

# Grażyna Drzazga, Magda Stroińska

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## The grammatical gender of Death : a textual and discourse approach

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Grażyna Drzazga / Magda Stroińska (Hamilton)

## The grammatical gender of Death: a textual and discourse approach

“Gender is the most puzzling of the grammatical categories”  
Greville Corbett. 1991. *Gender*

The assignment of grammatical gender is among the most intriguing problems in human language. In this paper we discuss the question of semantic versus morphological motivation for gender assignment and agreement by analyzing the grammatical gender of one of the key cultural concepts, i.e. death. In our analysis, we consider how the grammatical category influences conceptualizations of death in cultures and discourses of various nations. We will refer to the images of death in three different languages and cultures: English, German and Polish. Finally, we will illustrate the cross-linguistic problems potentially caused by such differing conceptualizations by analyzing translation challenges connected with the noun *death* on examples from contemporary popular literature in those three languages. It seems that at the discourse level the semantic cues can influence grammatical gender and override morphological motivation, even in the case of such an important concept as death. The personification of death is a type of hybrid that allows agreement patterns which would be considered incorrect from a purely grammatical point of view.

### Rodzaj gramatyczny śmierci z punktu widzenia tekstu i dyskursu

Klasyfikacja rzeczowników pod względem rodzaju gramatycznego jest jednym z najbardziej interesujących zagadnień dotyczących języka. W poniższym artykule rozważamy problem rozróżnienia pomiędzy semantyczną a morfologiczno-składniową motywacją rodzaju gramatycznego na podstawie jednego z kluczowych pojęć kulturowych: śmierci. W naszej analizie zastanawiamy się jak kategoria gramatyczna rodzaju wpływa na konceptualizacje śmierci w kulturze i dyskursie. Odwołujemy się do przedstawienia śmierci w trzech kulturach i trzech językach: angielskim, niemieckim i polskim. Na podstawie fragmentów współczesnej literatury popularnej, pokazujemy jakie problemy tłumaczeniowe może sprawiać istnienie tych różnych konceptualizacji. Wydaje się, że na poziomie dyskursu informacje semantyczne mogą wpłynąć na rodzaj gramatyczny nawet w przypadku tak ważnego pojęcia jak śmierć. Personifikacja śmierci jest rodzajem hybrydy, któ-

ra dopuszcza różne warianty składni zgody, uznawane za niepoprawne na poziomie opisu czysto językowego.

## Das grammatische Geschlecht des Todes: Text- und Diskursperspektive

Die Klassifikation der Substantive auf Grund ihres grammatischen Geschlechtes (oder Genus) ist eine der interessantesten Fragen der sprachlichen Analyse. Der folgende Beitrag befasst sich mit der Frage der Differenzierung zwischen semantischer und syntaktisch-morphologischer Motivation für die Zuweisung von grammatischem Geschlecht und Genuskongruenz. Von besonderem Interesse hierbei ist ein Schlüsselwort jeder menschlichen Kultur: der Begriff und das Konzept ‚Tod‘ und seine Genuseigenschaften. In unserer Analyse zeigen wir, inwieweit die grammatische Genuskategorie die Konzeptualisierung des Todes in der betreffenden Kultur einerseits und auf der Ebene des Diskurses andererseits bestimmt. Wir beziehen uns dabei auf Repräsentationen des Todes in drei Kulturen und Sprachen: der englischen, der deutschen und der polnischen. Die unterschiedliche Konzeptualisierung des Begriffes ‚Tod‘ in diesen verschiedenen Kultur- und Sprachkontexten kann in der Tat zu Übersetzungsproblemen führen, wie wir anhand von Beispielen aus der Gegenwartsliteratur aufzeigen. Es scheint, dass auf der Diskursebene die semantischen Informationen das grammatische Geschlecht und somit die Genuskongruenz beeinflussen können, sogar bei einem so wichtigen Schlüsselwort wie ‚Tod‘. Die Personifikation des Todes scheint eine Mischform zu sein, bei der verschiedene Kongruenzformen möglich sind, die auf der rein grammatischen Ebene als fehlerhaft gelten würden.

### 1. Introduction

Many languages do not use the category of grammatical gender, but those that do employ a variety of often very intricate systems for the classification of nouns. Many Indo-European languages use a two or three gender distinction but some, like English, have retained gender distinctions only in their personal pronoun system. Other language families, for example the Niger-Kordofanian family in Africa, use much more complex systems of noun classification, often based on the external properties of objects, such as their shape or purpose, etc.

