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Strengths and Limitations of Artificial Intelligence in Conveying Gender Vagueness in Literary Translation

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Abstract. Over the past few decades, the field of translation studies has undergone significant technological evolution, progressing from computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools to neural machine translation (NMT) systems and, most recently, to large language model (LLM)-based chatbots. The latter, while not originally designed for translation tasks, demonstrate high efficacy in natural language processing and function as cognitive communication systems (dialogic artificial intelligence (AI) agents). When utilized by translators, such tools can significantly enhance productivity and output quality due to prompt engineering techniques. This study examines the ability of AI systems to process and render in translation the semantics of blurred boundaries, i.e. instances where literary authors create situations of interpretative choice that invite readers' active meaning construction. The paper evaluates how current AI solutions can: 1) detect intentionally vague elements in a literary text and 2) render them across languages while preserving the author's intent. Data collection was carried out using comparative analysis of translation results performed by 15 NMT systems (DeepL Translator, Google Translate, Yandex Translate, SYSTRAN, HIX, etc.) and 4 AI chatbots (ChatGPT-4o, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and Sider). The findings demonstrate that while conventional NMT systems struggle with conveying gender neutrality – a manifestation of semantic vagueness – LLM-based chatbots excel through their generative architecture. Their interactive cognition enables contextual adaptation and alternative phrasing, effectively bridging the “gender vagueness gap” in translation.

Keywords: *vagueness, gender, non-isomorphism in language, literary translation, neural machine translation, artificial intelligence (AI), prompt engineering*

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Научная статья

Возможности и ограничения искусственного интеллекта при передаче гендерной неопределенности в художественном переводе

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Аннотация. Сфера переводоведения претерпела значительные технологические изменения в последние десятилетия: от систем компьютерного перевода (CAT) к нейромашинному переводу (NMT) и, наконец, к чат-ботам на основе больших языковых моделей (LLM). Хотя последние изначально не были предназначены для перевода, они демонстрируют высокую эффективность в обработке естественного языка и функционируют как когнитивно-коммуникативные системы (диалоговые агенты искусственного интеллекта (ИИ)). В руках переводчика такие инструменты могут стать эффективным средством повышения продуктивности и качества работы благодаря возможностям промпт-инжиниринга (prompt engineering). В данном исследовании анализируется способность систем ИИ обрабатывать и передавать в переводе семантику размытых границ, когда автор художественного текста создает «ситуации интерпретационного выбора», позволяя своему читателю самостоятельно толковать смысл высказывания. В работе оцениваются, насколько современные системы ИИ способны: 1) выявлять элементы намеренной неопределенности (неясности) в художественном тексте; 2) передавать их на другие языки, сохраняя при этом заложенный автором замысел. Базой для проведения сравнительно-сопоставительного анализа послужили 15 систем машинного перевода (DeepL Translator, Google Translate, Yandex Translate, SYSTRAN, HIX и др.), а также 4 сервиса AI чат-ботов (ChatGPT-4o, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Sider). Результаты исследования демонстрируют, что традиционные системы машинного перевода не обеспечивают адекватного воспроизведения гендерной нейтральности – частного случая семантической неопределенности. В отличие от них, чат-боты на основе больших языковых моделей демонстрируют достаточно высокую эффективность благодаря своей генеративной архитектуре. Их интерактивные возможности позволяют адаптироваться к контексту и предлагать альтернативные варианты формулировок, что в определенной мере способствует решению проблемы передачи гендерной неопределенности в переводе.

Ключевые слова: неопределенность, гендер, языковой алломорфизм, художественный перевод, нейромашинный перевод, искусственный интеллект (ИИ), промпт-инжиниринг

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Introduction

A word or expression is perceived as vague when its meaning is not exact, accurate or precise. According to Russell's overarching claim, "all language is vague" [1, p. 61]. Thus, the discussion of vagueness embraces research on a vast array of topics, including cultural, cognitive and pragmatic issues [2–4].

