

# Language and Inclusivity in the Media: University Students' Reception of Gender-Sensitive Subtitles

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**Language and Inclusivity in the Media:  
University Students' Reception of Gender-Sensitive Subtitles**

Master's Thesis

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## **Abstract**

Gender-sensitive language has gained prominence in contemporary discourse due to its perceived influence on gender equality. Despite increasing interest in gender-sensitive language, few studies have been conducted on its reception in audiovisual products. While previous studies have examined speakers' attitudes towards gender-sensitive language, the reactions and attitudes to contextually situated examples of gender-sensitive language have largely been overlooked. This thesis aims to address this gap by examining students' reception of gender-sensitive language in subtitles translated from English into Croatian. An anonymous online survey consisting of three video clips, each with three different versions of subtitles varying in gender sensitivity, was distributed to Croatian university students, gathering 102 responses. Students were asked to rate the acceptability and readability of the subtitles on a 5-point Likert scale and choose their preferred subtitle version. Open-ended questions were included in the survey to gather qualitative input. Although the results indicate students' preference for the generic masculine forms, they also reveal nuances in the reception of gender-sensitive subtitles. More importantly, they reveal a gender-based divergence in reception. These results suggest that while conventional linguistic forms continue to be the preferred choice, there is growing acceptance of alternative subtitling practices that need to be studied.

**Keywords:** gender-sensitive language, generic masculine, audiovisual translation, subtitling, reception study

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## 1. Introduction

Although gender-sensitive language has been debated in the West since the 1960s, it has gained significant traction in recent years. Due to the increasing visibility of different social identities and the emergence of new ones, gender-sensitive language has become a prevalent topic in both public and academic discourse. As society strives to achieve equality and inclusion, greater emphasis is placed on how gender is construed and expressed through language. This larger sociocultural and ideological shift is being reflected across numerous sectors and industries. In recognition of the pivotal role that they play in shaping and influencing public discourse, the media and audiovisual sector have widely adopted guidelines for gender-sensitive language use (Impartiality and Editorial Standards Action Plan, 2021; Directive (EU) 2018/1808).

As mass media continue to reconfigure and echo these linguistic changes, the challenge of producing faithful translations that will appeal to broader audiences arises. Subtitles play a significant role in broadening the reach of audiovisual content to global audiences. However, numerous linguistic and technical limitations constrain them. The translation of gender-sensitive language from languages with natural gender into languages with grammatical gender presents multiple challenges. Confined by the rules of grammar, as well as societal expectations, the translator's choices are not always simple and clear-cut. Moreover, the public often has negative reactions to gender-sensitive language, arguing that it is distracting, unintelligible, and oppressive (Blaubergs, 1980; Vergoossen et al., 2020; Đorđević, Janković & Nikolić, 2022; Ivanová & Kysel'ová, 2022). Although several studies have investigated speakers' attitudes towards gender-sensitive language, there is a research gap in examining audience reception towards gender-sensitive translations, especially in languages with more rigid gender structures. To mend this gap, this master's thesis explores audience reception of gender-sensitive subtitles translated from English into Croatian. The main research questions examine whether younger audiences strongly prefer the traditional, generic masculine forms in subtitles, or if they are more open to linguistic change. The research hopes to contribute to translation studies by offering data on the specific needs, expectations, and preferences of the target audience, which are also reflective of broader sociopolitical shifts. Moreover, the research may provide valuable insight into how different demographic factors influence the reception of gender-sensitive language. Finally, the research provides suggestions for producing inclusive, yet widely acceptable, translations.

## 2. Gender-Sensitive Language

### 2.1 Historical Development

Deborah Cameron (2012) made it clear in *Verbal Hygiene* that “people do not merely speak their language, they also speak copiously and passionately about it” (p. viii). A case in point is the ongoing controversy surrounding gender-sensitive language, which continuously sparks debate and public outcry. Yet, contrary to the intensity of attitudes and disputes surrounding the matter, this debate is not recent. As post-structuralism emerged in the late 1960s, it challenged the existing power structures and questioned universal narratives. It emphasized the role of language and dominant discourse in maintaining and perpetuating differences in power. As Stefanović and Spasić (2019) explain, the notion that any vocabulary could assume privileged access to truth was disputed, signalling a democratic intervention in language and the discursive construction of cultural spheres. Marginalized voices excluded from dominant discourse were beginning to be heard as they challenged the status quo. “Discourse was being fashioned in accordance with the belief in the power of language, the power of the human capacity to construct social realities through language, and the power of change” (Stefanović & Spasić, 2019, p. 152). Recognizing the connection between language and ideology, feminists began to examine the relationship between language usage and gender asymmetries: “It was realised that an intimate link between language and ideology existed, and that by studying language use, one could discover a great deal about the ways in which societies function and the way that individuals and groups construct identities and cultures” (Mills & Mullany, 2011, p. 1). Language was no longer merely a method of communication, nor a mirror that simply reflected our reality. It came to be seen as an instrument capable of sustaining or mitigating social injustices. So, as the women’s movement gained strong momentum during the 1970s, the notion of sexist and gender-discriminatory language became a glaring issue within Western feminist circles. It was argued that sexist language, which has been defined as “words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender” (Parks & Robertson, 1998a, p. 455; as cited in Parks & Robertson, 2000), perpetuated prejudice and social inequality. During that time, multiple discussions on the existence of sexism in language appeared, “e.g. Densmore (1970), Greer (1971), Miller and Swift (1972), One (1971), and Toth (1970)” (Blaubergs, 1980, p. 135). Most of these publications focused on the non-generic nature of masculine terminology. As this area of academic inquiry developed, new theories emerged. Lakoff (1973) examined “Women’s language” and how women’s subordinate status is reflected and reinforced through the language they are expected to use, as

well as through the language used to portray them. She explains how this language presents itself in all levels of English grammar: “We find differences in the choice and frequency of lexical items; in the situations in which certain syntactic rules are performed; in intonational and other suprasegmental patterns” (Lakoff, 1973, p. 49). Since then, this area has flourished and earned its rightful place across disciplines. Today, it remains as relevant as ever.

## **2.2 Key Concepts**

In light of recent social and political movements, as well as the increasing visibility of different social identities, debates on gender-sensitive language have again been moved to the centre of public attention. Considerable efforts have been made to actualize gender-inclusive language, whose purpose is “to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex or social gender is the norm” (European Parliament, 2018). Currently, these efforts are echoed across the globe, with an abundance of guidelines, toolkits, and recommendations for public use.

Likewise, there are numerous definitions for gender-sensitive language, which are often used interchangeably, in conjunction, or even in contrast. To avoid confusion, this thesis uses the following definition of gender-sensitive language:

Gender-sensitive language is defined as the “realization of gender equality in written and spoken language attained when women and men and those who do not conform to the binary gender system are made visible and addressed in language as persons of equal value, dignity, integrity, and respect” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024).

The rationale for using this relatively broad and overarching definition lies in the belief that both gender-neutral language, sometimes also referred to as gender-blind language, as well as gender-inclusive language, can be used to express gender awareness. Due to the divergence of discourses, which are often contradictory and incompatible, there is no uniform approach to gender inclusivity. Although some individuals may find gender-blind language less inclusive due to its inability to make marginalized groups visible through lack of explicit reference, it may be the preferable option when dealing with non-binary identities. In contrast, gender-discriminatory language is used to denote language opposite to gender-sensitive language. It is defined as language that “includes words, phrases and/or other linguistic features that foster stereotypes, or demean or ignore women or men” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). It is important to note that, unlike sexist language, there is rarely a deliberate intention to be sexist or derogatory. For instance, Slavic languages are typically imbued with

patriarchalism and heteronormative structures that some users of language may consider to be discriminatory.

### **2.3 Debate over Gender-Sensitive Language**

All these definitions share the idea that language plays a pivotal role in either fostering or overcoming gender discrimination, stereotypes, and inequality. Many advocates of gender-sensitive language believe it promotes social change and increases the visibility of different gender identities. There is a well-established belief that language mirrors the extra-linguistic reality and helps us better understand the world and its complex social dynamics:

Language reflects the thoughts, attitudes, and culture of the people who use it; a rich vocabulary on a certain topic denotes increased interest in that area, the presence of negative or positive connotations for the same denoted concept betrays prejudicial feelings about the subject discussed (Suciu, 2015, p. 238).

Gender, on the other hand, refers to the “combination of socio-cultural roles assigned to people in a systematic and structural way according to their sex” (Scott, 1986, as cited in Castro, 2010, p. 106). Language can therefore offer valuable insight into how we conceptualize gender and the corresponding social roles we assign to it. Additionally, it may be indicative of broader social structures, the underlying mechanisms responsible for their formation, and our overall value system. Nonetheless, certain authors believe that it may also influence our perception of reality, as well as our attitudes and conduct.

