Grammatical gender as an underlying factor of an ethnopoetic mapping of the world: a gestaltist approach

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Abstract. In the context of modern scholarly landscape it seems quite evident that grammatical gender represents not a purely formal category but it is endowed with certain semantics which exists in a concealed, implicit form until this meaning is demanded in figurative speech. This article focuses on the gender profiles of 10 languages that are viewed as matrices for further poetic personification and, consequently, for the development of a certain literary tradition. The gender profile of the language is treated from a gestaltist standpoint as a ratio of grammatically conditioned figures in the gestalts of language units.

Keywords: gestalt, figure, gender profile of the language, masculine profile of the language, feminine profile of the language

1. Introduction

Animation of inanimate objects and abstract notions as a verbalized way of thinking about the world can be called a generic feature of poetic speech that dates back to the times of magical or mythological mapping of reality. That global personification which took place in the archaic epoch had a considerable gnosiological value being an important constituent of comprehension processes. For it is through the animation of natural forces and sexualisation of inanimate objects that the human consciousness was learning to understand the surrounding world as people can realize any dumb thing only by correlating it with themselves.In much the same way poetic conceptualization of reality in terms of animated objects, phenomena and abstract notions occurs. Viewed in a cross-cultural perspective the processes of poetic personification take their course according to different algorisms which results in the existence of ethnospecific gender mappings of the world. As, for example, in the languages which have the grammatical category of gender personified images are stenciled basically along the lines suggested by the grammatical gender of the nouns that denote those objects and notions which undergo personification.

In this paper personification is viewed as a variety of metaphor which foregrounds the figure of gender. Foregrounding as one of the key categories in poetics is dealt with in a number of scholarly works that give different interpretations to the notion "figure" treating it either in the perspective of cognitive linguistics [2; 5] or from the standpoint of classical gestalt theory [6]. However, it is safe to say that the term "figure" belongs to those categories whose essence, despite the lack of unanimity in approaches, is described more or less universally in contemporary poetics [7, c.12]. Likewise, in terms of foregrounding the figure of gender in the gestalt of an object or notion one can consider the specificity of the language mapping of the world that gives rise to differences in the poetic image of the world cultivated within the framework of this or that cultural tradition. "Figure" is understood then as that element in the gestalt of the language sign which is expressive and clear for the consciousness of native speakers [1, c. 226].. In the case of personification the basis for such foregrounding is placed at the disposal of human consciousness by the grammatical category of gender which is not deprived of meaning and the latter becomes evident any time "the thought is given an opportunity to concentrate on it" [3, c. 483].

The aim of this analysis consists in revealing those built into the language system specificities that lay foun

dation to the poetic image of the world of the corresponding language collective.

2. Methodology and data sources

Two methods can be isolated as the leading ones in the research: selection and a quantative analysis. The first one lies in determining those thematic fields and their key lexical elements that can be considered central for human personification activities. To solve the problem set in the research one has no need in making attempts to consider thousands of nouns because the number of those objects, phenomena and notions which undergo personification in a certain linguo-cultural space is rather limited. The quantity of concepts that can be regarded crucial for the spiritual life of human society constitutes approximately four-five dozens. Among them are such notions as *eternity*, *law*, *love*, *faith*, *fear* and so on. Nevertheless, the spiritual culture of any social medium is based on the operations with these conceptual constants [4, c. 7].. The experiment presented in this article has been carried out on the much vaster material which includes the language units denoting those objects, phenomena and notions that are of paramount importance for human physical and spiritual existence, and therefore the probability of their personification is rather high in many languages. Choosing these units the author to some extent had to be guided by the intuition developed due to a long-standing experience of work with literary texts.

The second method applied in this paper is quantative. The singled out lexical units and their equivalents in all the languages under discussion have been classified according to their appurtenance to the grammatical genders existing in a certain language. In each of the languages a small group of the investigated word corpus is constituted by those lexical units which have only the plural form. The aim of the research consisted in determining the gender dominant for each of the 10 languages analyzed by stating which of the two personification-relevant genders (masculine or feminine) prevails. Therefore the tables given below contain horizontal subdivisions *masculine, feminine, neuter* and *plural* for the degree of the lexemes belonging to the corresponding genders and those words which are used only in the plural. The subdivisions with Roman figures (I, II, III, IV, V) denote the first, second, third, fourth and fifth thematic groups described in section 3 of this article.

The data sources of the research are constituted by the dictionaries used for establishing gender correspondences between the analyzed lexical units in 10 different languages.

