



2024 Ina-PrA Congress and 1st Ina-PrA International Conference:
Pragmatics and Language Use: Locally elaborated, globally connected.
Vol.01, No.01, 2024: December: 31-43

Gender Bias in Translation: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Sexist Language from NET Bible into the Tok Pisin Translation of the New Testament

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Abstract

This paper examines the presence and portrayal of sexist language in translating the New Testament from the New English Translation (NET) Bible to the Tok Pisin Buk Baibel, focusing on the socio-cultural implications of language. Using a sociolinguistic lens, it explores how gender biases are represented, amplified, or reduced in translation, especially in linguistic elements like generic nouns, pronouns, derivational forms, and parallel structures. Through qualitative analysis, the study identifies instances of gender-neutral terms in the NET Bible and assesses the translation strategies applied to gendered terms in the Tok Pisin Bible. It also explores shifts in gendered expressions between the source and target texts, evaluating the Tok Pisin translation for accuracy, acceptability, and readability. The findings reveal how translation choices can reinforce or counteract gender biases, affecting the portrayal of gender roles within the religious text. This highlights how socio-cultural factors influence translation decisions, impacting the interpretation of biblical messages and broader perceptions of gender in religious contexts. By examining these translation patterns, the study contributes to discussions on gender sensitivity in religious and literary translations and emphasizes the importance of addressing gendered language with cultural awareness. Overall, this research underscores translation as a culturally embedded process, illustrating the significant role of language in shaping societal views on gender within a socio-religious framework.

Keywords: *gender bias, gender neutral terms, bible translation, tok pisin, translation quality assessment*

INTRODUCTION

The study of religious texts has long been intertwined with cultural and social discourses, including those on gender, identity, and power. The translation of religious

texts is a significant domain where linguistic and cultural ideologies merge, impacting how audiences perceive spiritual and moral messages. In recent years, sociolinguistic and translation studies scholars have increasingly turned their attention to gender bias in religious translations, highlighting the subtle ways in which translation choices influence gendered perceptions within socio-religious contexts (Baker, 2018; Simon & Schouten, 2020). Mills (2008) critically examines how language, including pronouns, is implicated in maintaining and reproducing gender inequalities. Her work provides a foundational analysis of sexist language, particularly in how linguistic choices (e.g., pronouns) can reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. For example, the translation of pronouns, nouns, and other linguistic structures often serves as a conduit for transmitting implicit cultural norms regarding gender. This study examines the neutral gender pronouns and nouns through an analysis of the New Testament, translated from the New English Translation (NET) Bible into the Tok Pisin Buk Baibel, focusing on how gendered language is portrayed and the broader socio-cultural implications these portrayals entail.

The Tok Pisin translation of the Bible offers a unique opportunity to investigate how gendered language operates across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Tok Pisin, a creole language spoken in Papua New Guinea, inherently reflects the social norms and values of its speakers, who are embedded in a cultural context where gender roles have traditionally been well-defined yet are increasingly influenced by globalization and shifting social expectations (Mihalic, 2008; Dutton, 2016). Translation into Tok Pisin thus serves as an insightful case study to understand how gendered language interacts with a culture-specific worldview. Importantly, this study does not merely critique the translation for any gender biases it may reflect but also situates its findings within the broader scholarly conversation on translation as a practice that is fundamentally shaped by socio-cultural factors, including those related to gender (Hatim & Mason, 2014).

In translation studies, the notion of “faithfulness” to the original text has traditionally guided translation practices, often with less regard for the socio-cultural distinctions that shape meaning. Recent theoretical advances, however, argue that translations cannot be “neutral” because linguistic choices inevitably carry ideological and cultural weight (Venuti, 2017). Religious translations, therefore, are particularly prone to reflect embedded gender norms, consciously or unconsciously (Fawcett, 2013; Pym, 2014). Scholars have underscored that translations are interpretive acts, as the translator must choose terms that not only convey semantic meaning but also align with or resist cultural norms within the target language (Spivak, 1993). This research builds on these insights, examining how gendered expressions in the New Testament are either

preserved or adapted in the Tok Pisin translation, revealing shifts that may either reinforce or subvert traditional gender norms. It aims to highlight the socio-cultural dynamics of translation and expand the understanding of gender in translation studies, especially within religious texts where gender roles are often deeply embedded.

