Challenges and Distortions of Translating Grammatical Gender in Literary Texts
Julio Cortázar Translated into Various European Languages
Nissen, Uwe Kjær

Published in:
Bulletin of Hispanic Studies

Publication date:
2021

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

Go to publication entry in University of Southern Denmark's Research Portal

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark. Unless otherwise specified, it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

- You may download this work for personal use only.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version.

If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk
Challenges and distortions of translating grammatical gender in literary texts: Julio Cortázar translated into various European languages (Version 13.4.21)

Uwe Kjær Nisseg
Department of Language and Communication
University of Southern Denmark

Introduction
This article will present several translations of the short story Historia con migalas written in 1980 by the Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar (1914–1984) and published in the anthology Queremos tanto a Glenda y otros relatos. As one of the leading authors of Latin American literature, Cortázar’s works, as well as the short story in question, have been translated into numerous language; thus, his production constitutes a brilliant ground for cross-linguistic translation studies. With respect to Historia con migalas, translation from Cortázar’s mother tongue into other languages implies intriguing challenges, especially as Spanish possesses two grammatical genders, whereas other languages have either no grammatical gender or use different gender systems. As will be shown, most translators appear to lack a satisfactory understanding of this matter and, therefore, ignore the story’s gender theme so brilliantly showcased by the author. As book reviewers generally do not review foreign literature in the original language, but instead, use translated editions, wrong or inept translations may result in poor reviews being written on false grounds, inasmuch as they distort the full meaning of the original text.

1 According to wikipedia, migala corresponds to the spider Avicularia avicularia, sometimes called the ‘pinktoe tarantula’. It is a species of tarantula native from Costa Rica to Brazil and the southern Caribbean.
2 The idea to embark on this comparative analysis of various translations of Cortázar’s short story stems from footnote 4 in Mey (1991).
3 Translational problems concerning languages that possess grammatical gender and languages that only possess semantic gender have been treated in a number of studies, among others Jacobson (1959), Martín Ruano (2006) and Nissen (2002a).
Grammatical and semantic gender

Because Spanish is a typical grammatical gender language\(^4\) (i.e. adjectives, articles, and pronouns agree with the noun classes ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’), writers are generally constantly obliged to mark gender in relation to whether the person referred to is a female or a male, e.g. *Mi madre es ingeniera* vs. *Mi padre es ingeniero*\(^5\). Furthermore, as is well known, personal pronouns in the third-person singular and plural as well as in the first- and second-person plural distinguish gender: *ella/él, ellas/ellos, nosotras/nosotros* and *vosotras/vosotros*. However, as Spanish verbs are morphologically marked for the three grammatical persons, these pronouns are generally omitted (as e.g. in *Lleva una falda roja* and *Llevamos una falda roja*). In theory, this omission would facilitate gender neutral references when the referent is not explicitly specified, but this is not the case, as almost all predicative constructions are marked for gender and thus reveal whether the referent is feminine or masculine. This holds both for nouns as e.g. *Es profesora* vs. *Es profesor* and for adjectives as e.g. *Es alta* vs. *Es alto*. The same is true for the plural\(^6\). Altogether, grammatical gender is such an intrinsic part of Spanish that it is extremely difficult to avoid explicit references as to the gender of the person(s) involved\(^7\). Yet, it should be added that a few nouns and adjectives are invariable in form which does make gender-neutral references possible: *Es periodista, Es feliz*.

**Historia con migalas**

In the short story *Historia con migalas*, Julio Cortázar narrates the efforts of a couple (probably European) to escape from certain awful recent happenings near the Dutch

---

\(^4\) For gender marking in a variety of European languages, see the exhaustive treatment by Doleschal (2015). Specifically, for Spanish and French see Schwarze (2009) or any grammar book on Spanish, for example the comprehensive two volumes edition by the Spanish Academy (Real Academia, 2009).

\(^5\) In many cases, this holds for domestic animals as well.

\(^6\) As in most languages, the masculine form can refer generically to both women and men, but this (much debated) matter is not at stake here. Cp. Footnote 10.