The cognitive-pragmatic essence of the category of vagueness becomes especially relevant when we deal with translation. It is noteworthy that despite the widespread interest in vagueness, there have been very few studies in translation theory specifically addressing this topic. In the *Benjamins Translation Studies Bibliography*¹, only a few works examine the issue of vagueness in translation [5–8]. A similar scarcity of research is observed within the Russian scholarly tradition. The existing works either frame semantic indeterminacy (a broader concept encompassing vagueness) as a fundamental philosophical and methodological principle legitimizing multivariance in translation [9] or address the more specific field of ambiguity by opposing it to vagueness and exploring translation disambiguation strategies [10]. There are studies that provide analysis of grammatical and lexical approximations, gender vagueness, and intentional "imprecise precision" in literary texts, framing vagueness as an inherent and creative property of language that necessitates specific translation strategies (see, e.g. [11]). However, such research remains scarce and has not yet been systematically applied to the evaluation of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered translation tools. We view this as a significant oversight. As previously mentioned, vagueness is an inherent feature of all natural languages, yet the ways (both verbal and non-verbal) of expressing it vary across languages. This discrepancy presents a serious challenge for both translation and effective intercultural communication. Besides the so-called natural vagueness, there is also intentional "veiling" when authors create for their readers situations of interpretative choice, making something less

visible or precise. The task of the translator in this case is to preserve the effect in the target language, which can sometimes be very difficult due to the inevitable asymmetry between the source and target languages.

The relevance of this article is thus twofold. Firstly, it deals with the relative lack of studies on the intersection of vagueness and translation. Secondly, it addresses the urgent need to assess the capabilities of rapidly evolving AI tools, which are being integrated into translation workflows despite their underexplored performance in nuanced literary tasks such as conveying vagueness.

In this context, the principal aim of the paper was to explore the potential of modern AI-powered tools – including both conventional NMT systems and generative AI chatbots – in identifying and accurately rendering semantically vague elements, specifically, gender neutrality, in literary translation. To achieve this aim, the following research objectives were set: first, to assess the ability of these tools to detect intentionally vague constructs in the source text; second, to analyse the efficacy of their translation output in preserving nuanced meaning and interpretative ambiguity across languages; and finally, to compare the performance of conventional NMT systems with that of large language model (LLM)-based chatbots to identify their respective strengths and limitations in bridging the "gender vagueness gap".

The significance of this research is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how complex linguistic phenomena are processed by computational systems. Practically, the findings will provide professional translators with evidence-based guidance for tool selection and offer developers clear targets in order to improve AI models' ability to handle ambiguity and stylistic nuance.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive comparative framework that juxtaposes the performance of conventional NMT systems and generative AI chatbots in the specific challenge of

¹Available at: <https://benjamins.com/online/etsb> (accessed: 10 June 2025).

gender vagueness – a nuanced literary phenomenon that remains largely unexamined in computational translation studies.

Materials and methods

This study investigates the potential and limitations of machine translation/AI technologies in conveying gender vagueness from English to Russian, focusing on a case of lexical underspecification: the gender-ambiguous noun *friend* in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. In the passage below, Theodora's (one of the characters) apartment-mate is referred to only as a "friend", with no gender markers – a deliberate narrative choice that heightens intrigue.

*...Theodora had been tempted and had somehow plunged blindly, wantonly, into a violent quarrel with the **friend** with whom she shared an apartment. Things were said on both sides which only time could eradicate; Theodora had deliberately and heartlessly smashed the lovely little figurine her **friend** had carved of her, and her **friend** had cruelly ripped to shreds the volume of Alfred de Musset which had been a birthday present from Theodora, taking particular pains with the page which bore Theodora's loving, teasing inscription².*

The selected excerpt functions as an independent semantic unit, requiring no broader contextual knowledge – a critical feature for AI testing, as most systems lack full-text access. Moreover, the vagueness stems solely from lexical underspecification (*friend*), allowing controlled analysis of gender-rendering strategies.

The data were collected by means of comparative analysis of translation results performed by 15 NMT systems and 4 AI chatbots. The qualitative aspect

of the study involved prompt engineering for AI chatbots to reveal their potential for vague language processing.

Machine translation tools, widely used by professional translators in their work (see, e.g. [12]), encompass many programs and online services. These can be divided into two major groups. The first group consists of specialized NMT systems, which have already become conventional [13; 14]. The second group includes cognitive conversational agents (AI chatbots) based on LLMs, which have been gaining popularity among professionals since their public release in 2022.

