watching* from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines mansplaining this way: "When a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he's talking to does."⁷ *Machoexplicación* in Spanish⁸, *mecsplication* or *pénisplication* in French⁹, and *Herrklären* in German¹⁰ are translation solutions for this term that have already been adopted, albeit informally. Is there a way to express this very specific kind of sexist behavior in your target language?

Professions: When translating the names of various professions, does the target language default to a gendered word based on social expectations? In gendered languages, are *doctor*, *lawyer*, and *president* assigned masculine nouns/pronouns, while *nurse*, *teacher*, and *secretary* are assigned female nouns/pronouns? If the source text doesn't make gender assumptions about these professions, can a translation be faithful if they're expressed as gendered in the target language?

Pro-life, Anti-abortion, Pro-choice: Can the translator find ways to express the different nuances of these terms when they appear in the source text? When a text is dealing with attitudes and policies on abortion, translators need to carefully assess the context and the author's intent when using words like *pro-choice*, *pro-life*, and *anti-abortion*, since the terms themselves may be used in different ways. For example, pro-life is used by some only when referring to the unborn, while others may use it in a broader sense to express support for groups such as women, children, elders, persons with disabilities, or inmates on death row. A good translator will take account of these kinds of nuances when choosing vocabulary in the target language.

Feminism, Feminist: Do the most commonly used translations for these words suggest judgmental nuances in the target language? In some countries, the word *feminism* has inappropriately been likened to misandry (i.e., hatred, dislike, or mistrust of men). Translators should be careful to make sure that nuances that aren't present in the vocabulary of the source text aren't inadvertently transferred into the target.

Rape, Sexual Harassment: When we translate these terms or concepts into gendered languages, do we default to a specific gender for perpetrators and/or victims?

LGBTQ, LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA2S+, etc.: Even among persons who identify as a part of these communities, different versions of the acronym are used.

LGBTQ: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning.

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning with a "+" sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the community.

LGBTQIA2S+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, two spirit, and other people with non-conforming sexualities and/or gender identities.

Translators need to gain a clear understanding of each letter in the various renderings and research the acronyms in use among people who speak the target language and identify as members of the community.

Straight, Queer, Gay: Many languages simply use the English words or their transliterations. Translators need to exercise great care not to choose words in the target language with a pejorative connotation when the source text is using the word in a neutral way or in a way that expresses pride. Pejorative equivalents are appropriate only when the source text is using one of these words as a slur. In most instances *straight* shouldn't be translated to mean normal or natural, nor should *gay* or *queer* be translated with a word that LGBTQ+ persons would find offensive. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Steve Clemons shows how translations into Arabic (for example, in movie subtitles) sometimes distort the meaning of *gay* by using equivalents for *pervert* or *deviant* when there are words available that avoid making negative judgments and would more accurately reflect the nuances of the source language.¹¹

Cisgender, Heteronormative, Cishet¹²: While cognates may be a ready translation solution in Romance languages, these words can pose a challenge in many other languages that aren't based in Latin or Greek. If translators opt to use a transliteration or simply to employ the English word, they should consider if the reader will grasp the full meaning of these words and then perform the plausibility check to ensure that the translation solution is bias-free. A short explanation may be needed to alert the reader to the meaning of the transliterated or English word.

Non-Binary: This is an adjective used to describe a person who doesn't identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary persons may identify as being both male and female, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary persons do. Non-binary can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing identities such as agender, bigender, genderqueer, or genderfluid.

Queer: While historically pejorative, this word has been reappropriated in recent years to express inclusivity and pride. Some LGBTQ+ persons find it helpful to use this term to describe persons who don't quite fit with any of the other letters and yet identify as other than cisgender heterosexual. Queer is used by some as an umbrella term that includes all the other letters (e.g., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, etc.)