In this paper, we shall discuss some properties of the gender systems in English, German and Polish, with occasional observations about other Indo-European languages. The emphasis will be on the question of semantic versus morphological motivation for gender assignment and, further, on the issue of the effect of the above distinction (semantic versus morphological gender) on the agreement patterns used. While we discuss a variety of agreement choices available, we focus our observations on the gender and agreement patterns of one particular noun: death. We argue that what may appear to be a purely grammatical question concerning the options made available by the language system may in fact have far-reaching effects at the level of discourse and conceptualization. Does the

grammatical gender of death affect the ways in which cultures conceptualize and personify death? If so, could it affect the ways in which this unavoidable stage of human life is perceived and dealt with in social terms? We finish with a brief look at the difficulties that may arise when the gendered concept of death needs to be translated into a language that imposes a distinctly different gender assignment.

## 2. The category of Gender

Theoretically, there are several ways gender may be assigned in human languages. One possible way is a strictly semantic gender assignment, illustrated for example by Tamil, where nouns are divided into three categories: those that refer to male human beings and male gods (labeled as masculine or male rational), those that refer to female human beings and female goddesses (feminine or female rational) and other (neuter or non-rational) for virtually everything else (cf. Corbett 1991: 8–9, based on Asher 1985). Dyirbal, an Australian language, has four “genders” divided in such a way that they inspired George Lakoff’s famous 1987 book *Women, fire and dangerous things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*. Class I nouns refer to most animate objects and men; Class II refers to women, water, fire, weapons and forms of violence, and some animals considered exceptional; Class III refers to edible fruits and vegetables; Class IV refers to various things that were not included in classes I–III (cf. Corbett 1991:15).

The Niger-Congo family of languages is known for complex systems of noun classification. Kujamaat Jóola, spoken in Senegal, West Africa has 19 noun classes, recognized based on their distinctive agreement patterns. In Kujamaat Jóola, in particular, most human referents, irrespective of their natural gender, belong to class 1 and 2 (classes are paired since they represent Singular and Plural forms, here with prefixes *a-* and *ku-* respectively), but some particular words referring to humans are also scattered through other classes. The underlying rationale for class membership is often difficult to establish. Class 7 and 8 (*ka-/u-*), for example, contain bones, bony objects, body parts, most containers, one type of frog and language (Aronoff and Fudeman 2005: 56–64).

Most Indo-European languages have gender systems based either on the phonological or morphological features of words. In German, nouns that refer to creatures of differentiable sex are generally assigned the grammatical gender corresponding to their sex. Thus, *der Vater* (‘father’) is masculine and *die Mutter* (‘mother’) is feminine despite having the same ending, which usually indicates masculine nouns. For complex nouns, it is the derivational suffix that determines the grammatical gender. Thus, the word *Mädchen* is neuter even though it refers to a girl: its neuter gender is the result of the diminutive suffix *-chen*. If, on the

other hand, semantic gender assignment were to dominate, we would expect it to be feminine. In addition, all inanimate objects, plants, etc. are also assigned to the three genders and the reasons for the particular gender assignment are not always obvious (for more details cf. Schwichtenberg & Schiller 2004).

In the Slavic languages, the assignment to one of the three genders operates partly on a semantic basis: there is a differentiation between masculine and feminine for human beings and animals where the gender matters or where the gender distinction is visible. The masculine and feminine genders are also assigned to many other nouns based on their morphological properties, whereas the third gender – neuter – takes care of the remaining nouns. Where the gender assignment is not based on semantics, it is still predictable as it is based on the declension paradigm that the noun belongs to.

As for the formal properties of gender in Polish, as noted by Corbett (1991), “gender agreement depends on interaction with tense” (p. 126) and grammatical gender on the verb surfaces only in past tense forms. Historically, as with Russian (Corbett, 1991), Polish past tense verb forms were derived from a compound past tense element: the passive participle. This participle was based on the infinitive and formed with the suffix –ł–. It was marked for gender by means of the addition of appropriate suffixes. In the compound past tense, the participle followed the auxiliary verb ‘to be’, but the auxiliary verb was shortened around the 14th century and disappeared almost completely in the 16th century (Klemensiewicz/ Lehr-Splawiński/ Urbańczyk 1965: 367–374).