\(^7\) For a thorough treatment of grammatical and semantic gender in Spanish, see Nissen (2002b).
city of Delft. In order to try to forget the horrible events of the past (that are hinted at, but never entirely revealed), the couple have rented one half of a bungalow on a remote Caribbean island. Although only very few tourists are around, in the adjoining wing of the bungalow the couple can hear two American female voices murmuring, probably belonging to ‘secretaries or elementary school teachers from Detroit, from Nebraska’ (p. 19⁸). The couple have come to the island to find peace and to live in isolation, but they cannot stop listening to – in a kind of voyeuristic manner – what the people in the other part of the bungalow are up to, especially when for a brief moment the voices become audible; and here, the (implied) narrator comments that the interesting thing ‘wasn’t the meaning […] in that exchange of words […], but that one of the voices was that of a man.’ (p. 21). The man’s presence in the other half of the bungalow gradually becomes an obsession for the couple: ‘And there’s no man’s voice, even if it were speaking softly’ (p. 22) and ‘we’re not disconcerted too much by the short, dry cough, […] its tone unmistakably masculine’ (p. 28).

As soon as they become aware of this fact, the couple’s peace of mind is gone. The presence of the male voice at the other side of the wall makes the couple remember the past horrors and delights from which they had fled and the reader soon envisions the couple as two spiders that, predator-like, are waiting to attack. When the girls on the other side of the wall have abandoned their room to end their holiday, the couple – on hearing once more the masculine voice – resume their habit of doing mysterious things they apparently had done months before at ‘Delft’ and which had made them flee to the island. All of this is only made clear to the reader by means of a few disturbing hints to the past events, e.g.: ‘it doesn’t affect us to think about Michael, about the well’ (p. 21) or ‘Michael was fleeing in the moonlight […] so white and naked’ (p. 23). Without looking at each other, almost in a zombie-like way, the couple cross the fence that separates the two wings of the bungalow and enter the

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, all translations derive from the English version (Cortázar 1984).
other room where the unknown man is to be found. We are not told what exactly will happen then, but we are led to assume that something dreadful and gruesome is about to take place.

Until this final moment, the reader is unaware of the identity of the couple. No clue is provided as to their professional background, their age, their marital status or their gender, and it is only in the last paragraph of the story that the reader finally learns - indirectly be means of a subtle use of Spanish morphology and syntax - that the couple in fact consists of two women.

Cortázar very skilfully lets us believe - by means of exploiting our normal, stereotypical imagination as to the gender of the protagonists - that the couple consists of a man and a woman. Cortázar avoids describing the couple’s appearance and provides no hint as to a specific gender-related behaviour. On the contrary, Cortázar takes pains to describe the couple’s actions, imaginations and recollections in the plural and we never learn of particular actions or thoughts that could facilitate a gendered reading, e.g.: Llegamos a las dos de la tarde al bungalow (p. 29), Dormimos interminablemente, cosa rara (p. 30), Nos contamos los sueños (p. 32), ... no nos afecta pensar en Michael (p. 31), ... nos preguntamos otra vez por el abandono de los bungalows (p. 37), ... complicamos a propósito las cosas más simples (p. 39), ... no podemos mentirnos (p. 40), ... fingimos dormir (p. 41).

Thus, the revelation of their gender at the end implies a total re-reading and re-analysis of the story: from the moment of revelation, other female references in the story may begin to be seen in a new light. Thus, throughout the story the feminine word for another sneaking predatory animal, namely gata is used four times, whereas the usual generic masculine term, gato, is mentioned only once⁹. And now, all of a sudden, the feminine (but semantically sex-neutral) plural word migalas in the title

---

⁹ However, Mey (1991, footnote 5) suggests other attributes to the feminine gender. For an interesting analysis of other animals mentioned in the story, see Geisdorfer Feal (2000:245-46).
fits brilliantly into the plot – and naturally does so, even more than if the couple had been a woman and a man. Furthermore, the two women occupying the other side of the bungalow could suddenly be regarded as be-a-likes with respect to the protagonist couple: not only are the girls’ whereabouts, too, to a large extent shrouded in mystery, but they also relate to one man only, just as the couple’s earlier ‘prey’ had done in ‘Delft’: ‘the girls’ visitor has come back, just like Michael’ (p. 28).