Relative to that belief, language usage not only explains how we construe the world, but also impacts its construal, influencing our perceptions and providing meaning to the extra-linguistic. For instance, Castro (2010) argues that the linguistic representation of men and women has a cognitive dimension and contributes to the construction of social roles. In the same manner, the use of sexist or gender-discriminatory language could potentially contribute to the negative treatment of different groups in society. Parks and Robertson (2000) state that this “concern about the negative effects of sexist language is grounded in the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which suggests an affinity between language and culture” (Cameron, 1985; Carroll, 1956; Simpson, 1993; Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley, 1983, as cited in Parks & Robertson, 2000, p. 415). It is important to note that linguistic determinism, or the strong version of this hypothesis, encountered a lot of criticism and has largely been discredited: “Most linguists and psychologists today are sceptical about the strong version of the Whorfian claim that language determines perceptions, but on the weaker claim that it can



influence perceptions there is conflicting evidence” (Cameron, 2012, p. 142). Despite the potential influence of language on our thinking, it does not determine it. Users of certain languages may find it easier to discern and point out some issues due to their language’s heightened sensitivity to such matters, but this does not mean that users of other languages cannot even think about them.

Nevertheless, Parks and Roberton (2000) remark that the moderate version holds truth, as previous research has shown that “culture and language are intertwined such that the meanings people ascribe to language affect their realities, their self-concepts, and their world views” (Bing, 1992; Lakoff, 1973; Miller & Swift, 1988; Parks & Roberton, 1998a, 1998b, as cited in Parks & Roberton, 2000, p. 415). Language then does not determine the scope of thought, but it does influence the thoughts that are evoked. For example, Gabriel, Gygax and Kuhn (2018) argue that “the way a language grammatically encodes the gender of referents may have important social and cognitive consequences for comprehension and production” (p. 846). Several of these claims have been empirically proven, as “research has consistently revealed that masculine generics evoke a male bias in mental representations and make readers or listeners think more of male than female exemplars of a person category” (Stahlberg et al., 2007, as cited in Sczesny, Formanowicz, & Moser, 2016). Parks and Roberton (2000) also confirm that masculine generics produce masculine images or confusion in the receivers’ minds (Bodine, 1975; Hamilton, 1988; Khosroshahi, 1989; Kidd, 1971; Martyna, 1978; McConnell & Fazio, 1996; Merritt & Kok, 1995; Moulton, Robinson, & Elias, 1978; Schneider & Hacker, 1973; Stericker, 1981, as cited in Parks & Roberton, 2000, p. 417). The vast amount of research appears to challenge the presumed genericness of the generic masculine. Furthermore, some research even points to the existence of broader real-life implications. Ivanová & Kyseľová (2022) write that “there have been many experiments which discovered that generic masculine forms diminish the willingness of women to apply for various jobs and thus perpetuate gender inequality in male-dominated areas” (Born – Tavis 2010; Gaucher et al. 2011, as cited in Ivanová & Kyseľová, 2022, p. 408). In essence, most proponents of gender-sensitive language believe its implementation will help reduce gender asymmetries and discrimination prevalent in society. However, extensive research is needed to confirm these claims. For others, it is simply a matter of respect for their interlocutor.

Although most people would agree that it is important to pay attention to gender asymmetries in language, as they can provide valuable insight into extra-linguistic disparities, for some, it remains the sole valid and consequential approach. In other words, they believe

that gender-sensitive language will not solve social issues but will only highlight the issues that require changing. As Lakoff (1973) explains, “linguistic imbalances are worthy of study because they bring into sharper focus real-world imbalances and inequities. They are clues that some external situation needs changing, rather than items that one should seek to change directly” (p. 73). Likewise, Lakoff (1973) and Suci (2015) argue that social change creates language change, not the other way around. Cameron (2012) asserts this is not a binary choice, and that one can advocate for both. For others, language is a trivial concern that takes away from actual problems that require solving. This is a prevalent argument against gender-sensitive language identified by numerous researchers. For instance, Blaug (1980) mentions the most common arguments against changing “sexist” language in her typology. Alongside, she lists other popular arguments, such as that language change is coercive and takes away freedom of speech, and that it is difficult, inconvenient, and impractical (Blaug, 1980). Cameron (2012) also mentions that a frequently advanced argument is that it makes light of politics by taking the focus away from reality and placing it on language. She also mentions the common argument that it abuses language and destroys freedom (Cameron, 2012). Many users of language share this opinion and believe that change should happen “naturally” and spontaneously, rather than through intervention and imposition. Some would also consider it a form of ideological manipulation and oppression; as Stefanović & Spasić (2019) note, it is often questioned when this linguistic caprice blurs the line between social constructs and social engineering. Vergoossen et al. (2020) introduce another overarching dimension of criticism against gender-sensitive language labelled “Distractor in Communication”, which focuses on the concern that gender-sensitive language may lead to a lack of effective communication and may even distract readers and divert their attention from the content. Some users find that using certain gender-sensitive strategies, such as parallel forms, is grammatically redundant and affects the intelligibility and clarity of the text (Ćorić 2008, p. 207, as cited in Đorđević, Janković & Nikolić, 2022, p. 431). Ivanová & Kyseľová (2022) also encountered the same arguments in their research, where opponents often objected to pair-forms because they lowered the text's readability and were stylistically less adequate. Essentially, Cameron (2012) writes that such discourse is “symbolic of a bewildering range of affiliations” (p.160), such as gender, sexual preference, or subculture, which is why complaints about language are paralleled by anxieties about larger social changes. It is the politicization of language that causes people discomfort, as it shakes them out of their complacency and prompts them to take a stand.

### **3. Translating Gender-Sensitive Language**

#### **3.1 Translation Policy**

Irrespective of one's opinions on the matter, it is important to remember that language policy includes translation policy. It is impossible for the translator to refrain from taking a position on the matter. Even by choosing to ignore the issue, one then settles for the status quo, which is itself a stand on the issue. The choices that a translator makes are neither objective nor arbitrary. The translator's approach to the translation may either conform to the dominant politics of the target language culture or go against them. Kuzderová & Bednárová-Gibová (2021) state that the actions of translators are not arbitrary, but entrenched in culture and history, influenced by the ideologies of both the source and target culture. Therefore, we are unable to produce a target text without considering the interplay between language, culture, and ideology. "A text, whether it is a translation or an original, always results from a certain environment, a cultural space, thus taking on the elements of an ideology or even multiple ideologies" (Kuzderová & Bednárová-Gibová, 2021 p. 33).

#### **3.2 Gender-Sensitive Language and Audiovisual Translation**

At the moment, societies grapple with how to approach gender in language. This ideological and cultural turn is echoed across the media consumed by transnational audiences. The media, more specifically the audiovisual sector, include various fictional and non-fictional products, films, TV series, talk shows, documentaries, entertainment, and many more that have the ability to reach viewers across the globe. Díaz Cintas (2012) asserts that "today's communication landscape is deeply rooted and reliant on the potential offered by audiovisual technology" (p. 273). Following recent movements and policy developments, the media and audiovisual sector is rethinking gender-sensitive language and supporting tolerance and inclusion. Consequently, gender-sensitive language is becoming more prevalent, and its application is being debated and contested in the media. Furthermore, various gender identities and sexual orientations are now more often represented in the media, which also requires accurate and considerate translations. Some of these topics may be unfamiliar to the Croatian audience, and some viewers may even take offense. Others, on the other hand, advocate for the accurate portrayal of these identities and urge them to be treated with dignity and respect. Von Flotow and Josephy-Hernández (2018) further underscore that "biological sexual differences exist and are culturally managed and represented in many audiovisual products" (p. 298). That itself requires the translator to consider their approach and the translation strategies for rendering gender in translation. The translator is therefore faced with

the challenge of producing a translation that is inclusive, yet acceptable to diverse audiences. Even more, its production is highly dependent on the mode of audiovisual translation employed, each with its own limitations and obstacles.

### **3.3 Gender-Sensitive Subtitling**

Subtitling is the process of rendering verbal messages in film and media in one or two lines of written text presented on the screen, in sync with the original verbal message (Gottlieb, 2001, as cited in Antonini, 2005). It is also the predominant modality of audiovisual translation in Croatia. The subtitles are mostly interlingual, translated from English into Croatian, since “English is the source language of roughly 90 percent of subtitled content” (information provided by the Head of the Translation and Subtitling Department at Croatian TV, as cited in Nikolić, 2018, p. 180). However, when producing subtitles, the translator faces several constraints. These constraints may be technical, such as condensing the dialogue to fit within the subtitle (Díaz-Cintas 2012, as cited in Moura, 2024), or synchronizing the written target text with visual images, audio soundtrack, and reading speed (De Linde and Kay 1999, as cited in Moura, 2024). Moreover, subtitling can also undergo ideological manipulation, including censorship, omission, and neutralization of sensitive elements that are not subject to technical restraints (Díaz-Cintas 2012, as cited in Moura, 2024). These constraints arise and pose challenges when trying to translate instances of gender-sensitive language.

