

Translating Grammatical Gender in English–Arabic Literary Contexts: A Mixed-Methods Study of Student Performance

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Abstract: This study investigates the translation of gender from English into Arabic, focusing on the performance of senior-level translation students in a literary context. Building on previous research on verbal and adjectival translation, the article adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative examination of error types. The corpus consists of selected passages from Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, translated into Modern Standard Arabic by student translators. Gender-related renderings are classified as similar, different or unattempted in order to assess both accuracy and omission. The findings indicate that while gender is generally handled correctly at the lexical level, significant difficulties arise in maintaining agreement within phrases and clauses, particularly in cases involving inanimate or abstract nouns and structurally complex constructions. The study highlights the impact of grammatical asymmetry between English and Arabic on translation performance and underscores the need for more systematic instruction in contrastive grammar and contextual analysis. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender as a key factor in English–Arabic literary translation and provides implications for translator training.

Keywords: English–Arabic translation; grammatical gender; translation errors; agreement; contrastive grammar

1. Introduction

The concept of equivalence has long held a central position in translation studies, where it is generally understood in functional and communicative terms rather than as a simple formal correspondence between linguistic units (Nida 1964; Catford 1965;

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House 1977; Koller 1979/1989). In this perspective, the translator's task involves not only rendering grammatical structures accurately but also reconstructing meaning in a way that is appropriate to the linguistic and contextual norms of the target language (Baker 2018). These considerations become particularly significant in English–Arabic translation, where the two language systems differ substantially in their grammatical organization.

Previous research conducted within the same framework has shown that such differences constitute a major source of difficulty for student translators. A study focusing on verbal occurrences has demonstrated that learners frequently encounter problems in handling tense, aspect and agreement, often relying on literal strategies and insufficient contextual analysis (Mansoor and Dejica 2025). Similarly, an investigation of adjectival translation has revealed persistent issues related to semantic interpretation, collocational adequacy and stylistic nuance, suggesting that translation competence requires more than a formal application of grammatical rules (Newmark 1988; Hatim and Mason 1990; Mansoor 2017; Mansoor and Dejica 2026). These findings indicate that translation difficulties are closely linked to the interaction between grammatical structure and contextual meaning.

Within this theoretical context, contrastive linguistics provides essential insights into the structural differences between English and Arabic that shape translation decisions. This contrastive perspective is particularly relevant in English–Arabic translation, where structural divergences have been extensively documented in the literature on contrastive grammar and translation methodology (Aziz 1989; Dickins, Hervey, and Higgins 2002). One of the most significant asymmetries concerns the category of gender. In English, grammatical gender plays a minimal role and is largely restricted to natural distinctions, while most nouns are not marked for gender. By contrast, Arabic exhibits a highly developed gender system, in which nouns are classified as masculine or feminine and participate in a complex network of agreement relations. Gender in Arabic interacts with number, definiteness and syntactic position, governing agreement not only within the noun phrase, but also across clauses, affecting adjectives, pronouns and verbs.

These structural asymmetries become especially problematic in literary translation, where gender may contribute not only to grammatical cohesion but also to stylistic and pragmatic meaning. As the analysis conducted in this study shows, student translators often encounter difficulties in maintaining consistent gender agreement, particularly at the level of phrases, clauses and extended syntactic structures. While gender may be correctly rendered at the word level, its interaction with adjectives, pronouns and verb forms frequently leads to inconsistencies and deviations, reflecting both the complexity of the Arabic system and the influence of the source language.

The present article forms part of a broader research project aimed at investigating translation errors across major grammatical categories in English–Arabic literary translation and complements existing studies on student performance in translation classes (Dejica 2011; Dejica 2012; Toma and Dejica 2023). While

previous studies have addressed verbal and adjectival structures, the current study focuses specifically on gender in order to provide a more detailed account of its role in translation performance. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of translation outcomes with qualitative examination of error types. Drawing on a corpus of selected passages from Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* and translations produced by senior students, gender-related renderings are classified as similar, different or unattempted, allowing for a systematic evaluation of both accuracy and deviation.

The main objective of this article is to identify and interpret the patterns of error associated with gender in English–Arabic translation. By analyzing these patterns in relation to contrastive grammatical principles and translation theory, the study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how grammatical asymmetries affect translation processes and to provide a basis for more targeted pedagogical approaches in translator training.