In Polish, the grammatical gender of nouns serves as a classifying category – nouns have gender, but do not decline for gender (Grzegorzczkova 1993: 447). For all remaining parts of speech that are marked for gender, it is an inflectional category which reflects the subordination of these parts of speech to the noun phrase. Thus, when it comes to the agreement between the subject and the verb in Polish, the subordinate verb always has the gender of the head noun or pronoun (Grzegorzczkova 1999: 214). In Polish, separate forms for all three genders occur not only in the third person singular (‘on’ for masculine, ‘ona’ for feminine, and ‘ono’ for neuter) – a situation which Corbett (1991) describes as “relatively common” (p. 128), but also in the third person plural (‘oni’ for virile and ‘one’ for non-virile). However, all other pronouns have inherent gender based on the referent and they assign gender feature.

### 3. Misalignment of grammatical and natural gender

In languages marked for gender, any structural element that is a target for agreement has to show it. This means that attributive adjectives, the verb, predica-

tive adjectives and anaphoric pronouns will have to show gender agreement with the controller noun phrase (the noun phrase that determines the agreement). Since grammatical gender is often motivated by the word's form rather than its meaning, the grammatical gender and natural gender of an animate referent do not need to be the same. In such cases, the question arises of whether the agreement should be motivated by semantics or by morphology. For example, if a morphologically masculine or neuter noun refers to a female, could the speaker choose feminine agreement? And further, does the hierarchy of agreement arrangements most likely be affected by semantics follow Corbett's (1979, 1991, 2006) agreement hierarchy? Corbett proposes four positions in his agreement hierarchy: attributive > predicative > relative pronoun > personal pronoun, and states that "as we move rightwards along the hierarchy, the likelihood of semantic agreement will increase monotonically" (p. 226). In addition, the variation of gender assignment in predicates is constrained by Predicate Hierarchy: verb>participle>adjective>noun (Corbett 2006: 233).

Let us have a look at a simple example involving a fictional female character, Cinderella. In English, the word itself has no inherent gender. However, morphologically, it is a compound whose final part sounds like a girl's name: Ella. Apart from that, 'every child' knows that Cinderella was a young girl and so, in English, we can expect sentences such as the following, with feminine personal pronouns:

1. She [Cinderella] gave them the best advice she could, and gently and submissively offered to dress them herself, and especially to arrange their hair, an accomplishment in which she excelled many a noted coiffeur.  
(Lorioux, n.d.)

In the most popular German version of Cinderella, published in the 1887 collection of fairy tales by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, the main protagonist is called *Aschenputtel*. The noun is neuter and so the agreement needs to select either the semantic aspect of the controller (the young girl, i.e. a female) or the morphological aspect (a neuter noun). However, the German word for 'girl', *das Mädchen*, is also neuter and so the neuter form of the pronoun may have additional motivation. In German, the verb does not inflect for gender and so we can only observe agreement patterns for articles, attributive adjectives and pronouns.

2. Aschenputtel ging alle Tage dreimal darunter, weinte und betete, und allemal kam ein weißes Vöglein auf den Baum, und wenn es einen Wunsch aussprach, so warf ihm das Vöglein herab, was es sich gewünscht hatte.

Thrice a day Cinderella (*neuter*) went and sat beneath it, and wept and prayed, and a little white bird always came to the tree, and if it (*neuter*) expressed a wish, the bird would throw down to it (*neuter*) what it (*neuter*) had wished for.  
(Aschenputtel / Cinderella (n.d.))

The Polish name for Cinderella is *Kopciuszek* and it is masculine. The available translations are quite varied. In one translation of the Charles Perrault version of the story, the morphologically masculine name *Kopciuszek* is used with the feminine form of the verb and with the feminine form of the predicative adjective:

3. Kopciuszek mimo lichych sukienek była jednak sto razy piękniejsza od swoich sióstr. Despite poor dresses, Cinderella (*masculine*) was (*feminine*) a hundred times more beautiful (*feminine*) than her (*same form for all genders*) sisters.  
(Kopciuszek, version A)

The translation of the Brothers Grimm version available on the same website uses masculine verb agreement for the name *Kopciuszek* but then switches to the word *girl* to refer to Cinderella and follows it with a feminine personal pronoun:

4. Tańczył tak Kopciuszek aż do wieczora, a gdy nadszedł czas powrotu, król wicz, który chciał się koniecznie dowiedzieć, kto jest ta piękna dziewczyna, rzekł do niej...