### **3.4 Linguistic Constraints**

Firstly, English is mostly seen as an analytic language with natural gender, which allows greater gender neutrality. Croatian, on the other hand, as Šincek (2020) mentions, is a fusional language that employs inflectional morphemes to convey grammatical, syntactic, or semantic information. These inflections also denote grammatical gender, which makes gender asymmetries much more visible (Hellinger and Bußmann, 2001, as cited in Sczesny, Formanowicz, & Moser, 2016). This means nouns are assigned the masculine, feminine, or neuter gender. The masculine has the “unmarked” or generic status and is used when addressing people of unknown gender, and groups of people (Bonnin & Coronel, 2021). However, grammatical gender frequently correlates with the social gender of referents, thereby bringing into question the genericness of the masculine terms. Nouns change in agreement with other words and forms that are consequently marked by gender, such as pronouns, adjectives, past and passive particles, and even certain verb tenses. This is why “modifying language use when gender is grammaticalized is more challenging as it impacts not only word production but also sentence production processes” (Gabriel, Gygax & Kuhn,

2018, p. 845). Šincek (2020) also confirms this claim, stating that the rich morphology and inflections that showcase grammatical gender make it difficult to construct a sentence that only contains one instance of grammatical gender. To translate certain instances of gender-sensitive or gender-neutral language, translators need to use creative and innovative solutions to uphold gender neutrality, or alternatively, they need to go in a roundabout way to achieve equivalence. There are several general guidelines and strategies for achieving gender-sensitive communication which will be used in this research. However, there are few subtitle-specific guidelines.

For instance, the European Parliament (2018) suggests using collective nouns instead of masculine plurals, which would be used to refer to mixed-gender groups or unknown referents. Instead of using “citizens” or residents” in Croatian, which would employ the masculine plural form as the “unmarked” or neutral form, one could say “population”, which is a collective noun. Nevertheless, it is not always possible to substitute masculine plural forms with collective nouns. Another suggestion would be to use “pairing” or parallel forms instead of only using the generic masculine. One would then translate “residents” as “stanovnice i stanovnici”, using both the feminine and masculine plurals. Some of the most commonly applied strategies are feminisation, or the latter approach, which should be used to increase visibility in already gendered contexts, and neutralisation, or the former approach, which is best to be used in non-gendered contexts (Gabriel, Gygax & Kuhn, 2018). However, some language users frown upon the use of feminisation strategies, “one reason is linguistic economy, whereby the markedness of feminine titles is considered superfluous information or informationally redundant” (Ćorić, 2008; Piper–Klajn, 2014; Piper 2016, as cited in Đorđević, Janković & Nikolić, 2022, p. 424). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, many individuals believe these strategies impose a burden on the text and impact its readability and intelligibility. These accusations are particularly relevant for subtitling, as subtitles need to be clear, concise, and easily readable because they remain on screen only for a short time and viewers often cannot revisit them. In many cases, the translator is constrained by subtitle length and character limit, reading speed, shot changes, and other mode-specific impediments. Therefore, there are certain guidelines and rules that the translator must consider. This frequently results in the reduction of subtitles and the omission of information to alleviate the burden on the viewer and facilitate the viewing experience. However, it is still necessary to respect the author’s wishes and intentions when rendering the text into the target language.

Another option would be to employ a neutralising approach. This is particularly relevant when the source content includes or mentions non-binary identities. Some languages try to circumvent this issue by introducing orthographic signs to denote non-binary inclusivity, such as the asterisk “\*” in French or the underscore “\_” in Slovene (Berger, 2019, as cited in Bonnin & Coronel, 2021). Waldendorf (2023) also outlines how “Germans most commonly use typographical symbols such as an underscore, colon, or asterisk; while Spanish often use an asperand (@) or an x” (p. 359). When choosing orthographic signs to include non-binary people, Croatian speakers mostly use the underscore “\_” positioned between the stem and the affix (KolekTIRV, 2024; Zagreb Pride, n.d.), however, most people are unfamiliar with the practice, as it is mostly used by the LGBTIQ+ community and specific media outlets. Nevertheless, Waldendorf (2023) cautions how these signs that depart from official orthography rules provoke debate within national contexts. Anything that could be perceived as linguistic manipulation typically elicits strong negative reactions. This also goes against the perceived ideal of “invisibility” in subtitling (Castro Roig, 2001, as cited in Antonini, 2005), which is meant to make the viewer forget that they are reading subtitles and shift their attention to the content on the screen. Therefore, such strategies are often deemed unsuitable for subtitling and stylistically inadequate. For instance, Netflix's English Timed Text Style Guide (2022) warns against using complicated punctuation that might be difficult for viewers to understand. They state: “Avoid using colons and semi-colons and instead use simple, clear sentence structures to aid comprehension“ (Netflix, 2022). It is also important to remember that the translator is not an independent contractor. As Gambier (2013) explains, they cooperate with multiple parties, such as the commissioner, e.g., a public TV broadcasting company. Therefore, there are certain working traditions, preferences, and quality expectations that the translator must meet. Waldendorf (2023) lists the main problems with applying gender-sensitive language in grammatical gender languages. The primary issues are that it is cognitively demanding, that gender-inclusive language comes in various competing forms, and that change frequently occurs in antagonistic settings (Waldendorf, 2023).

### **3.5 Sociocultural Constraints**

Similarly, the attempts to implement gender-sensitive language, as Gabriel, Gygas & Kuhn (2018) state, “have been constrained not only by the properties of languages, but also by societal debates associated with gender equality” (p. 845). Attitudes towards audiovisual products and their translations do not take place in a vacuum, they reflect broader sociopolitical contexts and prevailing ideologies. For instance, it has been asserted that in

most of Central and Eastern Europe, “a strong tradition of prescriptivism, standard language ideology and ethnolinguistic nationalism has reinforced conceptualisations of national language as an idealised, homogenous entity and the essence of the nation’s spirit” (Vervaeet 2019, as cited in Bogetić, 2022, p. 201). In essence, translation cannot be detached from the context from which the source text originates, nor from the context of the target society for which the translation is produced. Consequently, the translator assumes the role of mediator (Guillot & Pavesi, 2019) between the two cultures and strives to accordingly convey the ideology from the source text. The translator must carefully evaluate which changes and procedures are appropriate for the target language. As previously stated, this choice is not arbitrary. Despite the translator's assertion that they do not hold a position on the matter, their impartiality is at best limited. The translator’s sociocultural context influences them, and what they consider the default, commonsense option is likely what their society considers the norm. As the translator may internalize these values without realization, they may also use various translation methods and theories without being necessarily conscious of their presence: “In reality, however, all persons engaged in the complex task of translating possess some type of underlying or covert theory, even though it may be still very embryonic” (Nida, 1991, p. 19). Some translators prioritize fidelity to the source text, while others place readers’ expectations above all else; some translators are function-oriented, some aim for the target text to evoke similar reactions and emotions in the reader as the source text, while the rest welcome different perspectives. This wide array of choices tends to depend on the translation norms prevalent in a particular culture or time period (Lefevere, 1990). For decades, translation studies have discussed the functions that a translation must fulfil. Nida (1964, as cited in Gambier, 2018) was one of the first scholars to emphasise the role of the reader, which brought on a communicative approach to translation studies. More functionalist approaches, such as the skopos theory, focus on the particular purpose of translation, wherein “the text is made meaningful by its receivers” (Gambier, 2018, p. 45). The skopos theory states, “the highest rule of a theory of translational action is the ‘skopos rule’: any action is determined by its purpose, i.e. it is a function of its purpose or skopos” (Reiß & Vermeer, 2014, p. 90). Or, as Jabir (2006) sums up, “the main idea of skopos theory could be paraphrased as the translation purpose justifies the translation procedures” (p. 8). However, before translators freely adapt the text to the wishes and expectations of the target culture, they must consider the author's aims and opinions. We must ask ourselves when translation becomes adaptation, a domestic production without any external perspective. Similarly, Lefevere (1992, as cited in Kuzderová & Bednárová-Gibová, 2021) considers the translator a rewriter who can either conform or

rebel against the dominant thought of the target culture. He refers to the idea of rewriting as “manipulation, undertaken in the service of power” (Lefevere, 1992, as cited in Kuzderová & Bednárová-Gibová, 2021, p. 45). Therefore, he considers ideology one of the biggest constraints on translation (Lefevere 1992/2017, as cited in Gambier, 2018).