3. Ethnospecific ratio of grammatically conditioned figures *masculinity::femininity* in the gestalts of language units: the gender profile of the language
The subject of the analysis has been constituted by 564 source lexical units of the Ukrainian language with their equivalents in nine Indo-European languages belonging to four groups (Slavic group: Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian; Romanic group: French, Italian, Spanish; Germanic group: German; Greek group: modern Greek) and one Semitic language (Hebrew). Logically the material of this research falls into 5 groups. The first of them comprises 158 lexical units of general character. These are: 1) generic names of animate creatures, representatives of flora and fauna and the words denoting their main morphological parts (*being, person, individual, child, animal, bird, fish, insect, plant, tree, grass, flower, berry, blood, bone, cell, petal, leaf, seed* and so on); 2) lexis that denotes the most important general notions and events of human life (*universe, world, space, essence, life, birth, marriage, funeral, labour, game/play, rest, money, food, clothes, medicine* and so on); 3) the most frequently used words connected with the category of time and its measuring (*time, eternity, past, present, future, hour, minute, year, month* and so on); 4) words that denote the most popular notions of general analytical character (*sign, property, feature, condition, circumstance, reason, consequence, aim, means, need, action, event* and so on); 5) the basic lexis connected with verbal communication and sound production (*word, letter, sound, language, speech, voice, laughter, cry, echo, silence, music, melody, song* and so on).

The second thematic group (154 lexical units) includes: 1) the words that denote the key notions in the sphere of moral, intellectual and emotional life of people (*truth, right, law, power, liberty, mind, knowledge, thought, memory, education, good, evil, faith, hope, soul, happiness, beauty* and so on); 2) the most important evaluative notions of positive meaning and the main positive features of human character (*glory, victory, success, respect, dignity, courage* and so on); 3) the words that denote the basic negative notions in moral-ethic, psychoemotional and aesthetic domains (*sin, temptation, betrayal, lie, revenge, anger, fear* and others), negative events and phenomena in human life and some key objects associated with them (*war, crisis, defeat, crime, pain, threat, death, grave, jail, poison* and so on), negative features of human character (*jealousy, arrogance* and others).

The third group of words (101 lexical units) is constituted by: 1) the names of natural elements (*air, fire, earth, water*) and their most important derivatives including some specific features of relief (*flame, shine, sparkle, ocean, sea, river, mountain, valley, garden, meadow* and so on); 2) the words that denote celestial bodies, the most wide spread natural phenomena and conditions (*sun, moon, star, light, darkness, rainbow, lightning, thunder, rain, wind, snow, frost, heat* and so on); 3) names of seasons and parts of the world.

The fourth group (82 lexical units) contains the names of: 1) units of geographical distribution, state and public institutions, constructions (*region, city, town, village, tower, castle, palace, building, school, hospital* and so on); 2) structural parts of buildings (*ceiling, floor, wall, window, door*); 3) some basic objects of the interior (*furniture, table, bed, chair, wardrobe, cupboard* and some others).

The fifth group (74 lexical units) is formed by the names of the most wide-spread trees, bushes and flowers. As all these words denote the flora that is most common on the territory of Europe, the Hebrew part of their equivalents is represented by a less extended group of lexical units.

The results of the analysis testify to the fact that there can be singled out two types of gender profiles of the language: feminine and masculine.

3.1. The feminine profile of the language
According to the estimations used in this article, the language has the feminine profile if the greater part of the analyzed lexical units can be described as **language signs enclosing the figure of femininity in their gestalts**. The feminine profile logically falls into two kinds: the feminine profile of dominant and latent kind. The first one is observed in the Ukrainian language where the lexical units of the feminine gender constitute more than 50% in each of the analyzed thematic word groups evidently predominating over the lexis of the masculine and neuter genders:

Table 1. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the Ukrainian language

	Feminine gender	Masculine gender	Neutral gender	Plural
Gr. I.	*54,9 %*	24 %	18,7 %	2,4 %
Gr. II.	*76,7 %*	10,5 %	11,7 %	1,1 %
Gr.III.	*53,45 %*	28,45 %	17,2 %	0,9 %
Gr.IV.	*59,6 %*	16 %	21,3 %	3,1 %
Gr.V.	*68,75 %*	26,25 %	3,75 %	1,25 %

The latter manifests itself in the Bulgarian, modern Greek and Polish languages where the lexical units of the feminine gender prevail only in four thematic subdivisions:

Table 2. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the Bulgarian language

	Feminine gender	Masculine gender	Neutral gender	Plural
Gr.II.	*53 %*	16,5 %	30 %	0,5 %
Gr.III.	*47,5 %*	37,4 %	15,1 %	–
Gr.IV.	*43,1 %*	29,4 %	24,8 %	2.7 %
Gr.V.	*59,1 %*	33 %	6,8 %	1,1 %

Table 3. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the modern Greek language

	Feminine gender	Masculine gender	Neutral gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**40,9 %**	18,6 %	38,2 %	2,3 %
Gr.II.	**62,9 %**	11,4 %	25,7 %	–
Gr.III.	**40 %**	28,3 %	31,7 %	–
Gr.V.	**51,2 %**	19,5 %	29,3 %	–

Table 4. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the Polish language

	Feminine gender	Masculine gender	Neutral gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**40,4 %**	31,2 %	26,8 %	1,6 %
Gr.II.	**55,8 %**	22,4 %	21,8 %	–
Gr.IV.	**42,5 %**	30,7 %	22,8 %	4 %
Gr.V.	**52,44 %**	45,12 %	2,44 %	–

The Russian language can also be included in this group although the gap between the quantity of lexical units of the feminine gender, on the one hand, and the lexis of the masculine and neuter genders, on the other hand, is less tangible:

Table 5. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the Russian language

	Feminine gender	Masculine gender	Neutral gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**34,6 %**	34 %	28,9 %	2,5 %
Gr.II.	**48 %**	18,5 %	33,5 %	–
Gr.III.	**42,2 %**	40,4 %	16,5 %	0,9 %
Gr.IV.	**42,5 %**	35,6 %	20,7 %	1,2 %
Gr.V.	**57,5 %**	41,1 %	1,4 %	–

3.2. The masculine profile of the language

The language has been defined as that having the masculine profile in case the greater part of the analyzed lexical units can be called **language signs enclosing the figure of masculinity in their gestalts**. The masculine profile is also presented in two basic manifestations: the dominant and latent kinds.