Cinderella (*masculine*) danced (*masculine*) until the evening and when the time came to return home the prince, who insisted on knowing, who this beautiful girl (*feminine*) was, said to her (*feminine*)...  
(Kopciuszek, version B)

The next version quoted here is even more complex. It starts using the masculine verb agreement with the masculine noun *Kopciuszek* and then switches to the feminine agreement after an inserted description of Cinderella as a poor and rejected *girl* ('dziewczę'), which in fact is a neuter variant of the noun in Polish. Thus, within one sentence, all three gender forms have been used:

5. Zdziwiona i ze złości prawie od zmysłów odchodząca macocha i siostry przyrodnie, musiały patrzeć bezsilnie, jak zabiedzony (*masculine*) Kopciuszek (*masculine*), to nieszczęsne, wzgardzone (*neuter*) przez nich dziewczę (*neuter*), wsiadła (*feminine*) do karety i jak ją (*feminine*) powieziono na ślub z królewiczem.

The stepmother, surprised and almost losing her mind from anger, along with the stepsisters, had to helplessly watch how the miserable (*masculine*) Cinderella (*mas-*

*culine*), this unhappy (*neuter*) girl (*neuter*), rejected (*neuter*) by them, got (*feminine*) into the carriage and how she (*feminine*) was driven (*impersonal*) to the wedding with the prince.

(Kopciuszek, version C)

The above examples follow, by and large, Corbett's agreement hierarchy: in German, agreement generally obeys the grammatical gender of the noun (*neuter*). Even if the neuter noun *Aschenputel* were replaced by the word 'girl' (German *Mädchen*), the agreement would stay the same as the noun 'girl' is also neuter in German. The only instance of a feminine reference would be the personal pronoun *sie*.

Robinson (2010:160) challenges this somewhat simplistic interpretation of morphological gender agreement in the case of Grimms' fairytales. He proposes that

the Grimms' usage of the pronouns *es* and *sie* to refer to girls is neither random nor tightly related to accompanying nouns referring to the same girls (though even if it were, the choice of the latter needs explaining). Instead, I claim, the more positive pronoun *es* frequently refers to young, unsexed, nice and/or good girls, while the pronoun *sie* frequently refers to older, sexed, naughty and even bad girls, and of course women. The problem is, a given individual may not fall on the same side of all three of these axes, or not always in the same story.

Robinson quotes numerous examples of the pronoun switch from *es* to *sie* based solely on the plot development (i.e the good little girl – *es* – becoming available for marriage and turning into a *sie*) thus calling into question the strictly morphological motivation for gender agreement in German. One particularly convincing argument is that neuter nouns used to describe male referents do not trigger the use of pronoun *es* but rather the masculine *er* (e.g. *das Schneiderlein*, in "The Brave Little Tailor," where the diminutive suffix makes the noun neuter – cf. Robinson 2010: 153).

6. Das klang dem Schneiderlein lieblich in die Ohren, er steckte sein zartes Haupt zum Fenster hinaus und rief: "Hierherauf, liebe Frau, hier wird Sie Ihre Ware los." (Grimm 1857, v. 1: 127)

That sounded sweet to the ears of the little tailor (*neuter*); he (*masculine*) stuck his (same for masculine and neuter) delicate head out of the window and called out: "Up here, dear lady, here you can sell your wares." (after Robinson 2010:153)



These exceptions seem to conform to the generalization stated above and to Corbett's theoretical assumptions. Apart from the complex use of pronouns in Grimms' fairy tales which seems to follow 'moral' rather than morphological motivation, modifying adjectives agree in gender with the noun they modify (cf. example 5). Verb agreement (in Polish), on the other hand, follows either the semantic clues regarding the natural gender of the person (feminine) or the grammatical gender of the subject noun. We discuss the case of Cinderella here because it involves grammatical gender that is at odds with the natural gender of the referent. Even though the referent is a fictional character, it is imagined as human and the feminine characteristics of Cinderella are an inherent part of the plot. Interestingly, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, if the name 'Kopciuszek' were replaced by a neuter noun 'dziewczę' ('a girl') the acceptability of sentences in which the verb agrees with the natural gender of the subject would be much lower (dziewczę<sub>NEUT</sub> była<sub>FEM</sub> 'girl was'). This observation is confirmed by a search of the National Corpus of Polish, which does not contain any examples in which 'dziewczę' – was followed by a verb in the past tense with gender other than neuter.