### **3.6 Censorship**

Likewise, translations may undergo significant interventions arising from fear of repercussions when the target culture holds antagonistic views towards certain issues. Censorship has always been a factor in the production of translations. Different cultures hold different opinions on what is appropriate to read and write about, especially in sexual, political, or religious matters. According to Gambier (2018), self-censorship can include forms of erasure of insults and taboo words, as well as “distortion, downgrading, paraphrasing, mis-adjustment, biased translation and omission of swear words or sex-related terms” (p. 60). Censorship may also be conducted by censors, editors, or revisers. Šincek (2020) also discusses how most translators aim to enhance the commercial viability of their translations by adapting them to the dominant ideology. However, unfaithful translations may also happen when the translator is not attuned to certain nuances in meaning or deliberate discourse strategies. For instance, French dubbers have been found to modify feminist textual elements that challenge common beliefs about female sexuality and adapt them to the “dominant popular ideology and culture of France where socially constructed knowledge of femininity and sexuality is inseparable from images of the courtesan and the prostitute” (Feral, 2011, as cited in von Flotow & Josephy-Hernández, 2018, p. 300). Von Flotow and Josephy-Hernández (2018) have also observed that translators may occasionally lose the non-binary connotations or produce heteronormative translations when translating gender-ambiguous terms from English into languages with grammatical gender. De Marco’s (2006) research supports these claims by confirming that certain translations render the source text more sexist and homophobic under the influence of clichés and expressions present in mainstream society, while some translations even contain derogatory remarks that were not present in the original text.

### **3.7 New Viewership**

It is evident that the audience plays an important role in the translation process. Furthermore, there have been significant shifts in the role of the reader or, in this case, the viewer, in recent years. When it comes to their viewing habits and preferences, viewers vary widely. They differ in many ways, including age, gender, sexual orientation, political



inclination, socioeconomic background, degree of education, and an abundance of other traits that either distinguish or unite them. However, contemporary viewers are becoming increasingly vocal, directly involving themselves in the process of translation:

The audiences of these new media products have become emotionally invested in the content and have moved from the traditional role of consumers to an active role of prosumers, viewers who enact characteristics both of the consumption and production of the audiovisual content (Tapscott & Williams 2006, as cited in Orrego-Carmona, 2018, p. 322).

With the growing number of streaming platforms, as well as the increase in piracy, viewers now have unrestricted access to the content they like. They can select the subtitles they wish to see or remove them from the video entirely. Most streaming services offer the option to select between intralingual and interlingual subtitles, as well as no subtitles at all. The days when only cable TV or public broadcasting were available are long gone. It has also become easier for viewers to express their disapproval of subtitles. They can freely express their opinions on social media, websites, forums, and groups, where they may even poke fun at what they perceive as poor translations. Because the audience is simultaneously exposed to both the source text, or the spoken dialogue, and the target text in subtitles (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, as cited in Božović, 2019), “anyone with some knowledge of the source language is able to criticize subtitles, and therefore subtitlers” (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, as cited in Nikolić, 2018, p. 181), which is why Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007) call the practice of subtitling “vulnerable translation.” As Božović (2019) explains, viewers have certain expectations and preconceived notions about the subtitles, since they expect to read what they hear, which can lead to disapproval and unfavourable opinions on the subtitles. Consequently, “media companies have realized they need to keep up with the pace of the audiences’ expectations and promote innovation to cater to their users” (Orrego-Carmona, 2018, p. 323).

#### **4. Reception Studies**

Reception studies are crucial for understanding viewers’ needs, preferences, and expectations. They are a relatively ambiguous area and can take many different forms. Their primary goal is to determine how translation decisions impact viewers' comprehension, emotional engagement, enjoyment, and viewing experience of audiovisual materials (Moura, 2024). Kovačić (1995), Chesterman (1998), and Gambier (2018) distinguish between three types of

reception: response, reaction, and repercussion. Response is defined as perpetual decoding (Fox, 2016, as cited in Gambier, 2018) or the mental processing of subtitles, as Tuominen (2018) describes it. Reaction refers to psycho-cognitive issues, such as shared knowledge and comprehension (Gambier, 2018). Lastly, repercussion is understood both as the viewers' attitudes to AVT (Tuominen, 2018), as well as sociocultural consequences of subtitles (Gambier, 2009, as cited in Tuominen, 2018). Viewers may have different opinions about subtitles due to their constraints and "vulnerability." This is especially important when examining reactions to gender-sensitive language in subtitles, as it frequently elicits strong emotional reactions. By investigating audience reception, it is aimed to "maximize translation strategies, produce more effective and enjoyable translations, make AVT products more accessible for viewers with specific needs, and, if necessary, revisit existing standards" (Perego, 2016, p. 156). Moreover, as O'Sullivan (2016) states, "reception studies are also important as a way of establishing the impact of media policies and potentially as a way of guiding future policy" (p. 267). Apart from evaluating translation quality and acceptability, it also offers significant insight into wider social trends and possible shifts in ideology. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how viewers view, comprehend, and respond to gender-sensitive subtitles, as this could reveal future areas for subtitle improvement or confirm the previously mentioned negative viewpoints.

#### **4.1 Previous Research**

Past research in audiovisual translation mostly consisted of corpus-based analyses, and research focused on the process of production, or features of AVT as a product, neglecting the role of the end-user (Di Giovanni, 2022). As Perego (2016) states, research in AVT has been characterized by a conceptual and descriptive slant: "works in the field aimed either at analysing and describing the nature of the various translation modes, or they delivered rules for good practice in the form of handbooks mainly based on common sense and know-how" (p. 156). Most empirical reception studies did not surface until the middle of the 1990s, with many researchers rising from the beginning of the 2000s onward (Kovačić 1995; Leppihalme 1996; Fuentes 2003; Gambier 2006, 2008, as cited in Božović, 2019). Most reception studies focused on two themes: humour and cultural references (Antonini, 2005, 2007, 2009; Chiaro 2007; Desilla 2014; Fuentes 2003; Schauffler 2012, as cited in Tuominen, 2018). Since then, the area has grown exponentially, and various research methods and instruments have been implemented, such as eye-tracking devices (Szarkowska, Krejtz & Krejtz, 2017, as cited in Orrego-Carmona, 2024). Contemporary reception studies also focus on the reception of

swearwords (Briechele & Eppler, 2019; Moura, 2024). Contrary to popular assumptions in favour of eliminating swearwords, the respondents were typically against omitting or softening swearwords. Reception studies can therefore provide valuable insights into reactions to media policies, eliminating the need to act on one's assumptions. Unfortunately, not much is known about the use of gender-sensitive language in subtitles and how they are received. Although language policy is also an area of focus in reception studies, the reception of gender-sensitive language is rarely examined by empirical and experimental studies. As a result, studies on gender-sensitive language often remain confined to other disciplines.

Among the scales that measured attitudes towards sexist or inclusive language, the most notable was the self-report questionnaire constructed by Henley and Dragun (1983), its adaptation by Rubin and Greene (1991), and the Gender-Specific Language Scale by McMinn et al. (1994), which measured the respondents' ability to recognize sexist language. Nevertheless, these instruments lacked comprehensiveness, systematicity, and validity. Therefore, a fourth instrument that incorporated various aspects of attitudes toward sexist language from the previous studies was developed by Parks and Robertson (2000). Their Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language (IASNL) is a 42-item scale based on a conceptual framework that examines people's beliefs about language, their ability to recognize sexist language, and their willingness to use inclusive language. Ivanová and Kysel'ová (2022) conducted more contemporary research, which examined participants' attitudes to written gender-sensitive communication, signalling the turn to more context-based studies. A similar study, in which translators rated various gender-fair translation strategies, was conducted by Paolucci, Lardelli, and Gromann (2023). However, one's perception of their receptiveness to gender-sensitive language might not correspond with their actual reception of gender-sensitive language in real-life situations. Therefore, it is crucial to examine viewers' reactions to gender-sensitive language used in actual settings, such as the media and audiovisual products. With gender-sensitive language increasingly employed in modern media, there is a growing need to examine its reception, especially when translating these linguistic innovations into languages less capable of adjustment.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Aims and Hypotheses

This master's thesis aims to examine the reception of gender-sensitive subtitles translated from English into Croatian among Croatian university students. The aim of this experimental study is to investigate how gender-sensitive subtitles affect the acceptability and readability of the subtitles, as well as subtitle preferences. The main questions the study seeks to answer are 1) whether the younger audiences prefer generic masculine terminology and pronouns in subtitles, and 2) whether there are significant differences in reception between subtitles that vary in gender sensitivity. As previous research has shown, people often react negatively to gender-sensitive language, claiming that it is awkward and distracting, and that it affects the clarity and intelligibility of the text (Blaubergs, 1980; Vergoossen et al., 2020; Đorđević, Janković & Nikolić, 2022; Ivanová & Kysel'ová, 2022). Therefore, the assumption that most people prefer subtitles using generic masculine forms guides the thesis. Consequently, the main hypotheses and sub-hypotheses are tested in the study:

(H1) Most participants prefer generic masculine forms in the subtitles.