Despite the perspective of the modern Bible translation towards gender Bible as seen in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New International Version (NIV) New English translation that adopts gender-inclusive language, some remain faithful to the practice of patriarchal standard in translation. This further reinforces the critiques of translation practices, as evidenced by the studies of Marlowe (2001), Scholz (2017), and Perry (2019). The translation of sexist language in religious texts, particularly the Bible, into indigenous or Creole languages like Tok Pisin has received limited attention in academic research. Although linguistic studies have explored sexism in translation more broadly Santaemilia (2018), few have investigated its influence on the sociolinguistic and cultural contexts of postcolonial societies, such as Papua New Guinea. This lack of research is notable, as Tok Pisin—shaped by colonial encounters—has unique gendered linguistic features that can either reinforce or challenge patriarchal elements present in the original biblical texts. Translators must balance the demands of accurately conveying biblical content with addressing culturally specific perceptions of gender roles, which are deeply rooted in local traditions and social structures (Gordon, 2002; Grudem, 2000). Consequently, without critical attention, translations risk perpetuating gender biases and reinforcing inequality in societies where religion and tradition are closely linked.

Recent trends in Bible translation show an increasing emphasis on gender-neutral and inclusive language to reduce sexism (Haddox, 2020). For instance, versions like the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue) use inclusive language to align with modern perspectives on gender equity. However, replicating such approaches in Creole or indigenous languages, such as Tok Pisin, requires an understanding of the linguistic and cultural intricacies unique to these languages. Scholars highlight the importance of incorporating sociolinguistic research into translation practices to ensure both accuracy and cultural sensitivity (Beavis, 2013). Future studies could investigate comparative translation strategies, explore shifts in gendered language use, and assess the societal implications of these changes. Such research would not only enhance the field of Bible translation but also contribute to the broader goal of fostering gender inclusivity in religious and cultural texts.

The prevalence of sexist language remains a critical issue, with most research concentrating on translations within European languages, which limits the exploration of

how gender is represented and addressed in translations for non-Western audiences (Chamberlain, 1988; Simon, 1996). Furthermore, while numerous studies address sexist language in religious texts, these have primarily focused on gendered language within the source text itself rather than examining how translation can perpetuate, transform, or resist these biases (Grudem, 2000, Emerick 2011; Poythress, 2016 in Liu, 2022).

This research seeks to bridge this gap by exploring gendered language in the Tok Pisin Buk Baibel, offering insights into how the act of translating gender-biased texts for a non-Western, creole-speaking audience might alter traditional gender portrayals. By examining a religious text within this socio-linguistic and socio-cultural framework, this study not only contributes to the literature on translation and gender but also expands the field's understanding of how indigenous languages mediate cultural and ideological exchanges in global religious contexts.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its sociolinguistic approach to assessing sexist language in translation, providing a model for understanding how cultural and linguistic ideologies intersect in religious texts. By focusing on the interplay between language and gender, this study aligns with recent trends in sociolinguistics that recognize translation as a site for both cultural transmission and ideological negotiation (Fairclough, 2015). Moreover, it employs qualitative methods to identify patterns in the translation of gendered terms, including generic nouns, pronouns, and derivational forms. This approach, combined with a focus on readability, accuracy, and acceptability, will shed light on how translation decisions shape and are shaped by socio-cultural understandings of gender in Papua New Guinea.

RESEARCH METHOD

This descriptive qualitative study investigates the presence and treatment of sexist language in the Tok Pisin translation of the New Testament, focusing on how gendered expressions are represented and modified during translation. It specifically examines how neutral gender terms in the New English Translation (NET) Bible are managed by translators in the Tok Pisin Buk Baibel. The research methodology ensures a rigorous and systematic analysis of gender bias in religious translation, considering sociolinguistic and cultural contexts. To achieve this, the study employs document analysis and focus group discussions (FGDs) with experts in sociolinguistics, translation studies, and Tok Pisin to validate findings.