**How to veil and unveil references of gender**

Cortázar’s conscious and painstaking avoidance of all morphological references to gender traps the reader to stereotypically assume that the couple consists of a woman and a man. In the first place, he chooses the first-person plural form as the voice of the narrator. Although in Spanish, subject pronouns (as we have seen in section 2) do show grammatical gender, it is only due to their usual omission that the de-sexed composition of the story is at all possible\(^\text{10}\). Secondly, Cortázar constraints himself to entirely excluding all predicative constructions; in fact, only one single one slips through his self-chosen limitations, but in this case he deliberately chooses a gender-wise invariable adjective (*incapaz*) whose ending is not marked for male vs. female: *Dejamos irse las horas [...]*, *incapaces de otra cosa* (p. 31).

It is only in the story’s very last paragraph that Cortázar reveals that the couple consists of two women:

…desnudas vamos hacia la puerta y salimos al jardín. (p. 42)

The last sentence of the *Historia con migalas* is even more explicit:

No hay luz adentro cuando nos entramos juntas: es la primera vez en mucho tiempo que nos apoyamos la una en la otra para andar. (p. 42)

\(^{10}\) In case the subject pronoun were obligatory, Cortázar would have been obliged to choose between either *nosotros* or *nosotras*. *Nosotros* refers either generically to both women and men or to men alone, and, in this case, it would have been impossible at the end of the story to switch to a pure female reference. By using *nosotras*, the author would have revealed the couple’s sex from the very beginning, and no suspense, or surprise at the end, would have been possible to achieve.
Thus, the last paragraph shows no less than six grammatical references to the sex of the narrator-couple (*desnudas, juntas, la, una, la, otra*) and as these are the only references in the entire history as to the sex of the couple, they play a pivotal role\(^{11}\). The six markings of grammatical gender - and *ipso facto* the revealing of the couple’s sexual identity – are, therefore, indispensable features of which a translator not only must be aware, but she/he must also find a suitable solution in the target language.

**Different translations\(^{12}\)**

Cortázar’s deliberate construction of the veiling and unveiling of the protagonist couple’s sexual identity will now be analyzed with respect to the story’s different translations into other European languages. All the languages treated below have in common that the first-person plural does not mark grammatical person and - as practically all predicative constructions had been omitted in the source text - the issue of hiding the gender of the couple does not constitute a translation problem in any of the following languages\(^{13}\). The unveiling of the couple’s gender, on the contrary, entails severe difficulties.

For ease of reading, I repeat the two ending passages of the original text:

…the desnudas vamos hacia la puerta y salimos al jardín. (p. 42)
No hay luz adentro cuando entramos juntas; es la primera vez en mucho tiempo que nos apoyamos *la una en la otra* para andar. (p. 42; italics added)

\(^{11}\) Gondouin interestingly combines this linguistic observation with the story’s erotic and threatening effect:” [...] la pareja no sólo revela su desnudez y su identidad de mujer —el adjetivo “desnudas” es el primer elemento gramatical que indique su género— sino que libera su potencial erótico y amenazante.” (2019: 88)

\(^{12}\) Apart from limitations of space, the choice of languages has been constrained partly by the inexistence of translations into other European languages (e.g. no translations were available for Catalan, Danish or Finnish), partly due to the inability of this author to read other languages than the ones presented in this article. However, readers of Slavic languages may refer to e.g. the Russian version: Мы так любим Гленду (Cortázar 2010).

\(^{13}\) Stanco (s.d.:9) demonstrates that the reversed process appears to be more complex. The author lists various translation strategies with respect to how gender-neutral references in English can be maintained when they are translated into a grammatical gender marking language like Italian.
The English version, translated by Gregory Rabassa, is as follows. As in the copied original text, the crucial words are in italics:

… naked, we go toward the door and out into the garden. (p. 28)
There’s no light inside when we go in together; it’s the first time in a long while that we lean on each other in order to walk. (p. 29)

As English does not mark gender in predicative constructions and as no alternative solutions are supplied, the reader is not informed of the gender of the couple. Therefore, it is most likely that an English reader will continue to think stereotypically of the couple as a woman and a man and, therefore, finds no reason at the end to reinterpret the entire story. As a matter of fact, by not revealing that the couple consists of two women, Rabassa’s English version entirely skips the issue of gender/sex.