(H1.1) The generic masculine subtitles score the highest in terms of acceptability and readability.

(H1.2) The non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles score the lowest in terms of acceptability and readability.

(H2) There are significant differences in reception between the subtitles which vary in gender sensitivity.

The second hypothesis aims to examine whether the reception of subtitles varies significantly when different variants of gender-sensitive language are employed. Additionally, the thesis seeks to explore the underlying variables that influence the reception of gender-sensitive language. The correlation between the respondents' demographic characteristics and their attitudes towards gender-sensitive subtitles will therefore also be investigated. Furthermore, the number of gendered instances in an excerpt will also be examined to determine whether their oversaturation in subtitles plays a part in their possible negative appraisal. The following set of sub-hypotheses was tested:

(H3) Female and non-binary participants are more receptive to gender-sensitive subtitling.

(H4) Students enrolled in humanities and social sciences are more receptive to gender-sensitive subtitling.

(H5) Gender-sensitive subtitles are more likely to be accepted in videos with fewer instances of gendered language.

The study was grounded in the “three Rs” model of reception (Kovačić, 1995; Chesterman 1998, 2007; Gambier, 2018), which consists of reaction, response, and repercussion. In this study, repercussion refers to the sociocultural dimension, and examines the acceptability and appropriateness of the subtitles provided. Reaction entails the cognitive processing of the subtitles, namely, the readability of the subtitles. Lastly, response is only partially elicited in the study, since subtitle comprehension was not measured. The reason for excluding subtitle comprehension was that the participants were shown each clip three times. Therefore, if the first set of subtitles provided the participants with enough understanding of the audiovisual content, they would proceed with the same knowledge to the next version of the excerpt. It also draws on McDonald’s (2020) key elements of quality translations, namely acceptability and readability. McDonald (2020) explains that acceptability measures the naturalness of the text and its agreement with the norms and rules of the target language, while readability implies the ease with which the text can be read and understood. Paolucci, Lardelli, and Gromann (2023) also share a similar study design, rating the gender-fair translations in terms of readability and comprehensibility. Lastly, the questions regarding subtitle preference are similar to the ones applied in Božović’s (2019) study.

## **5.2 Participants**

The study gathered 102 valid responses. The participants were Croatian university students aged between 19 and 28, mean age = 23.32. The sample age was selected due to the novel viewing habits of contemporary audiences. Furthermore, younger generations often bring forth broader sociocultural and ideological shifts which may be reflected in their viewing habits. Out of the 102 participants included in the experimental study, 71 were female, 30 were male, and one participant identified as non-binary. Regarding education, 55.4% of students were enrolled in humanities and social sciences, which is also reflected in the gender

imbalance of the sample. The study targeted a diverse sample of students across four fields: humanities and social sciences, STEM, health and medical sciences, as well as business, management, and finance. The sample consisted of 43.6% undergraduate students and 56.4% graduate students. No previous knowledge or foreign language competence was required to participate in the study. Ethics approval was obtained from the ethics committee at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb.

### 5.3 Survey Design

A survey method containing three video excerpts with three sets of subtitles varying in gender sensitivity was employed. The videos were chosen because of their high presence of gendered language, namely grammatical gender seen in professions and occupations, forms of address, non-binary identities, etc. Several variants of gender-sensitive language have been recognized and categorized accordingly. This study assumes a similar categorization of gender-sensitive variants as Waldendorf (2023), who differentiates between binary feminisation and non-binary inclusion, and Ivanová and Kyseľová (2022), who, on the same basis, separate gender-inclusive pair forms and gender-neutral forms employing typographical symbols. The subtitles were made using Ooona, a cloud-based tool for subtitling, and embedded in the videos. Three versions of subtitles were produced for each video:

1. **Generic Masculine Subtitles:** Traditional subtitles that use the masculine forms as the unmarked default.
2. **Gender-Sensitive Subtitles that use well-established words and pair forms:** Subtitles that use both masculine and feminine forms, collective nouns, and similar inclusive language strategies, but are often binary in nature.
3. **Gender-Sensitive Subtitles that use non-standard typographical solutions:** Subtitles that often aim to include all gender identities through typographical symbols and punctuation marks. They are likely novel and unfamiliar to most viewers.

The subtitles were produced in accordance with the existing literature, including numerous guidelines, toolkits, and manuals (European Parliament, 2018; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019; Šincek, 2020; Špoljar, 2021; KolekTIRV, 2024; United Nations, n.d.). For the sake of convenience, the first version of subtitles shown in each video will be referred to as the generic masculine (GM) or sometimes, gender-discriminatory subtitles. The second version of subtitles will be labelled standard gender-sensitive subtitles (SGS), as they are

well-established in the standard language, while the third will be called non-standard gender-sensitive (NGS) subtitles. The excerpts were taken from news stories, talk shows, and entertainment shows. The reason for choosing non-fiction excerpts, rather than using excerpts taken from films and TV series, is to control the confounding variables. Using gender-discriminatory language in films and TV series might be seen as a deliberate choice, a character flaw, or perhaps a shot at being funny. Therefore, attempts to replace it with gender-sensitive language could be seen as a failure to match the desired effect of the source text and could negatively impact the viewers' reactions to it. The goal is to examine the reception of subtitles with varying levels of gender sensitivity in real settings, which are used to address actual people, as well as the audience, with no intent of being deliberately sexist or derogatory. The videos were available without subtitles on the Internet. They were downloaded and subtitled according to the conditions mentioned above. The videos were used solely for this master's thesis. The content of the videos has not been altered or manipulated in any way to comply with the copyright guidelines and usage policy. All rights belong to the original authors.

The first video is a TED Talks video by Michael C. Bush (2018) on employee satisfaction. The excerpt shown is 45 seconds long and starts by listing multiple occupations, after which it moves on to what makes employees happy. According to the Toolkit on Gender-Sensitive Communication (2019), professions are often gender stereotyped, and we should avoid assuming one's gender when speaking about occupations. Instead, we should aim to use double forms to make both genders visible or use collective nouns instead of gendered nouns. The subtitle versions were shown in the following order for all clips. The first version of the video was translated using the gender-discriminatory approach, referencing all occupations with the generic masculine forms, while the second version utilized the feminine counterparts and collective nouns where applicable. The third version employed typographical symbols, such as brackets and underscores, as suggested by non-binary respondents from Šincek's (2020) and Špoljar's (2021) interviews, as well as following KolekTIRV's (2024) suggestions. There were 12 instances of gendered language identified in the 45-second clip, making it highly gender-saturated. The following instances were identified and subtitled using varying levels of gender sensitivity.

Clip 1.

ST = Source Text TT = Target Text	Names of occupations	Groups of people	Examples
ST	CEOs	workers	Organizations that have a lot of happy <b>employees</b> have three times the revenue growth.
TT - GM	direktori	radnici	Organizacije sa sretnim <b>zaposlenicima</b> imaju tri puta veći rast prihoda.
TT - SGS	direktorice i direktori	radnice i radnici	Organizacije sa sretnim <b>osobljem</b> imaju tri puta veći rast prihoda.
TT - NGS	director(ic)e	radnici_e	Organizacije sa sretnim <b>zaposlenicima_ama</b> imaju tri puta veći rast prihoda.

The second video follows in a similar vein, but it contains far fewer instances of gendered language to test the hypothesis regarding the negative effect of oversaturation. The second video is taken from the Eurovision Song Contest (2016). It depicts the show hosts welcoming the audience and introducing the contestants. When translating this into Croatian, the typical approach would be to use the generic masculine when referring to the contestants, as well as when addressing the audience. The first version therefore employs the generic masculine approach, while the second version explicitly addresses both women and men and makes both female and male contestants salient. The third version uses brackets and underscores. The clip is 1 minute and 15 seconds long and contains only three instances of gendered language. The following instances of gendered language were present in Clip 2.



Clip 2.

ST = Source Text TT = Target Text	Addressing the audience	Groups of people	Examples
ST	Welcome.	composers	To all our new <b>viewers</b> , a warm welcome.
TT - GM	Dobro došli.	skladatelji	Želimo toplu dobrodošlicu svim našim novim <b>gledateljima</b> .
TT - SGS	Dobro došle i dobro došli.	skladateljice i skladatelji	Želimo toplu dobrodošlicu našem novom <b>gledateljstvu</b> .
TT - NGS	Dobro došli_e.	skladatelj(ic)e	Želimo toplu dobrodošlicu svim našim novim <b>gledatelj(ca)ma</b> .