2. Theoretical framework

The analysis of gender in English–Arabic translation must be situated within the broader theoretical framework of translation studies, where equivalence remains a central, albeit complex, concept. As emphasized in functionalist and communicative approaches, equivalence is not restricted to formal correspondence, but involves the accurate and contextually appropriate transfer of meaning between source and target texts (Nida 1964; Catford 1965; Koller 1979/1989; House 1977). In this respect, equivalence may be understood as operating simultaneously at semantic and syntactic levels, requiring the translator to balance structural correspondence with interpretive adequacy (Mansoor 2017). In this perspective, translation quality depends on the translator's ability to mediate between linguistic systems that may differ substantially in their grammatical organization, while preserving both meaning and communicative effect (Baker 2018; Hatim and Mason 1990).

Within this theoretical context, contrastive linguistics provides essential insights into the structural differences between English and Arabic that shape translation decisions. One of the most significant asymmetries concerns the category of gender. In English, grammatical gender plays a minimal role and is largely restricted to natural distinctions, while most nouns are not marked for gender. By contrast, Arabic exhibits a highly developed gender system, in which nouns are classified as masculine or feminine and participate in a complex network of agreement relations. Gender in Arabic interacts with number, definiteness and syntactic position, governing agreement not only within the noun phrase, but also across clauses, affecting adjectives, pronouns and verbs.

From a grammatical perspective, Arabic gender is not limited to natural or “real” gender, but includes formal and contextual classifications. Nouns may be identified as feminine through morphological markers, such as the suffix *-ō* (*taa marbuta*), or through lexical and usage-based conventions. These morphological and lexical features have been widely described in Arabic grammatical studies, which emphasise the interaction between form, function and usage in determining gender

assignment (Al-Jarf 1990; Haywood and Nahmad 2005). In addition, a number of inanimate nouns and abstract entities are assigned gender values independently of their semantic properties, which must be recognised and correctly applied in translation. This system creates inherent difficulties for translators working from English into Arabic, as they are required to assign gender values even when such distinctions are absent in the source text.

These structural differences have direct implications for translation equivalence. As shown in previous studies, students often encounter difficulties in applying grammatical rules consistently when moving from English to Arabic (Mansoor and Dejica 2025; Mansoor and Dejica 2026). While they may successfully identify lexical equivalents at the word level, they frequently struggle with agreement patterns at the level of phrases and clauses. This difficulty reflects the fact that gender in Arabic is not an isolated feature, but part of a broader agreement system that requires the coordinated marking of multiple grammatical elements.

In addition to morphological and syntactic considerations, gender also raises semantic and pragmatic issues in translation. In literary discourse, gender may contribute to stylistic nuance, personification and figurative meaning. From a cultural and semantic perspective, these aspects reflect the role of language in encoding worldviews and meaning structures, which must be carefully interpreted in translation (Katan 1999; Wierzbicka 1992). The assignment of gender can influence the interpretation of a text and may carry cultural or symbolic significance. As a result, the translator's task extends beyond grammatical correctness to include the preservation of these connotative dimensions. Failure to account for such factors may lead to translations that are formally accurate but pragmatically inadequate.

The present study adopts an analytical framework grounded in translation quality assessment, using a tripartite classification of translation outcomes: similar, different and unattempted translations (Mansoor 2017). Similar translations preserve both meaning and grammatical structure, different translations involve deviations or errors, and unattempted translations correspond to omissions. This model provides a systematic basis for evaluating translation performance and allows for both quantitative measurement and qualitative interpretation. By applying this framework to the category of gender, the study aims to capture the full range of difficulties encountered by student translators and to relate these difficulties to underlying linguistic and theoretical principles.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017) to investigate the translation of gender from English into Arabic. This methodological choice reflects the dual aim of the research, namely to identify recurrent patterns of error and to account for the linguistic and contextual factors underlying these difficulties. As highlighted in previous studies within the same research framework, the integration of quantitative measurement and qualitative interpretation allows for a more

comprehensive understanding of translation performance, addressing both the distribution of errors and their causes (Mansoor and Dejica 2025).

The corpus used for analysis consists of selected passages from Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley*, translated into English by Trevor Le Gassick (1975) and subsequently rendered into Modern Standard Arabic by student translators. The literary nature of the corpus provides an appropriate context for examining gender in translation, as such texts often contain complex syntactic structures and allow for the interaction of grammatical, semantic and stylistic features. The selected passages include both simple lexical items and extended constructions at phrase and clause levels, thus enabling the analysis of gender across multiple linguistic environments.