The data collection process involves a multi-phase approach, starting with document analysis to identify neutral gender terms and their translated equivalents, tracing

potential shifts in meaning or bias. FGDs provide a platform for experts to critique and validate findings, offering insights into translation strategies, cultural influences, and linguistic nuances. The study adopts the translation techniques framework of Molina and Albir (2002), which categorizes strategies used to navigate linguistic and cultural complexities. This framework is complemented by Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence theory, which emphasizes meaning over literal structure, and Venuti's (2017) perspective on making translations accessible to the target audience. Evaluating the translation in terms of accuracy, acceptability, and readability ensures a balanced analysis of linguistic precision and cultural adaptation.

The Tok Pisin Buk Baibel serves as the primary data source, with the study focusing on its New Testament translation from the NET Bible. By analyzing this text, the research aims to uncover insights into how gendered language is addressed, particularly in pronouns and generic terms, within the socio-cultural context of Tok Pisin speakers. Data collection is conducted through document analysis and FGDs, following Grbich's methodology (in Santoso, 2021) for identifying and categorizing sexist language elements such as generic nouns, pronouns, derivational terms, and parallel structures. FGDs, as structured by Krueger and Casey (2015) and Santoso (2017), engage translation experts and Tok Pisin speakers to explore linguistic and cultural nuances, as well as shifts in gender representation due to translation and socio-cultural constraints.

For data analysis, the study employs qualitative thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns related to gendered language in translation. Each identified instance of sexist language is assessed for its alignment with Tok Pisin cultural norms and its adherence or deviation from the original NET Bible. Thematic coding of FGD transcripts captures expert insights on translation practices and socio-cultural influences, helping to determine whether translation choices reinforce, alter, or mitigate gender biases. To assess translation quality, Nababan et al.'s (2012) criteria—accuracy, acceptability, and readability—are applied, evaluating whether the translation maintains the original text's intent while adhering to Tok Pisin norms and promoting gender sensitivity.

In summary, this study integrates document analysis, FGDs, and systematic evaluation techniques to provide a comprehensive analysis of sexist language in the Tok Pisin Bible translation. By incorporating frameworks from Molina and Albir (2002), Nida (1964), and Nababan et al. (2012), the research ensures a methodologically robust examination of gender representation in religious texts. This approach highlights the complex interplay between linguistic precision, cultural adaptation, and theological fidelity in the translation of gendered expressions.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of English gender-neutral pronouns and their corresponding translations in Tok Pisin. The English terms include "whoever," "slaves," and "the stranger." In Tok Pisin, these are rendered as "ol man," "ol wokboi," respectively. The translation techniques employed involve particularization and aim to adopt Tok Pisin's linguistic structures and cultural context. Notably, shifts occur in the translation process into Tok Pisin reflecting Tok Pisin's approach to patriarchal standards. The quality of these translations is assessed based on accuracy, naturalness, and clarity, ensuring that the intended meaning is effectively conveyed to the Tok Pisin-speaking audience as seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Componential Analysis

Data No.	Source Language	Target Language	Translation Techniques	Translation Shift				Translation Quality Assessment								
				F		M		ACR			ACT			RD		
				S	NT	S	NS	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1
001	Follower	<i>Man i bihainnim mi</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
002	Everyone	<i>Olgeta man</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
003	Those	<i>Man</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
004	The lost	<i>Man i lus</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
005	Children of God	<i>Ol pikinini bilong God</i>	Established Eq	√		√			2		3			3		
006	Slaves	<i>Wokboi</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
007	Any	<i>Sampela man</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
008	The disobedient	<i>Ol man bilong sakim tok</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
009	Those slaves	<i>Ol wokboi</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
0010	Eye Witness	<i>Ol man bin lukim</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
0011	The one	<i>Man</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
0012	Everyone	<i>wanpela man</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
0013	Witnesses	<i>Man bilong strongim tok</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
0014	Followers	<i>Ol manmeri bilong bihainim</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
0015	Whoever	<i>Man</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		
0016	Someone	<i>wanpela man</i>	Particularization	√		√			2		3			3		

0017	The Righteous	Ol i stap stret	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	
0018	The poor	Ol rabis man	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	
0019	Stranger	Man bilong Narapela ples	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	
0020	The crippled	Man lek bilong em bagarap	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	
0021	The paralytic	Sikman	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	
0022	Tax Collectors	Man bilong kisim takis	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	
0023	The obedient slave	Wanpela man bilong bihainim tok	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	
0024	The wise	Ol man igat gutpela save	Particularizatio n	√		√			2	3		3	