It seems that the proper noun 'Cinderella,' as the name of a conceptualized character, does not conform to the grammatical rules that govern common nouns like 'dziewczę.' This strengthens the claim about death that we make in the following part of the paper where we propose a distinction between *death* – a noun and DEATH – a concept.

We shall now move to the proper topic of our discussion: the grammatical gender of death and the impact of this grammatical category on the conceptualizations of death in English, German and Polish, as illustrated by the agreement patterns used or approved by translators and speakers.

#### 4. The grammatical gender of death

In Polish, the word for death – *śmierć* – is feminine. Generally, nouns that refer to non-human, inanimate objects or abstract ideas are assigned grammatical gender based on their morphological shape. Thus, the Slavic languages equivalents of death are feminine because the endings of the respective nouns point to the feminine declension. In Polish, *śmierć*, like most nouns that end in *-ć*, *-ość* or *-dź* are feminine (e.g. *ćwierć* – 'a quarter', *perć* – 'a mountain path', *miłość* – 'love', *złość* – 'anger', *przyjemność* – 'pleasure', *kość* – 'bone'); exceptions include forms such as *jegomość* (masculine, a somewhat outdated word for 'man' or 'chap'), but it has to be noted that the female equivalent *jejmość* is feminine.

*Death*, however, is a tricky noun: in its literal sense, it refers to a physiological phenomenon – the end of biological life (in the following sections we use italics to mark this understanding of the noun). Yet, at the same time, it is also used to refer to the cultural image of *DEATH*, an often personified conceptualization whose image can be associated with either masculine or feminine features even though it does not have a physical existence (this understanding of the noun will be both italicized and capitalized). *Death* as the end of life may sometimes be pluralized (e.g. “the Mafia related deaths”); the metaphorical personification, on the other hand, usually has no plural form – it refers to an individualized, even though non-existent object.

In English, the word *death* has no inherent gender because English nouns are not marked for gender. There is, therefore, no reason for English verbs, adjectives and determiners to reflect gender in their agreement patterns. The only part of speech that indicates gender is the personal pronoun for the 3rd Person Singular which allows one to distinguish between the masculine *he*, the feminine *she* and the neuter *it*. The masculine and feminine pronouns are used to refer to nouns denoting – respectively – male or female human or supernatural beings and male or female animals, while the neuter pronoun is used to refer to small children and animals (where gender is not considered important, e.g. ‘rat’), as well as all inanimate objects, abstractions, etc. Thus, *death* is usually referred to as *it*, but its visual representation is most often associated with male features and we would therefore expect the pronoun *he*.

In German, all nouns have inherent gender: masculine, feminine or neuter. The noun *Tod* (‘death’) is masculine. It is accompanied by masculine articles (*der* or *ein*) and adjectives, and would be referred to by the masculine pronoun *er*. The German verb does not show agreement in gender.

## 5. The personification of *DEATH* in different cultures

A detailed description of the personifications of *DEATH* in various cultures is beyond the scope of this paper (for a comprehensive discussion cf. Guthke 1991); however, we would like to outline the main ideas about the personification of *DEATH* in the cultures that are the focus of our analysis: German, Polish and English.

In German-speaking countries, as illustrated in the 17th century folksong *Es ist ein Schnitter, der heißt Tod* (“This is a reaper, his name is Death”, published in the collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*), *DEATH* is very often imagined as *der Senseman*, the (Grim) Reaper (Guthke, 1991: 7–10). The noun *death* being masculine, *DEATH* is naturally represented as a skeletal male figure, with a skull

instead of a face, dressed usually in a black hooded cloak. Since the Middle Ages, this rather fearsome character appears in many visual representations, often carrying a scythe. Interestingly, the same personification prevails in the English-speaking environment also, despite the fact that the noun *death* is not marked for gender in English.

An interesting exception is Death in the comic book series *The Sandman* by English author Neil Gaiman, published from 1989 to 1996. Here Death is depicted as a young and pretty girl, with a very pale face and black hair. She is both the representation of the end of life and a psychopomp, i.e. the guide that takes the dead to the other world. This feminine representation of death is anomalous in Western (English-speaking) culture but the popularity of *The Sandman* series may become a factor in opening the metaphorical door to a new conceptualization. We were curious as to whether the Gaiman family's Eastern European roots may have had something to do with his feminine conceptualization of death but he maintains the reason was just to break the cultural stereotype (personal communication, March 2011).