Surprisingly, neither do the translations into German or Swedish give any clues as to the sex of the couple:

… nackt gehen wir zur Tür und in den Garten. (p. 33)
Es ist kein Licht im Innern, als wir zusammen hineingehen; zum ersten Mal nach langer Zeit stützen wir uns gegenseitig. (p. 33)

… naked we go to the door and into the garden.
There is no light inside when we go in together; for the first time after a long while we support each other.

… nakna går vi till dörren och ut i trädgården. (p. 172)
Det finns inte något ljus därinne när vi kommer in tillsammans; det är första gången på mycket länge som vi stöder oss på varandra för att kunna gå. (p. 173)

… naked we go to the door and out into the garden.
There is no light in there when we come in together; it is the first time in a very long while that we lean on each other to be able to walk.

Like English, neither German nor Swedish mark predicative constructions for gender and, again, as no other solutions are proposed, also in these two cases the issue of gender/sex is skipped entirely. Since the crucial words in German and Swedish are translated in exactly the same way as they are in the English version, one
could be left with the impression that the German and Swedish translations were translated from the English text; however, in both cases the editorial prefaces state that the texts were translated directly from the original Spanish.

The following translations into four Romance languages (Italian, French, Portuguese and Romanian) do not ignore Cortázar’s linguistic efforts. The Italian and Portuguese translations follow the original Spanish text almost word by word:

… _nude_ andiamo verso la porta e usciamo in giardino. (p. 30)
Non c’è luce dentro quando entriamo _insieme_; è la prima volta
in tanto tempo che ci appoggiamo _l’una all’altra_ per camminare. (p. 30)
[… _naked_ [fem.] we go to the door and out into the garden.
There is no light inside when we enter _together_ [fem.]; it is the first time
in so long that we lean _the one_ [fem.] on _the other_ [fem.] to walk.]

… _dirigimo-nos despidas_ para a porta e saímos para o jardim. (p.30)
Não há luz lá dentro quando entramos _juntas_; é a primeira vez em
muito tempo que nos apoiamos _uma na outra_ para andar. (p.30)
[… we go naked [fem.] to the door and go out into the garden.
There is no light inside when we enter _together_ [fem.]; it's the first time in a long time
that we lean the one [fem.] on the other [fem.] to walk.]

As in the source text, all three occurrences (for Italian: _nude, insieme_ and _l’una all’altra_ and for Portuguese: _despidas, juntas_ and _uma na outra_) are marked for the feminine gender and, thus, the Italian and Portuguese texts accurately echo the original.

With respect to the translations into French and Romanian, a slight change occurs, as gender is marked only in two places, respectively _nues_ and _goale_ (‘naked’) and _enlacées_ and _înlănțuite_ (‘embraced’); by contrast, both _ensemble_ and _împreună_ (‘together’) are invariable adverbs. However, there is no doubt that the two markings are sufficient to alter the stereotypical interpretation as to the gender of the couple:

… _nues_ nous allons vers la porte et sortons dans le jardin. (p. 44)
Il n’y a pas de lumière à l’intérieur lorsque nous entrons ensemble; pour la première fois depuis longtemps nous avançons, enlacées. (p.44)

[…naked [fem.] we go to the door and out into the garden.
There is no light inside when we walk in together; for the first time in a long while we move forward, entwined [fem.].]

… goale ne îndreptăm spre ușă și ieşim în grădină. (p. 115)
Când intrăm împreună, vedem că înăuntru nu-i lumină; pentru prima oară, după mult timp, înaintăm înlănțuite. (p. 115)

[…naked [fem.] we go to the door and out into the garden.
When we enter together, we see that there is no light inside; for the first time after a long while, we move forward entwined [fem.].]

