

Inclusive Language -- Note! This is an excerpt from a larger paper by Rod Decker.

The second preliminary issue that should be summarized relates to inclusive language. The controversies here have been even greater than those related to translation philosophy in general. It is particularly acute in the political-cultural context of the West at the beginning of the 21st century due to the ideological issues raised by feminism, both in the secular, political arena and in the theological, ecclesiastical arena. The issues involve how reference is made in a translation to the sex of the individuals referenced in the text.¹⁸

Current “politically correct” usage is never to identify the sex of an individual referenced, especially if both men and women are intended. This supposedly avoids denigrating women. Especially objectionable to this ideology is the use of a masculine pronoun as a generic term that refers to both men and women. There may be some languages which have a generic, third person singular personal pronoun, but English does not. Traditional usage for centuries has been the use of “he” in such contexts (e.g., “when the taxpayer votes, he votes with his pocketbook”). It is also worth noting that the grammatical category of gender is not a language universal; some languages have it, some don’t.¹⁹

In such an agenda-driven context, traditional references in Bible translation have been challenged, either on an activist basis, or on the basis of avoiding offense. Several translations, including the *NRSV* and *TNIV*, have actively sought to implement some level of inclusive language. Such changes have been controversial, to say the least. The release of the *TNIV* NT in 2002 has sparked the most recent firestorm. It is not the purpose of this article to engage that controversy or to evaluate the *TNIV*. To provide an adequate basis for discussion of the *ESV*, the following paragraphs sketch some of the grammatical features of the Greek of the NT that are relevant to the issues raised by inclusive language.

The grammatical category of gender is relatively rare in English if compared with Greek. Nouns and verbal forms in English do not have grammatical gender. The only portion of our language which has gender is the personal pronoun, and then only in third person singular. First person (“I” and “we”) and second person (“you”) use the same form regardless of the sex of the referent.²⁰ Third person plural pronouns (“they,” “them,” etc.) likewise do not distinguish sex reference. Only in third person singular do we have

¹⁸ This is often referred to as a “gender issue,” but gender is most properly a grammatical term, not a physiological one. It is used, perhaps, as a euphemism for a more explicit term such as “sex.”

¹⁹ Most oriental languages, for example, have no gender system, nor do most of the American Indian languages. Other languages have as many as thirty different genders! See the details in Carson, *ILD*, 77–98.

²⁰ Gender and sex are inter-related categories even though they should properly be distinguished on a formal and referential basis. When there is a correspondence between the two categories which seems “normal” to an English speaker (i.e., a masculine gender pronoun is used to refer to someone of the male sex) it is designated as natural gender. But one must remember that languages vary wildly in this regard and what seems normal and natural to an English speaker would seem quite odd to one who speaks another language with a different gender system.

masculine and feminine forms (“he,” “she,” and “it”). In this case English follows natural gender. That is, persons (and animals) of the male sex are referenced with masculine gender pronouns, females with feminine, and inanimate or sexless referents receive neuter gender pronouns. (There are a few traditional exceptions in English such as ships which have traditionally received feminine gender pronouns, but even here the word “ship” or the names given to ships have no special *form* to mark gender.)

In Greek the grammatical conventions are quite different. Nouns *all* have gender. Every Greek noun is either masculine, feminine, or neuter—and this is explicitly encoded in the grammatical form of the word. Masculine nouns are usually second or third declension (rarely first), and always take a masculine article (if they have an article). Feminine nouns are usually first or third declension (rarely second) and always take a feminine article. Neuter nouns are always second or third declension (never first) and always take a neuter article. The grammatical gender of a noun is fixed and never varies regardless of context or reference.²¹ Furthermore, the grammatical gender is fixed by convention, not by the sex (or lack thereof) of the referent. For example, τέκνον (child) is always neuter gender—and that whether it refers to a male (Mk. 21:28) or a female (1 Pt. 3:6), or whether it refers to either or both (Lk. 1:7). The word for hand (χείρ) is feminine gender regardless of whether it is a man’s hand (Mt. 12:10), a woman’s hand (Mk. 1:31), and angel’s hand (Acts 7:35), or the “hand” of a sword (a metaphorical reference to the power of the sword, 1 Clement 56:9; Job 5:20).²²

The article is also inflected for gender. Rather than the “a, an, the” of English, Greek has but one article, although it may occur in any one of 24 forms depending, in part, on whether it is masculine (ὁ, οἱ, etc.), feminine (ἡ, αἱ, etc.), or neuter (τό, τά, etc.).

Adjectives in Greek are also gender-inflected. Adjectives that modify nouns will always agree with that noun in gender. They may be used to modify a noun of any gender (i.e., there is not a separate noun for each gender), and receive the appropriate masculine, feminine, or neuter suffix based on the gender of the noun.²³ Substantival adjectives are inflected for gender based on the noun for which they substitute. For example, ὁ καλός (the good) could refer to a good man since it is used with a masculine article and has a masculine ending. Since Greek uses the masculine form as the generic term, it could also refer to a good person. Context must decide which reference the author intends. If reference were made to a good woman, the form would more likely be feminine, ἡ καλή.

²¹ There are a very few words which can be either masculine or feminine, though in any given instance they are either one or the other (usually indicated by the article, sometimes by declension as well), e.g. ἄρκος, ου, ὁ/ἡ, bear; θεός, οὔ, ὁ/ἡ, God, god, goddess; παῖς, παιδός, ὁ/ἡ, child; and ὄνος, ου, ὁ/ἡ, donkey.