Once again, the subtitles are translated in accordance with the Toolkit on Gender-Sensitive Communication (2019) and the guidelines proposed by the European Parliament (2018), as well as KolekTIRV's (2024) suggestions.

The final video shows a news excerpt about Nemo, a non-binary singer. In 2024, Nemo became the first openly non-binary artist to win the Eurovision Song Contest, contributing to broader conversations on non-binary visibility and inclusivity. Following Nemo's win, media outlets began to discuss non-binary identities and gender-inclusive language, however, many local outlets still grappled with addressing them correctly, often misgendering them in the process. Given the lack of familiarity with non-binary identities as well as the lack of appropriate forms to address them, the data received for this video will be analysed separately to avoid biased results. The subtitle versions do not follow the same pattern as the previous subtitles, because there is no well-established way of addressing non-binary identities in Croatian. Therefore, both gender-sensitive variants may be equally unfamiliar to the viewer. Also, the generic masculine might be considered more discriminatory, as it misgenders the referent. Correspondingly, the first discriminatory approach was to use the pronoun matching the sex they were assigned at birth, when having Nemo refer to themselves, having others address them directly, and when being addressed indirectly. The gender-sensitive subtitle versions are based on Šincek's (2020), and Špoljar's

(2021) interviews with Croatian people who identify as non-binary, and partially with KolekTIRV's (2024) suggestions. Although no consensus was reached, the interviewees offered valuable insight into their preferred pronouns and forms of address. The second version of subtitles uses the literal translation of "they." Even though it is not the best option, as it contains binary configurations and utilizes the masculine plural, it is the safer option when we do not know someone's pronouns. Other grammatical categories changed in agreement with the singular they which led to Nemo also referring to themselves in plural. This version was primarily used to signal awareness of their non-binary identity, while still using pronouns and forms that are already existent in language, although in a not-yet-sanctioned way. The third version is also grounded in interviews with Croatian non-binary people (Šincek, 2020; Špoljar, 2021), and mostly employs the underscore. It also uses archaic verb forms because they are unmarked by gender. The clip was 56 seconds long and contained 5 instances of gendered language.

### Clip 3.

ST = Source Text TT = Target Text	Talking about themselves	Direct address	Indirect address
ST	<b>I met</b> so many amazing people.	How <b>did you practice</b> that?	...how Nemo <b>managed</b> to stay balanced...
TT - GM	<b>Upoznao sam</b> toliko sjajnih ljudi.	Kako <b>si</b> to <b>uvježbao</b> ?	...kako je Nemo <b>uspio</b> zadržati ravnotežu...
TT - SGS	<b>Upoznali smo</b> toliko sjajnih ljudi.	Kako <b>ste</b> to <b>uvježbali</b> ?	...kako <b>su</b> Nemo <b>uspjeli</b> zadržati ravnotežu...
TT - NGS	<b>Upoznah</b> toliko sjajnih ljudi.	Kako <b>si</b> to <b>uvježbao_la</b> ?	...kako <b>je</b> Nemo <b>uspio_la</b> zadržati ravnotežu...

#### **5.4 Procedure**

A two-part anonymous online survey was devised for the purposes of this empirical study. The first section gathered data on the respondents' demographic characteristics: age, gender, field of study, level of study, etc. Participants' subtitle preferences and attitudes towards gender-sensitive language were also examined. The second section consisted of three short excerpts with three sets of subtitles varying in gender sensitivity. The participants had to watch three subtitle versions of each excerpt in the following order, one using generic masculine forms (GM), the second utilizing standard gender-sensitive language (SGS), and the third employing non-standard gender-sensitive language (NGS). Afterwards they had to rate each version in terms of acceptability and readability on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 expressing complete disagreement, and 5 expressing complete agreement with the statements provided. Additionally, they were asked to choose their preferred subtitle version. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean and standard deviation of acceptability and readability ratings, as well as the preferred subtitle version. Comparative analysis was used to compare perceived subtitle acceptability and readability compared to different demographic characteristics, and to assess the influence of demographic factors on reception. Lastly, the participants had the choice to provide additional feedback, reasons why they find certain subtitles (un)acceptable, or perhaps their translation techniques and strategies. Qualitative analysis was employed to analyse the answers to open-ended questions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify and report patterns in the data.

#### **5.5 Data Collection**

The survey was created using *Ika*, an application for online surveys. The survey was administered online, ensuring easy access to all participants. Each participant was provided with a link to the survey and informed about the purpose of the study, as well as their right to withdraw at any time. By providing their informed consent, the participants proceeded to the survey. The survey was conducted anonymously in June 2024, and the data were securely collected and stored to ensure confidentiality.

## 6. Results and Discussion

The main hypothesis supposes that most participants will prefer the generic masculine subtitles. To test the hypothesis, descriptive analyses were performed to present the general trends in audience reception. The audience was asked to rate each subtitle on a scale from 1 to 5 in terms of acceptability and readability, with 1 being the lowest option, and 5 the highest. The mean and standard deviation of acceptability and readability ratings were calculated and are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Acceptability and readability ratings of all subtitle versions

Acceptability	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
GM – Clip 1	102	1	5	4.13	1.175
GM – Clip 2	102	1	5	4.31	1.034
GM – Clip 3	102	1	5	3.59	1.492
SGS – Clip 1	102	1	5	3.85	1.246
SGS – Clip 2	102	1	5	3.88	1.163
SGS – Clip 3	102	1	5	3.11	1.399
NGS – Clip 1	102	1	5	2.52	1.348
NGS – Clip 2	102	1	5	2.65	1.369
NGS – Clip 3	102	1	5	2.77	1.378
Readability	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
GM – Clip 1	102	1	5	4.73	.677
GM – Clip 2	102	1	5	4.69	.717
GM – Clip 3	102	1	5	4.59	.894
SGS – Clip 1	102	1	5	3.74	1.312
SGS – Clip 2	102	1	5	3.80	1.275
SGS – Clip 3	102	1	5	3.60	1.373
NGS – Clip 1	102	1	5	2.38	1.379
NGS – Clip 2	102	1	5	2.57	1.404
NGS – Clip 3	102	1	5	2.98	1.414

It is evident from the mean score of the generic masculine subtitles that it was the preferred option among participants. The generic masculine subtitles consistently scored above 4 on the Likert scale, which means most participants agreed, or strongly agreed that the subtitles were appropriate, acceptable, and easy to follow. The only instance where that was not the case was when the generic masculine pronouns were used to refer to a non-binary singer, Nemo. Several participants wrote how those subtitles were offensive and inappropriate. As seen in Table 1, the generic masculine subtitles scored the highest in terms of readability across all three excerpts. The standard deviation for readability rankings was very low, meaning that the data are clustered around the mean. Surprisingly, most participants were not critical of standard gender-sensitive subtitles, which mostly scored above 3.8, which means that most participants agreed, or partially agreed, that the subtitles were acceptable and appropriate, although they did not find them the best-fitted solution. Additionally, participants were asked to choose the subtitle version they preferred most for each video. The mode, or the most frequently occurring value in the data, was calculated, showing the primacy of the generic masculine subtitles again. The data are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Mode of preferred subtitle versions

		<b>Preferred subtitles</b>		
		Clip 1	Clip 2	Clip 3
N	Valid	102	102	102
	Missing	0	0	0
Mode		1	1	1
Minimum		1	1	1
Maximum		3	3	3

The first version of the subtitles, containing generic masculine forms, was given a corresponding value of 1, the second was given the value 2, and the third, the value 3. It can be observed in Table 2 that 1 was the most frequently occurring value in all three videos. However, what this table does not show is that there was a slim difference between the standard gender-sensitive subtitles and the generic masculine subtitles. Precise frequency and percentages for the number of times each version of subtitles was chosen can be observed in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of the preferred subtitle versions for each excerpt

<b>Clip 1</b>				
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Version 1	55	53.9	53.9
	Version 2	42	41.2	41.2
	Version 3	5	4.9	4.9
	Total	102	100.0	100.0

<b>Clip 2</b>				
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Version 1	60	58.8	58.8
	Version 2	32	31.4	31.4
	Version 3	10	9.8	9.8
	Total	102	100.0	100.0

<b>Clip 3</b>				
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Version 1	54	52.9	52.9
	Version 2	27	26.5	26.5
	Version 3	21	20.6	20.6
	Total	102	100.0	100.0

The results in Table 3 show a preference for the generic masculine subtitles, which confirms the main hypothesis, stating that the participants prefer generic masculine subtitles instead of subtitles using gender-sensitive language. However, the narrowly decided results in Clip 1 may indicate a shift in subtitling preferences and the need to evaluate standard translation practices. The sub-hypotheses were also confirmed, as the generic masculine versions scored highest in terms of acceptability and readability, while the non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles which employed typographical symbols scored the lowest across all dimensions.