NET Gender Preference in Bible Translation

The NET Bible often uses gender-inclusive language where the original text's intent is deemed to include both men and women. For example, it replaces terms like "man" with "person" or "human" and generic masculine pronouns ("he," "him") with gender-neutral alternatives such as "they" or restructured phrases (e.g., "the one who" instead of "he who"). The translation of gender-neutral English terms into Tok Pisin often results in a shift toward masculine expressions. As seen in data numbers 002, 003, 0012, 0015, and 0016, the neutral pronouns "everyone", "someone", "those", and "whoever" in NET Bible is commonly rendered as "ol man," in Tok Pisin Bible. This case is consistent throughout the translation from NET into Tok Pisin's New Testament Bible. Similarly, in data numbers 001, 006, 008, 0010, 0014, 0017 to 0024, the nouns "follower", "slaves", "strangers", "paralytic", "the tax collector", "the obedient slave" and "the wise", carry masculine connotation in Tok Pisin translation having marked by the term "man". The exception case is data 005, the noun phrase "children of God" as "pikinini bilong God," where "pikinini" can imply a male child.

This tendency reflects the linguistic structure of Tok Pisin, where "man" is frequently used as a default term for individuals despite having an inclusive preference for "manmeri" in Tok Pisin that implies "people" which is genderless. However, this practice can inadvertently obscure the presence of women and non-binary individuals in the text, leading to a male-centric interpretation. Such translations may not fully capture the inclusivity intended in the original English terms, potentially affecting the audience's understanding of the text's scope and applicability.

Addressing this issue requires a nuanced approach to translation that considers both linguistic norms and the importance of gender inclusivity. Developing or adopting

gender-neutral terms within Tok Pisin could enhance the accuracy and inclusivity of translations. This approach would ensure that the translated texts more faithfully represent the diversity of individuals referred to in the original language, thereby promoting a more inclusive understanding among Tok Pisin speakers.

Preference of Translation Technique(s)

In translating English gender-neutral terms into Tok Pisin, the use of particularization techniques often results in the adoption of the term "man," which, while intended to be generic, can inadvertently exclude female representation. Particularization involves selecting a more specific term in the target language than the source language's general term. For example, translating "everyone" as "ol man" or "the stranger" as "man i no bilong ples" exemplifies this approach. Although "man" in Tok Pisin is commonly used to denote a person regardless of gender, its consistent application may lead to interpretations that overlook women and non-binary individuals, thereby reinforcing a male-centric perspective.

The preference for particularization in these translations can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Tok Pisin's lexicon may lack direct equivalents for certain English gender-neutral terms, prompting translators to choose the closest available word, which is often "man." Secondly, cultural and linguistic norms within Tok Pisin-speaking communities might influence translators to favor terms that are widely understood and accepted, even if they are not entirely inclusive. Lastly, the process of particularization can enhance clarity and relatability for the target audience by using familiar terms, albeit at the expense of inclusivity. Addressing this issue necessitates a deliberate effort to develop and incorporate more inclusive language practices within Tok Pisin translations to ensure equitable representation of all genders.

In this study, the translation technique of particularization was identified as the primary method used to translate English gender-neutral terms into Tok Pisin masculine terms, such as "man," which may exclude female representation. Particularization involves selecting a more specific term in the target language than the general term used in the source language. This technique was determined to be the most appropriate for the following reasons:

Lexical Constraints in Tok Pisin: Tok Pisin's vocabulary may lack direct equivalents for certain English gender-neutral terms. Translators often resort to more specific terms like "man" to convey the intended meaning, even if it results in a loss of gender neutrality.

Cultural and Linguistic Norms: The use of "man" as a generic term for individuals is prevalent in Tok Pisin. This cultural and linguistic norm influences translators to choose terms that are widely understood and accepted by the target audience, even if they are not entirely inclusive.