The participants in the study were ten senior-level students enrolled in a translation studies programme. All participants had completed courses in translation theory and practice, as well as advanced grammar in both English and Arabic, and were therefore expected to possess a sufficient level of linguistic competence to engage in the task. They were selected on a voluntary basis and were instructed to translate the selected passages into Modern Standard Arabic. In order to approximate authentic translation conditions, students were allowed to consult dictionaries and other reference materials during the task. This relatively homogeneous group allows for the identification of systematic patterns of difficulty, while still reflecting variation in performance.

The analytical framework employed in this study follows a model of translation quality assessment based on a tripartite classification of translation outcomes: similar, different and unattempted translations (Mansoor 2017). Similar translations are defined as those which preserve both the semantic content and the grammatical structure of the source text, reflecting an adequate level of equivalence. Different translations include instances where the target text deviates from the source in terms of grammatical agreement, lexical choice or contextual appropriateness, resulting in errors or partial inaccuracies. Unattempted translations correspond to cases in which the translator omits the relevant element, either entirely or partially, often due to uncertainty or difficulty in identifying an appropriate equivalent.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. The quantitative component involved calculating the frequency of each category of translation outcome across the dataset, expressed in numerical and percentage terms. This step made it possible to identify general trends and to determine the extent to which gender-related issues affect translation accuracy at different levels of linguistic complexity. The qualitative component consisted of a detailed examination of the translations classified as different or unattempted, focusing on the specific types of errors involved. Particular attention was given to problems of gender assignment, agreement between grammatical elements, and the interaction between gender and other categories such as number and syntactic structure.

By combining these two analytical dimensions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive account of gender as a translation problem, linking observable patterns of error to underlying grammatical and contrastive factors. The

methodological continuity with previous research on verbs and adjectives ensures comparability of results across grammatical categories, while the specific focus on gender allows for a more detailed exploration of a linguistic feature that remains insufficiently addressed in English–Arabic translation studies (Mansoor and Dejica 2026).

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of gender in English–Arabic translation reveals a differentiated pattern of difficulty, depending on the level of linguistic complexity and the nature of the items involved. As indicated by the quantitative results, the proportion of “similar translations” is relatively high at the word level, while “different translations” become more frequent at the level of phrases and clauses. This distribution suggests that gender is generally manageable when it is transparent and lexically established, but becomes problematic when it interacts with syntactic structure and agreement patterns.

At the word level, a considerable number of items were translated accurately by the majority of students. Examples such as “life” → *حياة*, “star” → *كوكب*, and “threshold” → *عتبة* were rendered similarly by seven out of ten participants, indicating a high degree of familiarity with gender assignment in commonly used lexical items. In such cases, gender is perceived as an inherent property of the noun, and its correct identification does not require complex grammatical processing. These results confirm that, when gender is morphologically or lexically transparent, student translators are able to produce accurate equivalents and maintain appropriate agreement at the word level.

However, the analysis also shows that this level of accuracy does not extend systematically to more complex structures. At the phrase and clause levels, where gender interacts with agreement and syntactic organization, the proportion of “different translations” increases significantly. For instance, structures such as “all things are at his command” → *كل شيء بأمره* and “and all things belong to him” → *وله كل شيء* were translated differently by six participants, while only three produced similar translations. These examples illustrate that difficulties arise when gender agreement must be maintained across larger units, particularly in constructions involving abstract nouns, pronouns or complex referential relations.

A central source of error concerns gender agreement within the grammatical system of Arabic. As previously discussed, gender in Arabic governs agreement between nouns and other elements such as adjectives, verbs and pronouns. The data indicates that students frequently fail to establish consistent agreement in such contexts, particularly when the controlling noun is ambiguous or when it does not display overt morphological marking. These findings are consistent with contrastive linguistic accounts which emphasise the complexity of agreement systems in Arabic and their implications for translation (Aziz 1989; Haywood and Nahmad 2005). In several cases, masculine nouns were incorrectly associated with feminine forms, or vice versa, leading to inconsistencies within the same structure. These errors confirm

that students often rely on surface-level cues and struggle to apply agreement rules systematically in more demanding contexts.