In Slavic mythology, *DEATH* (Polish *śmierć*, Russian *смерть*, Czech *smrt*, Serbian *смрт* – all of feminine gender) is associated with the goddess Morena (also known as Mora, Mara, Morana, etc.). Some of the best known visual representations of *DEATH* have been created by Jacek Malczewski, a Polish painter of the early 20th century. In his pictures, even Thanatos, the male Greek god of gentle death, is represented as a young woman.

## 6. The gender of personified *DEATH*

Only in some cultures can *DEATH* be represented as, or appear in the shape of, an animal. For example, some inhabitants of Polynesia think of *DEATH* as Fe'e, a giant cuttlefish that spends its time in the ocean but is able to leave the waters and grab its victims with its black tentacles. In most cultures though, if *death* is given a physical shape, the image is human. Therefore, this image should have natural gender and, in languages that employ this category, the noun *death* should also have grammatical gender.

As Jakobson (1959) states, “even such a category as grammatical gender, often cited as merely formal, plays a great role in the methodological attitudes of a speech community” (p. 142). As he goes on to illustrate, the personification of the weekdays shows that for the speakers of Russian the images of the days are consistently assigned the gender that complies with the grammatical gender of the corresponding noun. Taking this hypothesis into consideration, how would the grammatical gender of the word *death* affect its cultural conceptualization?

One could claim that, similarly to the weekdays and their personification, there should be a one-to-one correspondence between the gender of the personification of *DEATH* and the grammatical gender of the noun ‘death’ in a given language. However, as highlighted in the study by Guthke (1999), there are many examples where the representation does not agree with the grammatical gender. For example, the German painter Klaus Drechler represents *DEATH* as woman (*Tod mit Kind* – ‘Death with a child’, 1991) even though, as mentioned before, *death* is masculine in German. Another example is the picture by the Italian painter Stefano Della Bella who portrays *DEATH* as an armed horseman (the first picture of *Les cinq morts* series) despite the fact that *death* in Italian is feminine.

The grammatical gender may have been originally assigned based on morphology but, once assigned, it became part of the cultural conceptualization. This hypothesis was investigated by Segel and Boroditsky (2010) who attempted to answer the question of whether the grammatical gender of nouns in an artist’s native language always agrees with the gender of the personifications depicted in their art. In order to answer their research question, they analyzed almost two thousand paintings, and according to their results, grammatical gender predicted personified gender in 78% of cases. This may seem a lot but, on the other hand, one may ask from where the remaining 22 % took their cue.

On the basis of the results of the above mentioned study, it may be assumed that it is not always the grammatical gender of the word that determines the gender of the personification of *DEATH*. What, then, can the other factors be to explain this situation? One hypothesis is that “death will be seen as masculine or feminine according to whether it typically occurs in a phallic-penetrating or vaginal-enveloping form” (Guthke 1999: 20). Thus hunting and martial societies will likely associate *DEATH* with physical violence, strength, power, and masculinity, while in agricultural societies death will most likely be caused by starvation or disease and is therefore associated with the lack of maternal care – hence a feminine representation.

## 7. *DEATH* in translation

In this section, we discuss the differences in the conceptualization of *DEATH* from the point of view of translation, using two literary texts as the object of analysis: “The Tale of Three Brothers” from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows* by J.K. Rowling and *The Reaper Man* by Terry Pratchett. The common element in both of these texts is *DEATH* as a character; however, the two personifications differ considerably.

In “The Tale of Three Brothers” we read:

7. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him.

What should a translator do when rendering the text into a language – for example Polish – in which the word *death* and its personification are not masculine? The analysis of the context in the book gives a partial answer, however, the translator has to see the text in a wider network and, in the case of this bestseller, also think of the film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. In both the film and the book, the actual gender of *DEATH* is not relevant. In the text, none of *DEATH*'s apparent masculinity plays any role, while in the film *DEATH* is portrayed in a genderless manner. Thus the noun *death* in this particular case refers to a universal concept and the decision to change the gender of the noun *death* in order to make it fit the target language gender agreement seems to be completely justifiable. The target text, translated by Piotr Cholewa, in Polish reads:

8. Nie dała (*feminine verb*) jednak za wygraną. Postanowiła (*feminine verb*) udawać, że podziwia czarodziejskie uzdolnienia trzech braci, i oznajmiła (*feminine verb*) im, że każdemu należy się nagroda za przechytrzenie Śmierci (*feminine noun but not grammatical agreement controller*).