As Italian, French, Portuguese and Romanian possess grammatical gender systems that are very much like that of Spanish, it would be tempting, as a result of the analysis, to conclude that the translators’ task was facilitated by the marking of gender being such an intrinsic part of the structure of these languages that a translator almost automatically would be aware of, and unable to ignore this issue. Furthermore, one might assume – keeping in mind the observation above that the Germanic languages in question (English, German and Swedish) are not ‘suited’ for marking of gender in predicative constructions – that the translators had no other choice but to skip the issue. Nevertheless, as our last example from another Germanic language will show, this assumption is easily gainsaid. The Dutch translation below shows how a skillful and observant translator indeed manages to find a solution and, therefore, the issue at stake here is not a question of language typology:

… naakt lopen we naar de deur en gaan de tuin in. (p. 34)
Er brandt geen lamp als we samen naar binnen gaan; voor eerst in lange tijd ondersteunen we elkaar bij het lopen, zij mij en ik haar. (p. 34)

[… naked we walk to the door and go into the garden.
There is no lamp when we enter together; for the first time in a long while we support each other in walking, she me and I her]

14 I am grateful to Gerhard Boysen for his comments on the Romanian translation.
Although neither Dutch does mark gender in predicative constructions - *naakt* (‘naked’) and *samen* (‘together’) are invariable as to gender -, the very last line unveils the gender of the couple by introducing two personal pronouns that refer explicitly to the gender of the persons involved: ‘(lit.:) … we support each other in walking, *she* me and I *her* ’. Apart from correctly dealing with Cortázar’s gender game, the Dutch translator skillfully allows the suspense to be maintained even longer than does the source text: in the original, the revelation occurs in the last two paragraphs, while the Dutch translation does not let it happen until the very last line. It is easy to assume that Cortázar would have approved of this solution.15

**The translators**

An astonishing aspect of the failed translations is the fact that both the English and the German translations are due to very experienced professionals16. The translator of the English version, Gregory Rabassa, was born and raised in the United States, but for most of his life worked to translate various famous Latin American writers. Proof of his undeniable competence (and his close relationship to Cortázar) is an anecdote telling us that on the advice of Cortázar, the Nobel prize winner Gabriel García Márquez had to wait three years before Rabassa put Márquez’s monumental *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on his schedule. The translation was widely acclaimed and García Márquez later declared Rabassa's version to be superior to the Spanish original17. Rabassa’s great contribution towards making Spanish and Portuguese

---

15 It should perhaps be pointed out that very similar solutions easily could have been achieved in the other Germanic languages considered here, i.e. English, German and Swedish.
16 Unfortunately, apart from the name I do not have any information as to the Swedish translator. According to the Swedish Royal Library, these Cortázar short stories are the only translations made by Henrik Broby (unless he has used other names). Interestingly, *Historia con migalas* has been published twice in Sweden. The first translation by Henrik Broby stems from 1982 and is the one used in this article (Cortázar 1982). The second translation appeared in *Samlade noveller* (‘Collected works’) where Knuth Ahnlund is credited for being the translator (Cortázar 2012: 640) although both translations are totally identical. After having corresponded with the publisher, Modernista, it turned out that it should have been Henrik Broby in the latter case, too; a mistake that, according to the publisher, will be corrected in a future edition.
17 See Wikipedia.
literature accessible to English readers, is also recognized in a homage by Galván (2007). Rabassa died in 2016.

Also, the German translator, Rudolf Wittkopf, had a long-standing experience with translation and also wrote poems himself. He first translated from English and French, but later mainly from Spanish. He was the main German translator of works by Julio Cortázar, Octavio Paz and Federico Lorca. In 1984, Wittkopf received the Translator’s Prize from the Spanish Ministry of Culture, and posthumously the Translator’s Prize of Literature from the Spanish Embassy in Germany¹⁸. He died in 1997.

Both translators being deceased, it is not possible to figure out what led them to translate the story in question the way they did and, therefore, it remains a mystery how the couple’s gender that Cortázar so meticulously had tried to hide until the very last moment, could have been prematurely ‘outed’. Cast doubt on these translators’ linguistic competence with respect to Spanish seems of course meaningless. Nevertheless, neglecting the crux of the story brings to one’s mind the famous Italian saying about translators and their work: traduttore, tradittore.

