

Michalina Piotrowska  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8199-5072>  
University of Humanities and Economics in Lodz, Poland  
[moli3339@gmail.com](mailto:moli3339@gmail.com)

# The impact of pronouns on the reception of supernatural creatures in Sapkowski's short stories

## Wpływ zaimków na odbiór istot nadprzyrodzonych w opowiadaniach Sapkowskiego

### Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse two translations of Andrzej Sapkowski's books *Ostatnie życzenie* (*The Last Wish*) and *Miecz przeznaczenia* (*Sword of Destiny*) with the focus on pronouns used by the author and translators (Danusia Stok and David French) in relation to the supernatural creatures presented in the short stories. The text deals with the impact these pronouns can have on the perception of such creatures.

The changes introduced in the translation of both texts and their possible consequences are discussed. The manipulation of certain terms may result in the humanization or dehumanization of supernatural creatures, which may – in turn – result in different effects the story has on the reader.

**Keywords:** Sapkowski, translation, supernatural, pronouns

### Streszczenie

W artykule zanalizowano tłumaczenia książek Andrzeja Sapkowskiego *Ostatnie życzenie* i *Miecz przeznaczenia* ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zaimków używanych przez autora i tłumaczy (Danusję Stok i Davida Frencha) w stosunku do istot nadprzyrodzonych przedstawionych w opowiadaniach. Artykuł dotyczy wpływu, jaki te zaimki mogą mieć na postrzeganie takich istot.

Poruszane są również kwestie zmian wprowadzonych w tłumaczeniu obu tekstów i ich możliwych konsekwencji, gdyż manipulowanie pewnymi terminami skutkuje uczłowieniem lub odczłowieniem istot nadprzyrodzonych, co z kolei wpływa na to, jakie wrażenie wywiera opowiadanie na czytelnika.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Sapkowski, tłumaczenie, nadprzyrodzone istoty, zaimki

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to present results of research devoted to the connection between the way supernatural creatures' denotations have been translated and their perception. The author has analysed two books by Andrzej Sapkowski: *Ostatnie życzenie* and *Miecz przeznaczenia*. Two translations have been scrutinized to see whether the changes that have been introduced by the translators could potentially change the readers' reception of the text. It needs to be taken into account that the above-mentioned books have been translated by two different translators. *Ostatnie życzenie* has been translated by a Polish translator Danusia Stok, whereas *Miecz przeznaczenia* has been translated by an English translator David French. Their origins may result in contrasting approaches to the way supernatural creatures are presented in their translations.

The main protagonist of Sapkowski's books is Geralt of Rivia, a Witcher who can be hired to kill creatures that pose a threat to people. While for most inhabitants of the Witcher's universe it does not make any difference whether the monster is intelligent or not, Geralt of Rivia claims to follow the Witcher's code, which is likely to be his own moral code. Following this code means not accepting all monster-hunting jobs. Geralt intentionally lets some of the creatures he encounters go away alive, as he recognizes them as thinking beings. For that reason it is important to reflect in translation which creatures are human-like – i.e. in the description of Doppler or Silvan – and which are not. It is a relevant part of the story.

Geralt's approach to such creatures could be reflected in the way translators translate pronouns relating to them. In the Polish language system all nouns possess gender, so when Sapkowski writes about weird creatures he uses personal pronouns 'he' or 'she'. When translating into English a translator has a choice. S/he can decide to go for a non-personal pronoun 'it' and dehumanize the creature or choose pronouns 'he' or 'she' to make the creatures be perceived as human-like. The translator's choice might be affected by the shape of the creature in question, as some of the supernaturals are human-like, while others may resemble animals as well as some other characteristics like the fact that some of those creatures express emotions.

Considering the translation theory proposed by Appiah (2012: 339), a translator should focus on the receiving culture of the translation. As a result, the author of this article expected the translators to adapt the text to the target audience. Moreover, because of the literary character of the books, the author anticipated that the translations would adhere to the rules of dynamic equivalence, as described by Nida (2012: 144f).

## Characters in *The Last Wish* (*Ostatnie życzenie*, trans. by Danusia Stok)

The book *The Last Wish* translated into English by a Polish translator – Danusia Stok – contains short stories in which humans are perceived as monsters, as they are victims of curses and short stories in which monsters are perceived as humans, since they behave human-like.

*The Witcher* (*Wiedźmin*) is a story of *striga*, a monstrous creature, which turns out to be a cursed princess. This perhaps explains why *striga* is referred to as ‘she’ in Stok’s translation:

Jednym słowem strzyga. (2014b: 14)

In a word, she became a striga. (2020b: 8)

There would be enough reasons to refer to *striga* as ‘it’. Her animalistic shape, non-thinking nature and the fact that she poses a realistic threat to people’s lives could be some of them. Nevertheless, Stok has chosen ‘she’, which could be justified by the fact that the characters in the story call the monster a princess, as well as the fact that the creature does, in the end, turn into a real princess.