Interestingly, the same technique was applied by the translator into French – Jean-François Ménard who uses the feminine form *la mort*.

The same fragment translated into German by Klaus Fritz reads:

9. Doch der Tod (*masculine*) war gerissen. Er (*masculine*) tat, als würde er (*masculine*) den drei Brüdern zu ihrer Zauberkunst gratulieren, und sagte, weil sie so klug gewesen seien, ihm (*masculine*) zu entrinnen, verdiene jeder von ihnen einen Lohn.

As illustrated, in all target texts, the translators used the native concepts from the target cultures and, where necessary, substituted the source text male representation of *DEATH* with the corresponding target culture conceptualizations: thus, in Polish and French *DEATH* is feminine and in German masculine. All translations sound natural, native-like, and the meaning of the passage has been preserved.

On the other hand, in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, the character Death poses a significant translation challenge. Death is male; even the name he chooses for himself confirms his physical gender – Bill Door. Contrary to what was found in the Harry Potter series, in the case of Pratchett's books, the masculinity of the character cannot be ignored. The translators of the text into Polish and French had to struggle with the choice of what to do with sentences like the one below:

10. Death put down the timer, and then picked it up again. The sands of time were already pouring through. He turned it over experimentally, just in case. The sand went on pouring, only now it was going upwards. He hadn't really expected anything else.

The question arises of whether, in the Polish translation, the translator should follow morphological or semantic agreement. If the translator decides to follow morphological agreement, then *DEATH* would have to be referred to as “she” which would be in contradiction to the plot of the book. On the other hand, if semantic agreement is chosen, the result would be a morphological mismatch between the feminine gender of the subject noun and the masculine gender of the verb: *Śmierć odstawił...* (‘Death (feminine) put down (masculine)...’). In this case, the masculine form of the verb would be motivated by semantic or referential cues, which, according to Corbett (1991: 43) may override the morphological motivation in some contexts. In addition, this mismatched form does not sound natural in Polish since it also disagrees with the conceptualization of *DEATH* in the Polish culture. The last possible approach to this problematic fragment would involve preserving the masculinity of Bill Door and using an equivalent of the noun *death* that is masculine in gender (e.g. *zgon* in Polish). This seems to be an appropriate way out of the dilemma since the gender of the character would be preserved and the text would read well. Semantically though, the two nouns are not really equivalent as *zgon* refers to the physiological aspect of *death* and does not function as a cultural concept. The decision that was actually made by Piotr Cholewa, the translator of *Reaper Man* into Polish, was to use the word *śmierć* with an incorrect gender agreement. It preserves the characteristics of Bill Door but the text sounds foreign and could be considered grammatically acceptable only if *Śmierć* would be the surname of the character. In the plot of these books, however, it is not the surname, but the profession. The translation reads:

11. Śmierć (*feminine noun*) odstawił (*masculine verb*) klepsydrę, ale po chwili wziął (*masculine verb*) ją znowu. Piasek czasu się przesypywał. Śmierć (*feminine noun*) na próbę odwrócił (*masculine verb*) życiomierz – dla sprawdzenia. Piasek sypał się dalej, tyle że teraz z dołu do góry. Śmierć (*feminine noun*) właściwie nie oczekiwał (*masculine verb*) niczego innego.

In the French translation, the translator, again, resorted to the same strategy by using the noun *Mort* and the feminine determiner *la*, but this feminine noun is later in the text referred to using the masculine pronoun “il.” The French verb does not show gender. The fragment in French reads:

12. La Mort reponse le sablier, puis le reprend. (...) Il le retourne pour voir, au cas ou...  
*Death put down the timer, and then picked it up again (...) He turned it over experimentally, just in case.*

In German, on the other hand, the translation decision was to use the equivalent of the noun *death* – *Tod*, but without the determiner (except when it is needed to express cases other than the Nominative). This way, *Tod* sounds like a surname and the reader immediately realizes that the reference is to the personification rather than the physiological process. Since the German noun *Tod* is masculine, the translator could use the masculine pronoun “er” without making the target text sound unnatural. In German, neither the verb nor the predicative adjectives mark agreement. The translated fragment reads:

13. *Tod* (masculine noun) stellte die Lebensuhr beiseite – und nahm sie erneut zur Hand. Der Sand der Zeit rieselte von der oberen Hälfte in die untere. Er (masculine personal pronoun) drehte das Gefäß, um ganz sicher zu sein. Der Sand rieselte auch weiterhin, jetzt von unten nach oben. *Tod* (masculine noun) hatte es nicht anders erwartet.