Interpretation and reception
An interesting aspect to pursue relates to the question how the mistranslated stories actually are perceived by the reader. A glance on some reviews may give us some evidence as to the reception of the book *We love Glenda so much and other tales*, and, specifically, of the *Story with spiders*.

One review, published in the *New Statesman*, while commenting on quite a few of the other short stories in the Cortázar collection, does not mention *Story with spiders* at all. However, in her conclusion this reviewer states that: ‘the stories in *We Love Glenda So Much* play with such explaining-and-containing devices as music,

¹⁸ See Wikipedia.
painting, the cinema; or, less predictably, graffiti …’ (Gilbert, 1984:28). It is not too far-fetched to assume that this reviewer, had she been aware of Cortázar’s ‘gender game’ in *Story with spiders*, definitely would have included ‘gender’ in her enumeration.

Another review, published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, proceeds in a similar way: some other short stories are considered, but no reference is made to *Story with spiders*. Recapitulating, the reviewer acknowledges that ‘*We love Glenda So Much* shows him [= Cortázar, UKN] still in fine form, intelligently provoking new ways of reading and seeing’ (Rankin, 1984:70). Also, in this case, as is clear from his remark on ‘new ways of reading’, had the reviewer been aware of the revelation at the end, he would probably have drawn attention to the gender issue in *Story with spiders*.

Also, a third reviewer comments on most of the short stories of the book but does not mention *Story with spiders* at all. Concluding, he emphasizes Cortázar’s writing style: ‘He likes to play tricks with time, space reality, illusion.’ (Kearns, 1983:558), but although he focusses upon Cortázar’s ability to ‘play tricks’, once more, no reference is supplied as to the evident ‘gender trick’ played in *Story with spiders*.

Only one reviewer specifically considers *Story with Spiders* (Zweig, 1983). However, as can be seen from his review, he focusses on the dreadfulness that happens throughout the story:

In "Story with Spiders," a couple arrive at a deserted resort in the Caribbean to recuperate from some undisclosed personal difficulties. Two young girls move into the adjoining bungalow, and the couple spend their nights sitting in the dark, listening to every sound the girls make, meditating on their self-contained gaiety, wondering occasionally if they hear a man's voice mingled with theirs through the wall. As nights pass, the couple come to see themselves as a pair of
lurking spiders, slightly evil creatures in their web of obsession. As in all of these stories, there is a fringe of uncertainty as to what is actually happening, as if narratable events could not entirely penetrate Cortazar’s intensely inward universe. (Zweig, 1983:1)

There is no indication that this reviewer is even considering the gender of the couple as problematic or interesting; again, the gender play is skipped, because not perceived.

For sake of comparison a French and two Portuguese reviews will serve. As the French version is translated correctly, the reviewer does not hesitate to focus upon Cortázar’s gender play by choosing the first-person plural as the morphological hiding place:

… mais l'intéressant, c'est que le fantastique s'y établit toujours par des techniques différentes: fondé tantôt sur le jeu des personnes grammaticales («Histoire avec des mygales», «Graffitti») (Ricard 1983: 105-06, my emphasis)

Also a Portuguese reviewer is aware of Cortázar’s twisting the reader’s expectations at the end of the short story to create an artful ‘puzzle’:

Cortázar brinca com o leitor, diverte-se a questioná-lo, coloca-lhe puzzles à frente e desafia-o a resolvê-los. […] História com Aranhas começa com um simples e aparentemente inofensivo relato dos dias de férias de duas pessoas que têm como vizinhas no seu bungalow duas jovens. Há desde o início uma grande tensão sexual, mas nunca há um contacto efectivo, há noites passadas na escuridão a ouvir barulhos, há a espera de um sinal, memórias de acontecimentos passados não muito claros. E no final… uma surpresa. Um desafio à percepção. (Unknown, 2014, my emphasis)

Despite the fact, that revealing the gender of the couple is achieved only by means of subtle references at the end of the story, readers of Spanish do not have quarrels with respect to the interpretation. Thus, in a literary analysis of the short story, Gondouin observes:
La voz homodiegetica que narra el relato tiene la originalidad de ser un “nosotros”, que sólo se revelará ser un “nosotras” en las últimas líneas del cuento. (Gondouin, 2019: 86)

and, similarly, a Spanish reader in a blog offers this impression:

Lo que sí fue sorprendente para mí es que los protagonistas voyeur fueran dos chicas; claro, uno está pendiente todo el rato de las dos chicas a las que los voyeur miran que uno no se plantea que no sean un matrimonio. (LibroAdictos 2004)

Interesting is also the fact that an entire section in a book on queer theory deals with *Story with spiders*. The author concludes:

Cortázar’s lesbian subjects in “Historia con migalas” represent two extremes: the midwestern schoolteacher types, seemingly innocuous and ordinary, and the vampire spiderwomen to whom the “we” of the story corresponds. (Geisdorfer Feal 2000: 245)

Naturally, having read the Spanish original, the reviewer is in no doubt as to the gender of the couple.

To delve further into the consequences of the mistranslations, I had altogether six native speakers (family members and friends) read the English, German, and Swedish versions without telling them, naturally, about the ‘revelation’ at the end. Afterwards, I asked them to apply first names to the two members of the couple. All but one informant came up with one female and one male name, in accordance with the stereotypical thinking of what ‘a couple’ traditionally consists of. This small test (which obviously should be extended to more persons in order to establish a broader perceptual basis) shows, nevertheless - as did the reviews quoted above - that the

---

19 Neither is Nestor Ponce, but he rightly points out that we never learn about the exact sentimental relation between the two women: “No sabemos si las mujeres son amantes, pero sí que tienen un pacto de sangre y de silencio que les permite avanzar inexorablemente a la caza de víctimas. Son cómplices en el sentido delictivo de la palabra.” (2020:91).
translations failed to convey Cortázar’s intended ‘gender game’ and, hence, the deeper implications of the story.

**Conclusion**

Cortázar’s short story *Historia con migalas* shows how the category of grammatical gender and the stereotypical expectations as to the gender of the protagonists represent entwined aspects of grammar and culture.

The translations into a number of European languages, referred to above, demonstrate that Cortázar’s deliberate veiling and unveiling of the protagonist couple’s gender – which is achieved by skilfully exploiting the structure of the Spanish language – is not in all cases perceived by the translators. Their first - and easily achievable - task was to avoid any gender reference and, by means of this procedure, keep the ambiguity as to the couple’s gender alive throughout the story – almost until the very end. Their pivotal challenge was how to translate the crucial revelation - which in the Spanish original is achieved by means of predicative constructions and pronouns that mark gender - into a language that does not mark gender in the same way. As has been shown in the case of the Dutch translation, the success or failure of such translations is not a question of whether the target language possesses grammatical or pronominal gender. On the contrary, as the translation into Dutch shows, problems with respect to different gender marking systems may be solved by means of creative solutions. Surprisingly, too, the analysis has shown that even experienced translators may fail to notice certain of the decisive morphological and syntactical features that are so engrained in the Spanish language and exploited with such persuasive effects by the author.

A number of reviews of the collection *We love Glenda so much*, in which *Story with spiders* was published, reveal furthermore that the reviewers apparently were not aware of Cortázar’s gender play and, therefore, failed to acknowledge his skilful attempt to play with the stereotypical gender mindset of the readership.
Consequently, as the subtle linguistic aspects that contribute to suspense and surprise are neglected, such translated versions do not appear as fascinating to the readers and reviewers as the original would have been. Furthermore, interesting interpretations like the one put forward by Gondouin: “¿no se podría proponer una lectura paralela del cuento, en la que las muchachas del “otro lado” no son sino la conciencia de las narradoras?” (2019: 87) are not likely to be possible.

No doubt therefore that Cortázar’s *Historia con migalas* calls for new translations into English, German and Swedish.

A final warning: Mistranslations of this kind underpin once more the importance of translating from the original text, rather than relying on ‘relay translations’ in which the target text is translated from another language (typically English20) into which the original text had earlier been translated; this seems to the case even for translators with many years of experience.

**Works cited**


---

20 This issue has already been raised in Dollerup’s (1999) detailed investigation of translations of Grimm’s fairy tales.


Gilbert, Harriet. 1984, We love Glenda so much and other tales (Book review) New Statesman, 13 January, pp. 28-29.