The second hypothesis claimed that there were significant differences between audience reception of different subtitles. Friedman’s test was used to test this hypothesis. Acceptability and readability were measured as key components of reception. The test was therefore used to compare the acceptability ratings of the three different subtitle versions within each clip. In other words, within-subjects data were examined and their differences in terms of acceptability were calculated.

Table 4. Friedman Test showing significant differences between versions of subtitles

<b>Test Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>	
N	102
Chi-Square	74.019
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	<.001

a. Friedman Test

It can be observed from Table 4 that the p-value is lesser than .001 which means that there is a statistically significant difference between the subtitles. Post hoc tests are necessary to determine the pairs of subtitles in which the differences are most severe. The ratings of subtitle versions were collected and compared using The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test which will show whether the differences in ratings are statistically meaningful. The differences in ratings were ranked and are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Differences in ranks between non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles and generic masculine subtitles

<b>Clips 1 &amp; 2 Ranks</b>		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
NGS - GM	Negative Ranks	73 <sup>a</sup>	45.29	3306.50
	Positive Ranks	11 <sup>b</sup>	23.95	263.50
	Ties	18 <sup>c</sup>		
	Total	102		

- a. Non-standard gender-sensitive < Generic masculine
- b. Non-standard gender-sensitive > Generic masculine
- c. Non-standard gender-sensitive = Generic masculine

Table 5 contains a summary of rankings which are divided into type a, b, and c, depending on whether the ranking of the generic masculine subtitles is higher than the ranking of the non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles, whether the non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles rank is higher than the generic masculine subtitles rank, or whether they are tied. Therefore, we can conclude that there are 73 negative ranks for non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles, only 11 positive ranks for non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles, and 18 ties. This confirms the

hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the acceptance of different versions of subtitles. To confirm this claim, the Wilcoxon test was applied, as seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showing statistically significant differences in ranks

<b>Test Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>	
	neutral - masculine
Z	-6.803 <sup>b</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on positive ranks.

Because the p-value is lesser than .001, there is a significant difference in the acceptability of non-standard gender-sensitive and generic masculine subtitles.

The same test was then applied to different pairs of gender-sensitive subtitles. The standard, well-established, and the non-standard, typographical, gender-sensitive subtitles were paired to compare the difference between them, and so were the standard gender-sensitive and generic masculine subtitles. Afterwards, the same process was used to determine differences in readability. Interestingly, when comparing the standard and non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles, the standard subtitles are significantly more accepted. Compared to standard gender-sensitive subtitles, there were 66 negative ranks for non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles, only 14 positive ranks for non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles, and 22 tied ranks. There was a statistically highly significant difference between the two versions of subtitles, as the p-value was lesser than .001. The difference between generic masculine subtitles and standard gender-sensitive subtitles was not as sharp, but with the p-value lesser than .005, the results are statistically significant.

The same results were then obtained on differences between subtitle versions in terms of readability, as seen in the Table 7.



Table 7. Readability ranks of subtitle versions from the first two clips

**Clips 1 & 2 Ranks:  
Readability**

	Mean Rank
Generic masculine	2.68
Gender-inclusive	2.03
Gender-neutral	1.29

The difference between the subtitles is visible in Table 7 from the mean ranks of the subtitle versions. Nevertheless, the Wilcoxon test was performed again, and the differences were statistically significant for all pairs of subtitles. The non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles, again, received the lowest rankings, while the generic masculine subtitles scored the highest.

Lastly, the tests were also conducted for the third clip. As previously mentioned, the third clip was excluded from joint analyses because it deals with a slightly different situation and neither “standard” or “non-standard” gender-sensitive forms are well-established in the language. Even the masculine generics acquire a new meaning in the third clip, as their usage misgenders and invalidates Nemo’s identity. The standard gender-sensitive forms used in the third clip are already present in the standard language but are used in a not-yet-sanctioned way. It was speculated that because of the uncommonness of non-binary terminology, as well as the possible antagonistic stances toward non-binary individuals, the public could reject both gender-sensitive subtitle versions. While Friedman’s test revealed significant differences, this time there was no significant difference between the two gender-sensitive variants in terms of their acceptability, which confirms the third clip as an outlier. The similarity in ranks can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8. Differences in acceptability ranks between the gender-sensitive subtitle versions

**Clip 3 Ranks: Acceptability**

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Standard – Non-standard gender-sensitive language	Negative Ranks	34 <sup>a</sup>	30.37	1032.50
	Positive Ranks	34 <sup>b</sup>	38.63	1313.50
	Ties	34 <sup>c</sup>		
	Total	102		

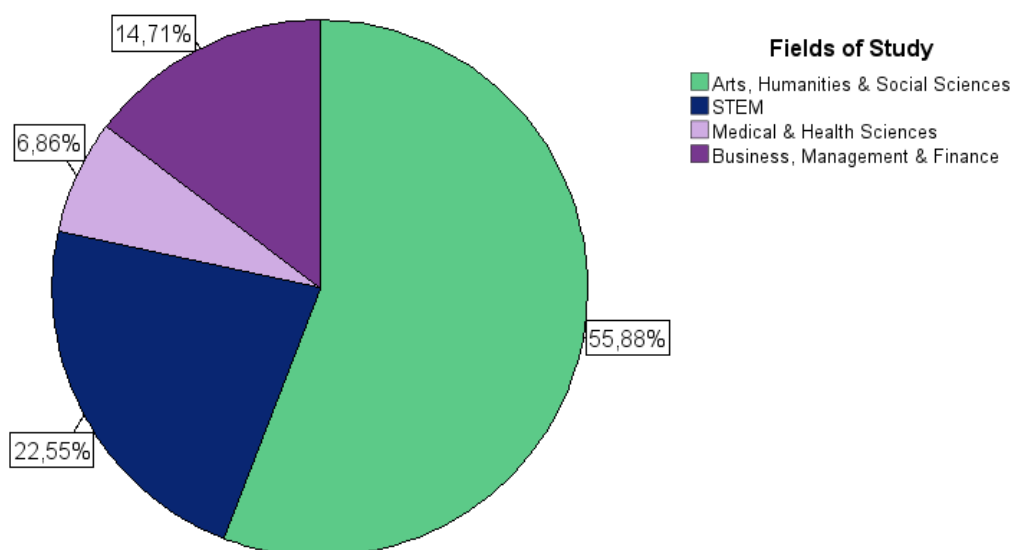
- a. SGS < NGS
- b. SGS > NGS
- c. SGS = NGS

However, when comparing the two in terms of readability, this was not the case. Again, the typographical symbols of the non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles were outranked by other subtitles, and the standard gender-sensitive subtitles fared much better. What this means is that the standard gender-sensitive subtitles were not hard to follow, but that another factor influenced their previous negative appraisal. The participants likely did not agree with the use of the typically plural pronouns to denote a single person. Some respondents left additional feedback criticizing the use of the plural pronoun “we” as a substitute for “I”, arguing it was confusing, unnatural, and absurd. However, the participants did not mind the literal translation of “they” as “oni”.

Lastly, no significant differences were found between the first two video clips that varied considerably in the frequency of gendered language, which disproves the hypothesis that gender-sensitive subtitles are more likely to be accepted in videos with fewer instances of gendered language. Nonetheless, it is important to note that several respondents expressed discontent with the excessive use of gender-sensitive language in some clips. What is more, the subtitles that use pair forms for professions in the first clip were especially well-received among women, even though the subtitles were crowded and highly saturated with gendered instances. These results may indicate that visibility in such areas is of importance to women.

The additional hypotheses wanted to examine how different demographic factors influence students’ reception of subtitles varying in gender sensitivity. The participants were predominantly female university students (69.6%), with only 29.4% male participants, and one participant who identified as non-binary. The non-binary respondent was excluded from quantitative analyses which examined differences based on gender as they would have been to sole representative for the entire gender category, skewing the results. The high response rate of participants enrolled in arts and humanities could be responsible for the gender imbalance, as these studies generally have more female students. The areas of study encompassed by the research are as follows:

Figure 1. Participants' fields of study



Another reason could be that women are more interested in gender-sensitive language, as it mostly concerns them. Apart from gender, age, and field of study, the research also examined students' level of study, attitudes towards gender-sensitive language, and usual subtitle preferences. The Chi-square Test and One-Way ANOVA were used to determine whether these demographic characteristics influenced the dependent variables. The Chi-square Test was used to determine whether there was a significant association between gender and preferred subtitle versions and found that there was a statistically significant difference between men and women both in Clip 1 and Clip 2.