Ale nie mówcie: „strzyga”, mówcie: „królowna”. Łatwiej unikniecie takiej pomyłki przy królu... i związanych z tym przykrości. (2014b: 22)

But don’t say striga, say princess. It makes it easier to avoid making a mistake in the king’s presence – and any consequent unpleasantness. (2020b: 15)

Another factor contributing to the humanization of *striga* is the fact that despite the fact that she murders people, her crimes are committed unconsciously. In fact, she is a victim herself, as she has been cursed for years.

The main character of a different story – “The Lesser Evil” (“Mniejsze zło”) – Renfri is portrayed by a wizard as a monster that should be killed. It is claimed that because Renfri was born on a certain date she is cursed and will cause death and destruction, so should not be treated as a human being (2020b: 84). However, both in Polish and English versions Renfri is referred to with the pronoun ‘she’, which probably reflects Geralt’s point of view that she is, in fact, a woman that has been a victim.

Ona nie jest człowiekiem. (2014b: 108)

She’s not human. (2020b: 90)

Renfri is a sentient being and looks like a regular human, but – just like *striga* – has had no influence on her fate.

The short story “A Question of Price” (“Kwestia ceny”) depicts Geralt meeting a cursed human being. In this case it is a knight called Duny, whose curse made him look like a half-man, half-hedgehog. Amid the story, the man’s inhumane appearance is revealed, and similarly to two previous stories, Stok does not choose to use the pronoun “it”, but rather the pronoun “he” translating in this way faithfully.

Zabijcie go! (2014b: 178)

Kill him! (2020b: 146)

All in all, Stok's strategy of using pronouns "s/he" in case of cursed humans results in the humanization of the characters, as even before the reader discovers their real nature the use of aforementioned pronouns may implicate their human nature.

In the short story "A Grain of Truth" ("Ziarno prawdy") a cursed human being – Nivellen – is presented. It is not surprising that he is also referred to as "he" in the translation (2020b: 58). However, another character in this story is Vereena, a type of vampire called *bruxa*, which pretends to be a human being. The translator has chosen a feminine pronoun in relation to the creature

Wampirzyca poderwała się, wygięła grzbiet jak lampart i wrzasnęła. (2014b: 78)

The vampire jumped up, arched her back like a leopard and screamed. (2020b: 63)

Stok's choice of the pronoun might be explained by Vereena's human-like appearance and her seemingly human-like behaviour. However, unlike all the characters described above, she is the first one deliberately killing people, and doing so in an animalistic manner, making her a real monster. The argument in favour of using the pronoun "she" is her ability to be capable of loving Nivellen and the fact that in the English language system vampires tend to be gender-specific.

The short story "The Edge of the World" ("Kraniec świata") describes the Witcher's encounter with a creature identified as *silvan* – a humanoid, talking goat. Local people ask the protagonist to get rid of the creature calling it a *deovel* (2020b: 171) and referring to it as *he* (2020b: 171), which could be explained by the intelligent character of the devil which is considered a treacherous and witty entity. The use of pronouns concerning *Silvan* changes in the description of the creature, which could either be an inconsistency in translation or the translator's deliberate manipulation of pronouns aiming to strengthen the outlandish description of the creature:

Dolna część ciała stworza pokryta była długim, gęstym ciemnorudym włosom aż po rozwidlone racice. (2014b: 212)

Its nether regions were covered with long, thick, dark-red hair right down to the cleft hooves. (2020b: 176)

The translator replaced the term 'stwór' with the pronoun 'its', she could have used the pronoun 'his' as well. The use of the pronoun "it" only occurred in the narrator's description, whereas, other characters in the story keep referring to the creature as "he" regardless of their perception of it as the *silvan* or a *deovel*. The change introduced to the translation seems to dehumanize *silvan*, which is a sentient being.

The most enigmatic in its use of pronouns is the English version of a short story about a djinn entitled "The Last Wish" ("Ostatnie życzenie"). The translator's choice of pronouns changes multiple times throughout the story and, thus, may be confusing for the reader. However, a closer analysis of the contexts in which the pronouns are used leads to a discovery of a pattern. Stok has chosen to use the masculine pronoun in the context of describing djinn's actions and emotions

zanim zdążył umknąć we własny wymiar (2014b: 300)

before he managed to escape into his own dimension. (2020b: 253),

whereas, the description of the creature's physique is dominated by the pronoun "it", perhaps due to its inconsistent shape. The djinn changes its form, first appearing as smoke, later becoming a head, and finally transforming into a head with paws:

Głowa zakłapała dziobem [...] (2014b: 258)  
The head snapped its beak [...] (2020b: 217).

The scheme of such use of masculine (2020b: 217, 258f, 263, 266) and neuter (2020b: 217) pronouns repeats itself throughout the story. This translation may lead to the humanization of the creature's actions preceded by the masculine pronoun as they could be perceived as more deliberate, at the same time the dehumanizing djinn's physique referring to its form with a neuter pronoun.

## Characters in *Sword of Destiny* (*Miecz przeznaczenia*, trans. by David French)

The book *Sword of Destiny* has been translated by an English translator – David French. In contrast to Stok's translation, his text is dominated by the neuter pronoun 'it'. His choice might be explained by the fact, that most supernaturals in the short stories he translated are not human beings, unlike the characters in short stories translated by Stok.