The dominant masculine profile shows itself on the material of Hebrew, as here the quantity of lexis of masculine gender exceeds 60% in the first, third and forth thematic groups, 55% in the second thematic group and 79% in the fifth thematic group:

Table 6. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in Hebrew

	Masculine gender	Feminine gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**63 %**	35,1 %	1,9 %
Gr.II.	**56,5 %**	43,5 %	–
Gr.III.	**64 %**	36 %	–
Gr.IV.	**62 %**	37 %	1 %
Gr.V.	**78,6 %**	21,4 %	–

The words of masculine gender also prevail in the three Romanic languages which have constituted the object of the analysis. In French, Spanish and Italian the lexis of the masculine gender predominates over the lexis of the feminine gender in all five subdivisions of the analyzed lexical units although the French language demonstrates a bit more convincing discrepancy in the quantity of lexical units of the masculine and feminine genders:

Table 7. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the French language

	Masculine gender	Feminine gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**61,1 %**	34,7 %	4,2 %
Gr.II.	46,9 %	52,6 %	0,5 %
Gr.III.	**60,2 %**	39,1 %	0,7 %
Gr.IV.	**57,4 %**	40,9 %	1,7 %
Gr.V.	**77,2 %**	22,8 %	–

Table 8. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the Spanish language

	Masculine gender	Feminine gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**57,1 %**	41,3 %	1,6 %
Gr.II.	45 %	54,5 %	0,5 %
Gr.III.	**59,5 %**	40,5 %	–
Gr.IV.	**57 %**	41,1 %	1,9 %
Gr.V.	**70,9 %**	27,8 %	1,3 %

Table 9. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the Italian language

	Masculine gender	Feminine gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**57,5 %**	41 %	1,5 %
Gr.II.	45,7 %	54,3 %	–
Gr.III.	**55,75 %**	44,25 %	–
Gr.IV.	**51,4 %**	45,7 %	2,9 %
Gr.V.	**72,9 %**	27,1 %	–

According to the total indices that display the general quantity of lexemes of the masculine and feminine genders in all five subdivisions, Hebrew, French, Spanish and Italian have a slightly different percentage of lexical units belonging to the masculine gender (the gap between the first and the fourth items of the rating is more than 10%). However, in all the four languages the quantity of these lexemes constitutes more than a half of the general body of analyzed lexical units:

The findings of the analysis also testify that the German language can be characterized as a language with a latent masculine profile for it shows the prevalence of the masculine gender words only in three thematic groups of lexis:

Table 10. The ratio of lexemes belonging to different grammatical genders in the German language

	Masculine gender	Feminine gender	Neutral gender	Plural
Gr.I.	**34,5 %**	32 %	32,5 %	1 %
Gr.III.	**49,2 %**	31,3 %	19,5 %	–
Gr.IV.	**40,4 %**	26,9 %	32,7 %	–

Finally, one should mention that the analysis has given an opportunity to reveal some rare instances of identical gender interpretation given to a certain object, phenomenon or notion in all the grammatical systems under discussion. Thus, for instance, the words *rhythm, sleep, sound, wit / intellect, beginning, end, ocean* belong to the masculine gender, and the words *music, soul, poetry, joy, freedom, wisdom, hope, revenge, enmity, earth* to the feminine gender in all the ten languages chosen for the comparative experiment. Obviously, it would be unreasonable to draw hasty conclusions on this account, nevertheless, such unanimity seems rather thought-provoking as for it testifies at least to the similarity of view taken by the representatives of different cultures on the above-listed notions in case of their personification.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this research are indicative of the discriminants in grammatical gender identification which exist in different languages in relation to the range of words denoting the central notions of five key thematic fields. According to the results of the comparative analysis carried out on the material of 10 languages one can single out two basic models of the gender profile of language – feminine and masculine – both of which have two subdivisions: the dominant and the latent kinds. The feminine gender profile of the dominant kind is found in the Ukrainian language, the feminine gender profile of the latent kind is represented in the Bulgarian, modern Greek and Polish languages. The masculine profile of the dominant kind manifests itself in Hebrew and the masculine profile of the latent kind in the French, Spanish and Italian languages. The German language that has the least pronounced prevalence of the words of masculine gender can be defined as a language with a mixed profile.

The obtained data have a direct bearing on the discrepancies in ethnospecific mapping of the world revealed by the corresponding linguocultural traditions.

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