²² Similar illustrations could be given with κοράσιον (little girl, neuter), παιδάριον (little boy, neuter), κεφαλή (head, feminine), γαστήρ (stomach, feminine), πούς (foot, neuter), δάκτυλος (finger, masculine), ὄμμα (eye, neuter), or στήθος (breast, neuter).

²³ Some adjectives use the same form for masculine and feminine (e.g., αἰώνιος, ον, eternal; ἀληθής, ἔς, true). For a complete listing and discussion, see Mounce, *Morphology of Biblical Greek*, 230–38.

Pronouns are also gender-marked in Greek. This is true of personal pronouns, though only of third person singular (first and second person pronouns are generic as in English): αὐτός, αὐτή, αὐτό are masculine, feminine, and neuter forms respectively. But this is only a *grammatical* category, not an ontological one since αὐτός functions in Greek not only to refer to males (natural gender),²⁴ but also as a generic pronoun which can refer to men and women alike,²⁵ or to inanimate objects.²⁶ Likewise the demonstrative pronouns grammaticalize gender: οὗτος, αὕτη, τοῦτο (near), and the far demonstrative, ἐκεῖνος, η, ο. Once again, the masculine form οὗτος may also be used generically and thus represented in English either as “this,” “this one,” “this man,” “this person,” “he,” or (in plural) “these” or “these people.”²⁷ Also marked for gender are the relative pronoun (ὅς, ἥ, ὅ), possessive pronouns (first person: ἐμός, ἡ, ὄν and the plural ἡμέτερος, α, ον; second person: σός, σή, σόν and the plural ὑμέτερος, α, ον), reflexive pronouns (first person: ἑαυτοῦ, ἡς; third person: ἑαυτοῦ, ἡς, οῦ),²⁸ interrogative pronouns (τίς, τί and ποῖος, α, ον), and the indefinite pronoun (τις, τι).²⁹

Of the verbal forms, neither finite verbs (e.g., λύω) nor infinitives (λύειν) have gender, but the participle is inflected to indicate gender: λύων is masculine, λύουσα is feminine, and λῦον is neuter. Adjectival participles normally agree with the gender of the subject of the verb they modify. The translation of a Greek participle into English is quite flexible since the Greek participle is used in a much wider range of grammatical contexts than is the English participle.

There is also considerable diversity in translation as to how one might reflect the gender system of Greek as it interacts with the participle. A masculine singular substantival participle, e.g., ἀκούων, might be translated as “the one who hears,” or “whoever hears,” or “he who hears,” or as “the man who hears.” Any one of these translation options are legitimate, depending on the context in which the participle is found. The most general

²⁴ E.g., John 9:17, τί σὺ λέγεις περὶ αὐτοῦ...; (what do you say concerning *him*?), in which the masculine pronoun αὐτοῦ refers to Jesus.

²⁵ E.g., Rom. 2:6, ὃς ἀποδώσει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ (who will give to each one according to *his* work), in which the masculine αὐτοῦ refers back to the distributive ἐκάστῳ (each one, or each person). On the generic use of αὐτός see Mark Strauss, “Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. G. Scorgie, M. Strauss, and S. Voth, 115–41 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 127–30.

²⁶ E.g., Matt. 5:15, οὐδὲ καίουσιν λύχνον καὶ τιθέασιν αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τὸν μῶδιον (neither do they light a lamp and place *it* under a basket), in which case the masculine αὐτόν refers back to λύχνον, an inanimate object for which we use the pronoun *it* in English. In this case a masculine form of αὐτός is used because the antecedent is masculine (λύχνος, ου, ὅ).

²⁷ As an example of a generic reference, see John 15:5 in which οὗτος refers to the one who abides in Christ—which might be a man or woman (also Matt. 5:19; 10:22; 18:4; 24:13). For an inanimate reference, see Matt. 7:12 where οὗτος refers to a teaching (also Matt. 13:19, 20, 22, 23).

²⁸ The second person reflexive pronoun, σεαυτοῦ, is not inflected for gender, nor is the reciprocal pronoun, ἀλλήλων.

²⁹ A similar range of usage in terms of generic use could be demonstrated for most of these pronouns as well, but the point has been adequately illustrated.

translation—and often the best choice—is “the one who hears.” Sometimes the context makes it clear that the participle refers to a male who is performing the action described by the participle. In this case the more specific “he who ...” or “the man who ...” may be more appropriate.³⁰

The preceding discussion illustrates some of the complexities of “gender language” in Bible translation. The specific issues that are being debated are legion, but they are not the focus of the present essay, even though some of them will surface in the discussion of the ESV which follows.

The above excerpt is only a temporary posting and will eventually be replaced with a much larger review article on the ESV. This section is posted presently due to discussion on the b-greek list.

Rodney J. Decker, Th.D.
Assoc. Prof./NT
Baptist Bible Seminary
Clarks Summit, PA 18411
Copyright 2004. All rights reserved.

³⁰ Some translations tend to use one or the other of these options as the default for participles. If one of the two more specific translations is employed as the default, there may be a tendency to make the text sound more specific in English than it is in Greek. The NIV sometimes seems to default to “the man who ...” for such participles. For example, note the translation of the participles in John 3:33; 10:1, 2; 12:25 *bis*, 35, 44; 15:5. In other cases such a specific translation is justified given the referent indicated in the context, for examples of which see John 5:10, 11, 13; 10:21; 11:39, 44; 19:35, 39.