Further difficulties are evident in the treatment of inanimate and abstract nouns, which are assigned gender values in Arabic independently of semantic distinctions. While such nouns may be correctly identified in isolation, their behaviour within syntactic structures often generates confusion. As the data shows, translators encounter problems when gender agreement is determined not by the natural gender of the referent, but by grammatical conventions specific to Arabic. This is particularly visible in cases where inanimate plural nouns are treated as feminine singular, a rule that requires a level of grammatical awareness that is not consistently reflected in student performance.

Another significant source of difficulty concerns the interaction between gender and structural complexity. The analysis reveals that accuracy decreases as translation units become more complex, especially in relative clauses, coordinated structures and extended noun phrases. For example, constructions such as “they gathered around him, comforting and consoling him” → فأحاطوا به معزّين مواسين or “they no sooner arrived before they filled the air with gossip” → ما إن وصلوا المكان حتى ملأوه were translated differently by a majority of students, often accompanied by omissions or partial renderings. These results indicate that gender is not an isolated category, but one that interacts with syntactic organization and broader discourse structures, requiring integrated processing rather than isolated rule application.

Omission also represents a recurrent phenomenon in the dataset, particularly in cases where gender-related elements are embedded in complex constructions. Instances of “unattempted translation” occur when students avoid rendering elements that require agreement or where gender assignment is uncertain. This behaviour suggests a lack of confidence in handling structurally complex segments and indicates a tendency to prioritise simplified structures over full equivalence.

When compared to previous findings on verbs and adjectives, both similarities and distinctions emerge. As in the case of other grammatical categories, students display a reliance on literal translation and an insufficient use of contextual analysis (Mansoor and Dejica 2025; Mansoor and Dejica 2026). However, gender-related errors are more closely associated with agreement systems and grammatical consistency, rather than with semantic nuance alone. While lexical items are often correctly identified, their integration into the target-language structure remains problematic, particularly in contexts requiring coordination across multiple grammatical elements.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that gender in English–Arabic translation poses a layered and multifaceted challenge. While students are able to handle gender at the lexical level, they encounter increasing difficulty as they move towards syntactically and semantically complex structures. The predominance of “different” and, in some cases, “unattempted” translations confirms that the main obstacle lies not in the identification of gender per se, but in the consistent application of agreement and the integration of gender within the broader grammatical system of the target language.

5. Recommendations for Translators and Translation Lecturers

The findings of the present study indicate that the translation of gender from English into Arabic poses a series of systematic challenges that require targeted pedagogical and practical responses. While student translators demonstrate a relatively strong ability to handle gender at the lexical level, their performance deteriorates as soon as gender interacts with agreement and syntactic structure. This imbalance suggests that translation competence in this area must be developed beyond isolated grammatical knowledge and integrated into broader linguistic and contextual awareness.

For translators, the first recommendation concerns the consolidation of contrastive grammatical competence, particularly with regard to gender assignment and agreement patterns in Arabic. As shown in Section 4, lexical items such as *حياة* ('life') or *كوكب* ('star') are translated accurately due to familiarity, yet difficulties arise when these items are embedded in more complex structures requiring agreement across multiple elements. Translators must therefore develop a more systematic approach to recognizing gender not only as an inherent property of nouns, but also as a central factor governing syntactic relations. This involves paying close attention to how gender affects adjectives, pronouns and verbs within the same structure, and ensuring that agreement is consistently maintained throughout the target text.

A second recommendation relates to the treatment of inanimate and abstract nouns, which constitute a major source of confusion. Since gender in Arabic extends beyond natural distinctions and includes lexically determined categories, translators must acquire a deeper understanding of how such nouns function within the grammatical system. The tendency observed in the data to misassign gender in cases where no explicit morphological marker is present reflects an incomplete awareness of these conventions. Translators should therefore be encouraged to engage with authentic Arabic texts and grammatical references in order to internalise these patterns and apply them more reliably in translation.

Another important aspect concerns the interaction between gender and structural complexity. The data clearly shows that accuracy decreases at the level of phrases and clauses, where gender agreement must be coordinated across several elements. Constructions such as *فأحاطو به معززين مواسين أو بأمره كل شئ* require not only correct gender assignment, but also integration with broader syntactic patterns. Translators should therefore develop strategies for analysing complex structures as units of meaning, rather than as a sequence of individual words. This includes identifying the controlling noun within the structure and tracing its influence on other grammatical elements.

In addition, translators must move beyond literal translation strategies, which tend to prioritise lexical correspondence at the expense of grammatical coherence. As in previous studies on verbs and adjectives (Mansoor and Dejica 2025; Mansoor and Dejica 2026), the reliance on word-for-word translation leads to inconsistencies in agreement and structural breakdown at higher levels of analysis. A more context-oriented approach is required, in which the translator considers the function of each element within the sentence and adapts it to the norms of the target language.