The short story "The Bounds of Reason" ("Granica możliwości") describes Geralt meeting a dragon that is able to shapeshift into a human. Meeting the creature in its human form, the Witcher does not realize its true shape, French retains the original pronoun 'he' (2020a: 2), however, as soon as the dragon turns into its real shape the pronoun changes to 'it':

Skłoniwszy głowę, smok rozpostarł skrzydła, olśniewająco złote w promieniach słońca. (2014a: 90f)  
Inclining its head, the dragon spread its wings, dazzling gold in the sunshine. (2020a: 80).

The deliberate change of pronouns strengthens the strangeness of the creature, dehumanizing it when it is needed.

The central character of the short story "Eternal Flame" ("Wieczny ogień"), is a *doppler*, a shapeshifter that is able to transform into any person it/he encounters. It is another example of a thinking creature that looks like a human being, and French has chosen to refer to the character with a neuter pronoun, although in this case, he uses it even when the *doppler* is in his changed form:

Musimy go złapać! (2014a: 163)  
We have to catch it! (2020a: 152)

The use of the neuter pronoun might aim to highlight people's perception of these creatures, as their lack of tolerance is emphasized several times in the story. Persecution of *dopplers* is described by the innkeeper who outlines their extermination in Novigrad, which is a gruesome and cruel process of covering the creature in clay and burning it

alive (2020a: 141), the *doppler* himself talks about being exiled from his homeland into the wilderness (2020a: 176) and comments on the injustice and hypocrisy of the society:

Daliście [...] skromną możliwość asymilacji krasnoludom, niziołkom, gnomom, elfom nawet. Dlaczego ja mam być gorszy? Dlaczego odmawia mi się tego prawa? (2014a: 190)  
 You gave dwarves, halflings, gnomes and even elves [...] the modest possibility of assimilation. Why should I be any worse off? Why am I denied that right? (2020a: 176)

Interestingly, in the closing paragraphs of the story, when the protagonists decide to let the *doppler* permanently pretend to be a man, the translator uses the pronoun ‘he’:

To mój kuzyn. (2014a: 193)  
 He’s my cousin. (2020a: 179)

The transformation of the pronoun is significant, as it occurs after the social acceptance of the supernatural creature by other characters in the story. The change of the pronouns used by French further emphasizes acceptance of the *doppler*.

The neuter pronoun is also chosen in a short story entitled “A Shard of Ice” (“Okruch lodu”) concerning a *zeugul*, which is an example of a typical, non-thinking monster with animalistic features. Its inhumane behaviour justifies the usage of the pronoun ‘it’.

Potwór był martwy. Był już częścią tej kupy śmieci, w której kiedyś bytował. (2014a: 94)  
 The monster was dead, now part of the midden where it had dwelled. (2020a: 85)

Two short stories in which French used feminine pronouns instead of neuter ones in relation to supernatural creatures are “A Little Sacrifice” (“Trochę poświęcenia”) and “Sword of Destiny” (“Miecz przeznaczenia”). The first one depicts a mermaid, a thinking creature, who from the waist up is a woman and from the waist down resembles a fish. Witcher translates a conversation between the mermaid and a duke who is in love with the creature. The translator’s choice of the pronoun ‘she’ could be motivated by the fact mermaids are commonly perceived as women, and that Sh’eenaz is the duke’s love interest, and her dehumanization with a neuter pronoun would be counterproductive. The supernatural creatures from the second short story are dryads, and similarly to the mermaid French uses the feminine pronoun. Dryads are most similar to human beings in this set of short stories. It should not be surprising, as they were humans who have undergone a mutation. The human origins of the dryads and the character of their society governed by a matriarchal figure of Eithne could allow the interpretation of them being more of a secluded tribe instead of a type of supernatural creature. This, in turn, coincides with the use of the pronoun ‘she’, which strengthens the humanization of them.

## Conclusion

Manipulation of the use of pronouns might influence the reception of supernatural characters, reflecting the perception of such creatures in the Witcher’s universe, as is the case of *doppler* in the short story “Eternal Flame”, in which the acceptance of the creature by other characters is marked by the change of the pronouns used.

Both Stok and French were more prone to use the neuter pronoun referring to male supernatural creatures, as described in the analysis of the short stories “The Last Wish” – djinn, “The Edge of the World” – *silvan*, “The Bounds of Reason” – the dragon, and “Eternal Flame” – *doppler*. Conversely, female supernaturals, such as *bruxa* in “A Grain of Truth” and the mermaid in “A Little Sacrifice”, are referred to with feminine pronouns which might be caused by the popular perception of such creatures as feminine, further favoured by them both being love interests of different characters in stories.

All in all, Stok predominantly uses feminine and masculine pronouns over the neuter pronoun, the choice of such strategy can perhaps derive from her Polish descent, as in the Polish language it is common to refer to supernatural creatures with feminine and masculine pronouns. Correspondingly, French’s English origins might impact his choice of neuter pronoun in three of the short stories, which he translated.

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