The struggles for racial equality, gender equity, and LGBTQ+ rights are hardly confined to the U.S. or other Western democracies. Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement have had an impact in various countries. There are organizations around the globe that represent minority and marginalized communities. Following these groups and checking out their websites can be a great way to help us learn terminology and about the different perspectives of people who speak and write in our target languages. For example, LGBTQ+ organizations in many countries—and not just in places you might expect—have a presence on the web and in social media. Take, for example, Helem in Lebanon, Yaaj in Mexico, the Russian LGBT Network, and HaengSeongIn in South Korea. These organizations' websites can be very useful in learning more about appropriate vocabulary in other languages. The Human Rights Campaign also has a glossary of terms in English on its website, the National Immigrant Justice Center offers a list of Arabic LGBTQ terminology for interpreters and staff, and Asian Health Services in Oakland, California, has published an LGBTQ Glossary in Chinese, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Korean.

It's sometimes the case that language authorities such as the Académie Française or Real Academia Española might not acknowledge—and will often reject—resources and linguistic solutions that will help you navigate issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Our training as professional translators can lead us to feel that we've overstepped a boundary if we deviate from their guidance. However, when dealing with race, women's issues, and LGBTQ+ persons, it's often the community organizations that are the real subject matter experts. When in doubt, trust the experts—namely, those who are living these realities.

Words matter. Identity matters. For translators who aren't members of marginalized communities, the first step is to recognize our own privilege, to acknowledge our own limitations, and to broaden our perspective regarding communities of color, women, and LGBTQ+ persons. Only with a recognition of that privilege can we produce translations that help readers in the target language access the experience of those living on the underside of privilege.

Notes

1. Marshall, Alex. "Amanda Gorman's Poetry United Critics. It's Dividing Translators," *The New York Times* (March 26, 2021), <https://nyti.ms/36KRTUu>.
2. Kakissis, Joanna. "Hungarian Roma Are Translating Amanda Gorman; Her Poetry Speaks to Their Experience," National Public Radio (January 29, 2022), <https://n.pr/3vbbkiB>.
3. McWhorter, John. "How 'Woke' Became an Insult," *The New York Times* (August 17, 2021), <https://nyti.ms/3vMOPRS>.
4. Hafner, Josh. "Woman Fired after Blocking Black Man from His Apartment Building in Video," *USA Today* (October 15, 2018), <https://bit.ly/USAToday-Hafner>; also see Lang, Candy. "How the 'Karen Meme' Confronts the Violent History of White Womanhood," *Time* (July 6, 2020), <https://bit.ly/Time-Karen>; Lewis, Helen. "The Mythology of Karen," *The Atlantic* (August 19, 2020), <https://bit.ly/TheAtlantic-Lewis>.
5. Hays, Tom. "White Woman Charged after Racist Central Park Confrontation," Associated Press (July 6, 2020), <https://bit.ly/AP-Hays>.
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7. "Words We're Watching: Mansplaining," *Merriam-Webster*, <https://bit.ly/MW-mansplaining>.
8. "Machoe explicación, alternativa a mansplaining," FundéuRAE, <https://bit.ly/Machoe explicación>.
9. "'C'est Quoi Le Mansplaining?' Ou Comment J'ai Cassé Mon Twitter," *Minute Simone* (June 15, 2018), <https://bit.ly/MinuteSimone-mansplaining>.
10. Fischer, Von Judith. "Mann, erklär mir nicht mein Leben! Das können wir gegen Mansplaining und Alltags-Sexismus tun," *Elle* (September 6, 2020), www.elle.de/mansplaining-sexismus.
11. Clemons, Steve. "Arabic Words for 'Gay' Need to Be Better than 'Pervert' or 'Deviant,'" *The Atlantic* (August 15, 2012), <https://bit.ly/TheAtlantic-Clemons>.
12. **Cisgender:** A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. **Heteronormative:** The assumption of heterosexuality as the given or default sexual orientation instead of one of many possibilities, and that the preferred or default relationship is between two people of "opposite" genders. **Cishet/Cis-Heteronormative:** This term refers to the assumption that heterosexuality and being cisgender are the norm, which plays out in interpersonal interactions and society, and furthers the marginalization of queer and gender diverse people. Source: Human Rights Campaign, "Welcoming Schools: Definitions to Help Understand Gender and Sexual Orientation," <https://bit.ly/HRC-gender-sexual-orientation>.

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