The issue of omission also deserves attention. The presence of “unattempted translations” in structurally complex contexts suggests that students often avoid elements that require careful gender agreement. While simplification may appear to facilitate the translation process, it ultimately reduces textual cohesion and leads to a loss of meaning. Translators should therefore be encouraged to develop inferencing skills and to engage more actively with challenging segments rather than omitting them.

For translation lecturers, the findings highlight the need for more explicit and applied instruction in gender systems within Arabic. Although students are typically familiar with the theoretical classification of gender, they encounter difficulties in applying this knowledge in translation tasks. Grammar teaching should therefore be integrated with translation practice, focusing on real examples drawn from literary texts and emphasising the functional role of gender in sentence construction. Exercises should be designed to address common problem areas, such as agreement mismatches, inanimate noun classification, and gender assignment in complex structures.

Furthermore, the use of authentic literary corpora, such as *Midaq Alley*, proves particularly valuable in exposing students to the full range of gender-related phenomena. Such texts illustrate how gender operates not only at the grammatical level, but also within discourse, contributing to cohesion, emphasis and stylistic expression. Classroom discussions should therefore encourage comparative analysis of translations, allowing students to evaluate different solutions and to refine their understanding of gender in context.

Finally, lecturers should foster a reflective approach to translation, encouraging students to justify their choices and to identify the sources of their errors. The variability observed in the data suggests that many difficulties arise not from a complete lack of knowledge, but from inconsistency in its application. By promoting critical awareness and systematic revision practices, translation training can help students achieve greater coherence and accuracy in their work.

In sum, the recommendations derived from this study underline the importance of integrating grammatical precision, structural analysis and contextual interpretation in the teaching and practice of translation. Addressing the specific challenges associated with gender can contribute significantly to improving translation quality and to developing more competent and confident translators in the English–Arabic context.

6. Conclusion

The present study has examined the role of gender in English–Arabic literary translation, focusing on the performance of senior-level student translators and adopting a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative analysis. The findings confirm that gender constitutes a significant source of difficulty, not because of its identification at the lexical level, but because of its integration into the broader grammatical system of the target language.

The results show that student translators are generally able to assign gender correctly when dealing with isolated lexical items, particularly those that are familiar or morphologically transparent. However, this competence diminishes as soon as gender interacts with syntactic structure and agreement patterns. At the level of phrases and clauses, the frequency of “different translations” increases, reflecting difficulties in maintaining consistent agreement across nouns, adjectives, pronouns and verbs. These findings indicate that gender is not an isolated grammatical feature, but a relational category that operates within a network of dependencies, requiring coordinated processing rather than individual rule application.

The analysis has further shown that the main challenges arise in cases where gender is not explicitly marked or where it is determined by grammatical convention rather than semantic criteria. Inanimate and abstract nouns, as well as complex syntactic constructions, generate a high rate of error and, in some instances, omission. These difficulties reflect the asymmetry between English and Arabic, where the absence of grammatical gender in the source language obliges the translator to make interpretive decisions in the target language. Such decisions require not only grammatical knowledge, but also contextual awareness and sensitivity to target-language norms.

When considered in relation to previous research on verbal and adjectival translation (Mansoor and Dejica 2025; Mansoor and Dejica 2026), the findings of the present study reinforce the view that translation competence involves the integrated management of multiple grammatical categories. While verbs and adjectives pose challenges related to tense, aspect, agreement and semantic nuance, gender introduces an additional layer of complexity that affects the overall coherence of the target text. The persistence of literal translation strategies and the insufficient application of contrastive grammatical knowledge across all three categories point to a need for more systematic and practice-oriented approaches in translator training.

Despite its limited sample size and focus on a single literary corpus, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender as a translation problem in the English–Arabic context. By identifying recurrent error patterns and linking them to underlying grammatical and contrastive factors, it provides a solid basis for both pedagogical intervention and further research. Future studies may extend this analysis to other text types or explore the development of gender competence across different levels of translation expertise.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that successful translation of gender from English into Arabic requires more than accurate lexical selection. It depends on the translator’s ability to integrate grammatical precision with structural awareness and contextual interpretation. Developing such competence is essential for achieving consistency, coherence and overall translation quality in this language pair.

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