The decision of how to resolve the problem of gender assignment in the translated texts in the different languages could be evaluated by analyzing the reaction of the audience. In the case of the *Reaper Man* in Polish, the question would be whether “Śmierć nie oczekiwał niczego innego” is acceptable for the readers.

## 8. Empirical study

This question was asked in a small study by Drzazga, Stroińska and Sullivan (2011). Three groups of respondents were asked to judge the acceptability of selected sentences from Pratchett’s *Discworld* translated into Polish. The most relevant group for this study – the group of Polish native speakers living in Poland and having limited or no exposure to English – rejected the sentence in which the noun *śmierć* was used with incorrect grammatical gender agreement. However, those respondents who recognized the translation hurdle and took into the consideration the fact that the sentences were taken from a bigger context, said that they could accept the sentence if *Śmierć* was the name of a character.

Native speakers of Polish who have been living in Canada for a considerable length of time and young adults who were bilingual generally accepted the lack of agreement as soon as they realized that the sentences refer to *DEATH* as a personification. However, it was also the group of young adults who were quite adamant about rejecting (disliking) any sentences involving the personified concept



of *DEATH*. That is why, in their opinion, the sentence “Śmierć chwyta za kubek szkieletową dłońią,” (‘Death catches the mug with the skeleton hand’), was also judged as unacceptable, despite the fact that the agreement between the subject and the noun was correct.

Thus it seems that the choice of the German translator was the most appropriate. In order to avoid problems with gender agreement (though not important in German where *Tod* is masculine), *Death* should be treated as a proper name, not a common noun. In this way, the translator ensures that the sentences will sound natural, even if taken out of context. On the other hand, using semantic motivation for gender agreement, as in the case of Polish and French may be accepted by the audience, but only in the context of a book of fiction.

Corbett (1991: 183ff) also discusses the concept of hybrid nouns that may change their agreement properties depending on the natural gender of the referent. He quotes the Russian noun *врач* (*vratf* – ‘physician’) that can follow feminine or masculine agreement patterns depending on the gender of the person it refers to. It seems that the imagined gender of a symbolic representation of a non-existent figure (*DEATH*) can also trigger a switch to a gender agreement inconsistent with the inherent gender of the noun.

## 9. Conclusion

The two interpretations of the word ‘death’ – the physiological (*death*) and the metaphorical one (*DEATH*) – are related to different grammatical properties. In the case of *death* it seems that, at the level of linguistic analysis, the grammatical agreement of the noun has to comply with the rules imposed by the formal aspects of language – its morphology. In Polish, this means feminine agreement across all syntactic structures. However, on the textual level, as illustrated by the translation of “The Tale of the Three Brothers” from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows* and *Reaper Man*, the imagined gender of the personification of *DEATH*, i.e. semantic motivation, may be used to establish non-standard gender agreement. Despite the fact that the sentence, if taken out of its literary context, will likely be considered unacceptable by the audience, the context seems to justify the incorrect agreement.

The word *death* and its grammatical agreement properties in Polish and German seem to follow Corbett’s (1979, 1991, 2006) Agreement Hierarchy and Predicate Hierarchy. Thus, *DEATH* (grammatically feminine) represented as a male figure, may combine in Polish with a masculine verb. As soon as the reader/listener realizes that the word ‘death’ is used in a metaphorical sense, i.e. as a personification, masculine agreement becomes acceptable, just as is the case with



names that may have grammatical gender inconsistent with the natural gender of the person. As such, ‘śmierć’ may be considered a *hybrid* noun that is capable of changing its agreement properties in specific contexts.

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Magda Stroińska, Ph.D.  
Grażyna Drzazga, MA  
McMaster University  
Department of Linguistics and Languages  
Togo Salmon Hall 629  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4M2  
e-mail: stroinsk@mcmaster.ca  
e-mail: drzazgm@mcmaster.ca