Table 9. Differences in preferred subtitles based on gender

			Set1			Total
			Version 1	Version 2	Version 3	
Gender	Female	Count	32	36	3	71
		% within Gender	45.1%	50.7%	4.2%	100.0%
	Male	Count	22	6	2	30
		% within Gender	73.3%	20.0%	6.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	54	42	5	101
		% within Gender	53.5%	41.6%	5.0%	100.0%

The second clip shows similar results to Table 9, although women were less receptive to standard gender-sensitive language in the second clip. The possible reason for the increased receptiveness in the first clip could be attributed to the fact that gender-sensitive subtitles increase women's visibility in the workplace, which may be an important topic for many women. The non-standard gender-sensitive outlier did not produce statistically significant differences in preferences based on gender. Both female and male participants preferred the generic masculine subtitles.

Furthermore, ANOVA was used to determine whether there were significant differences in acceptability and readability ratings based on gender, field of study, level of study, and other sociodemographic variables. The variables produced no significant effect on the perception of the acceptability and readability of the subtitles. This refutes the additional sub-hypotheses that the participants' study and gender will impact acceptability and readability ratings. Nonetheless, women were more receptive to gender-sensitive subtitles, and so were the students enrolled in arts, humanities, and social sciences. However, these differences were not statistically significant. Whether participants came from urban or rural areas did not affect their choices. As for subtitle preferences, whether respondents preferred interlingual, intralingual, or no subtitles, did not produce a significant effect on their preferred subtitle version, or rating. Finally, participants' attitudes towards gender-sensitive language influenced the participants' choices in certain cases. Those who were against gender-sensitive language consistently rated it the lowest. However, those who thought gender-sensitive language was important, also preferred the generic masculine forms in the first two clips. What this shows is that the respondents' perceived attitudes towards gender-sensitive language might not necessarily correlate to their willingness to use it in different settings. The usability of gender-sensitive language most likely depends on the context. For instance, those who advocated for gender-sensitive language were equally divided between the generic masculine and standard gender-sensitive versions of subtitles. Only the third clip, where gender-sensitive language was used to refer to a non-binary person produced statistically significant results, as seen in Table 10.

Table 10. Differences in preferred subtitles based on attitudes towards gender-sensitive language

**Attitudes to gender-sensitive language and subtitles about non-binary identities**

			Version 1	Set3 Version 2	Version 3	Total
Inclusive	For gender-sensitive language use	Count	17	18	16	51
		% within Inclusive	33.3%	35.3%	31.4%	100.0%
	Against gender-sensitive language use	Count	18	3	3	24
		% within Inclusive	75.0%	12.5%	12.5%	100.0%
	Unfamiliar with the term	Count	19	5	2	26
		% within Inclusive	73.1%	19.2%	7.7%	100.0%
Total	Count	54	26	21	101	
	% within Inclusive	53.5%	25.7%	20.8%	100.0%	

Table 10 shows that those who were against gender-sensitive language usage mostly chose generic masculine forms to refer to a person who identifies as non-binary. Those who advocated for its usage were more receptive to alternative forms. However, 33.3% of them did not mind using the generic masculine forms. With the p-value of .002, the Chi-square test confirms the statistical significance of these results.

Lastly, the additional feedback was qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis. The open-ended question for additional feedback, remarks, and suggestions gathered an additional 42 responses. Common patterns were thematically analysed, identified, and categorized. In the responses concerning the generic masculine subtitles, four common themes and characteristics were identified. Most participants found the generic masculine subtitles either/and: 1) clear, concise, and understandable 2) unmarked and neutral, 3) familiar and well-established, 4) exclusive and patriarchal.

A fifth category appeared in the third clip, where participants argued that the use of masculine generics to refer to a non-binary person was offensive and unacceptable.

The categories for standard gender-sensitive subtitles using feminization and neutralization strategies can be summarized as follows: 1) lengthy, awkward, and complicated, 2) redundant 3) unusual and marked 4) impediment to reading speed, 5) clear and easy to follow.

What is interesting is that 45% of participants who expressed their opinions on gender-sensitive subtitling emphasized the importance of gender-sensitive language but stated that it was not suitable for subtitling. This confirms the quantitative findings, in which attitudes to gender-sensitive language do not necessarily correlate with the willingness to use it.

The third, non-standard gender-sensitive version of subtitles that employed various typographical symbols falls into four overarching categories: 1) tedious, tiresome, and hard to follow 2) redundant 3) distractive, and 4) awkward and complicated.

The opinions regarding the third clip's subtitles were not included in the joint analysis, as they steer the topic of discussion towards different matters, such as opinions on various gender identities and acceptable pronoun use. However, many respondents expressed their fondness for using archaic verb forms, aorist and imperfect, to circumvent gendered tenses.

Interestingly, the respondents have also identified key issues and constraints in subtitling, stating that gender-sensitive subtitles might impede the reading speed, break the character limit, and take the attention away from the audiovisual content. Most of them expressed discontent with the typographical symbols, arguing they are excessive, distractive, and tiresome. Some of them, although admittedly confused by the subtitles at first, believed it was a matter of accustoming oneself to different language practices, and that with regular use they would no longer be considered atypical. Diverging opinions appeared on whether the translator should appeal to the broader public, choosing to use generic masculine forms to avoid confusion, or whether they should respect the non-binary nature of the source material. Lastly, some participants found the gender-sensitive subtitles important for making viewers reconsider conventional, gender-biased, linguistic practices. As for future ventures, respondents suggested sparsely using gender-sensitive language, alternating between different strategies. For instance, they suggested using both the generic masculine forms and feminisation strategies to unburden the text, thereby expressing openness to gradual and moderate change.

## 7. Conclusion

This master's thesis examined university students' reception of gender-sensitive subtitles, focusing on the dimensions of acceptability, readability, and preference. Participants were shown three video clips, each with three sets of subtitles varying in gender sensitivity (generic masculine, standard gender-sensitive, and non-standard gender-sensitive subtitles) to determine the differences in their reception, as well as gain insight into how different demographic groups perceive the subtitles. The findings show that there is a clear preference for generic masculine forms. Similarly, there is a noticeable aversion to gender-sensitive forms that use typographical symbols. The ratings were mostly consistent across all three dimensions of subtitle acceptability, readability, and overall preference. Despite the primacy of the generic masculine subtitles, the standard gender-sensitive subtitles were generally well-received among participants, signalling an openness to alternative subtitling practices. However, the openness to linguistic change was not consistent among all viewers. One of the most principal findings of this research is the influence of gender on subtitle preference. It was found that women displayed a greater disposition towards gender-sensitive language compared to their male counterparts. What is interesting is that although there was a significant difference in the preferred choice of subtitles between women and men, there was no statistically significant difference in the ratings of subtitle acceptability and readability. This means that even though some women did not find the standard gender-sensitive subtitles easier to follow or more appropriate compared to subtitles using generic masculine forms, they still chose it as their preferred option. These findings suggest that these subtitles might not be the best linguistic variant at the moment, but they function well as a discursive strategy used sparingly to defamiliarize the viewers with conventionalized linguistic practices and familiar patterns. It may force the viewers to reconsider what they think are neutral and default linguistic practices, and prompt them to critically reflect on such linguistic biases. The results show consistency with the qualitative data, where participants also diverged on the matter. Some participants found the gender-sensitive forms tedious, convoluted, and unintelligible, while others considered them necessary to achieve greater gender visibility and reconsider the dominant language practices. However, respondents advised using them sparingly, and in combination with other methods. No other associations between the choice of subtitles and demographic factors were found, therefore the sub-hypotheses were rejected. However, by focusing only on university students, this study may lack diversity in its sample. Therefore, it is necessary to include a more diverse sample in future research, encompassing participants of different ages, education levels, and backgrounds. It is also important to

consider other variables that might impact reception. Moreover, while this research offered insight into the respondents' attitudes through qualitative feedback, in-depth interviews or focus groups could provide a more comprehensive understanding of reception. It is also necessary to combine the survey with other, more objective, measures to achieve data triangulation. Nonetheless, this research contributes to translation studies by broadening our knowledge and utilization of gender-sensitive language in translation. Furthermore, it provides a better understanding of audience reception, which can guide the development of inclusive and audience-acceptable translation practices, improving both the quality of translations, as well as audience engagement.



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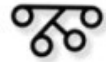
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## 9. Appendix

### 9.1 Ethics Statement



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21. lipnja 2024.

#### **Mišljenje Etičkog povjerenstva Odsjeka za anglistiku**

u sastavu prof. dr. sc. Mateusz-Milan Stanojević, doc. dr. sc. Anđel Starčević, doc. dr.  
sc. Stela Letica Krevelj

Istraživanje „Gender-sensitive subtitling: a reception study“ koje je Etičkom povjerenstvu Odsjeka za anglistiku prijavila Domenica Čokljat (diplomski rad pod mentorstvom dr. sc. Kristijana Nikolića) u skladu je s važećim etičkim normama.

dr. sc. Mateusz-Milan Stanojević, red. prof.