Other translation techniques, such as established equivalence, description, modulation, and generalization, were considered less applicable in the context of this study: (1) Established Equivalence: This technique relies on pre-existing standard translations. However, there may not be established equivalents in Tok Pisin for many gender-neutral terms, necessitating alternative approaches. (2) Description: While providing descriptive phrases could enhance clarity, it may lead to overly verbose translations, which can be impractical and disrupt the flow of the text. (3) Modulation: This involves changing the perspective or semantics of the source text. Applying modulation to achieve gender neutrality could result in less faithful translations to the original meaning. (2) Generalization: This technique uses more general terms in the target language. However, in Tok Pisin, generalizing terms may not effectively convey the specific nuances of the source text, leading to potential ambiguities.

Therefore, particularization was determined to be the most suitable technique in this study, despite its limitations regarding gender inclusivity. This highlights the need for developing more inclusive translation practices to better represent all genders in Tok Pisin translations.

Shift from Neutral in NET to Sexism Masculine terms in Tok Pisin

The implications of this translation shift are significant, as they can perpetuate gender stereotypes and exclude female representation in translated texts. Scholars have noted that such practices may reinforce patriarchal structures within the language and culture, affecting the audience's perception of gender roles (Perry, 2019). Addressing this issue requires a deliberate effort to develop and incorporate more inclusive language practices within Tok Pisin translations, ensuring that the translated texts more faithfully represent the diversity of individuals referred to in the original language.

In this study, the translation of gender-neutral English terms into Tok Pisin often results in a shift toward masculine expressions, reflecting the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language. For instance, English terms like "everyone" and "children

of God" are frequently translated into Tok Pisin as "ol man" and "pikinini bilong God," respectively, where "man" and "pikinini" are used generically but can imply male individuals. This practice introduces a masculine bias absent in the original English terms, leading to a loss of gender neutrality in the translation process.

This shift can be attributed to the translation techniques employed by translators, particularly the use of particularization. Particularization involves selecting a more specific term in the target language than the general term used in the source language. In the context of Tok Pisin, translators often choose terms like "man" to represent individuals, as the language may lack direct equivalents for certain English gender-neutral terms. While this approach enhances clarity and relatability for the target audience, it inadvertently introduces a gender bias by defaulting to masculine terms.

The Quality of Translation of Neutral Terms into Tok Pisin

In their 2012 study, Nababan et al. introduced a comprehensive Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) model focusing on three key parameters: accuracy, acceptability, and readability. Accuracy pertains to how faithfully the translation conveys the meaning of the source text. Acceptability evaluates the translation's conformity to the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language. Readability assesses the ease with which the target audience can understand the translated text. This holistic approach enables a nuanced evaluation of translation quality across multiple dimensions. The three-point scale provides a structured yet flexible framework for evaluating translation quality. Scores are typically assigned by trained evaluators or experts, and the results are used to identify strengths and weaknesses in a translation. This method enables a holistic assessment by integrating linguistic fidelity (accuracy), cultural appropriateness (acceptability), and audience comprehension (readability), making it widely applicable in both academic and professional translation contexts

In the context of translating English gender-neutral terms into Tok Pisin, the omission of these terms has led to a reduction in the accuracy score to 2, indicating a partial transfer of meaning. This suggests that the translations do not fully capture the inclusivity intended in the source text, potentially leading to misinterpretations or a narrowed understanding of the original content.

Despite the decline in accuracy, the translations maintain high scores in acceptability and readability, both rated at 3. This indicates that, while the translations may lack complete fidelity to the source text's meaning, they are linguistically appropriate

and easily comprehensible to the target audience. The translations align well with Tok Pisin's linguistic norms and cultural expectations, ensuring that readers can understand the content without difficulty.

CONCLUSION

Translating English gender-neutral terms into Tok Pisin often results in a shift toward masculine expressions, reflecting the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language. For instance, English terms like "everyone" and "slave" are frequently translated into Tok Pisin as "ol man," respectively, where "man" is used generically but can imply male individuals. This practice introduces a masculine bias absent in the original English terms, leading to a loss of gender neutrality in the translation process.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to express their profound gratitude to the University of Papua New Guinea for its invaluable support in facilitating the completion of this research. In particular, sincere appreciation is extended to Professor Pillai, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Administration), Professor L. Marai, Executive Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Digim Rina, Chairperson of the SHSS Research and Publication Committee and the team, and Mrs. Hiawalyer, Director of the Centre for Human Resource Development (CHRD). Their guidance, encouragement, and administrative support have been instrumental in ensuring the successful realization of this study.

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