The inclusion of AI chatbots in the category of translation tools, despite not being specifically designed for this function, is justified by their indisputable capacity for translation, which aligns them with NMT systems [15–19]. However, they should be classified as a distinct group because, unlike specialized NMT systems, AI chatbots act as cognitive conversational agents capable of following users' instructions and responding to users' input and feedback.

For the purposes of our research, we selected several of the most widely known services from both groups. The primary selection criterion was the application's availability to users: online access and either free use or a free trial period. The sample included 15 NMT systems (DeepL Translator, Google Translate, Reverso, Bing Translator, Yandex Translate, SYSTRAN, HIX, PROMT.One, Translate.com, Amazon Translate, ModernMT, IBM, Lingvanex, LibreTranslate, and MiraiTranslate)³ and 4 AI chatbots (ChatGPT-4o, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and Sider)⁴.

²Jackson S. *The Haunting of Hill House*. Penguin Books, 2019, pp. 7–8.

³<https://www.deepl.com> (DeepL Translator); <https://translate.google.com> (Google Translate); <https://www.reverso.net/text-translation> (Reverso); <https://www.bing.com/translator> (Bing Translator); <https://translate.yandex.com> (Yandex Translate); <https://translate.systran.net> (SYSTRAN); <https://translate.hix.ai/ru> (HIX); <https://www.online-translator.com/translation> (PROMT.One); <https://www.translate.com> (Translate.com); <https://aws.amazon.com/translate> (Amazon Translate); <https://www.modernmt.com/translate> (ModernMT); <https://www.ibm.com/artificial-intelligence> (IBM); <https://lingvanex.com/translation/russian-to-english> (Lingvanex); <https://github.com/LibreTranslate/LibreTranslate> (LibreTranslate); <https://trial.miraitranslate.com/trial> (MiraiTranslate).

⁴<https://chatgpt.com> (ChatGPT-4o); <https://gemini.google.com> (Google Gemini); <https://copilot.microsoft.com> (Microsoft Copilot); <https://sider.ai/ru/download> (Sider).

Results

We hypothesized that gender vagueness poses a substantial challenge for machine translation tools that cannot be adequately resolved without human intervention. To empirically verify this hypothesis, we presented a control excerpt containing the gender-neutral word *friend* to 15 specialized NMT systems and 4 AI chatbots demonstrating high potential in translation. The experimental results (see Table) reflect the distribution of translations of the word *friend* into female and male equivalents as well as both gendered options simultaneously. The last column presents the specific equivalents used in the translations.

Conversely, only 5 % opted for the male counterpart, with this solitary instance being produced by the free version of a commercial translation tool. A substantial share (26 %) of the systems demonstrated a propensity for employing both gendered options within a single translation. Notably, all four AI chatbot services unanimously produced female equivalents, occasionally offering alternative feminine words such as *соседка* ‘neighbour’ (female).

Our analysis confirms that, similar to human translators, AI chatbots demonstrate a capacity to not only detect gender vagueness and make interpretative choices but also to justify these

Translations suggested by NMT systems and AI chatbots

Translation tool	Gender			Translation(s)
	Female	Male	Both	
<i>NMT systems</i>				
DeepL Translator	+			<i>Подруга</i>
Reverso	+			<i>Подруга</i>
Google Translate			+	<i>Друг, подруга</i>
Bing Translator	+			<i>Подруга</i>
Yandex Translate	+			<i>Подруга</i>
PROMT.One			+	<i>Друг, подруга</i>
Translate.com	+			<i>Подруга</i>
HIX	+			<i>Подруга</i>
SYSTRAN		+		<i>Друг</i>
Amazon Translate	+			<i>Подруга</i>
ModernMT	+			<i>Подруга</i>
IBM			+	<i>Друг, подруга</i>
Lingvanex	+			<i>Подруга</i>
LibreTranslate			+	<i>Друг, подруга</i>
MiraiTranslate			+	<i>Друг, подруга</i>
<i>AI chatbots</i>				
ChatGPT-4o	+			<i>Подруга</i>
Google Gemini	+			<i>Соседка, подруга</i>
Microsoft Copilot	+			<i>Подруга</i>
Sider	+			<i>Подруга</i>
Gender choices, %	68	5	26	

The findings reveal a pronounced tendency among the systems examined (68 %) to favour the female equivalent in translating the target word.

decisions through linguistic and pragmatic contextualization. Here is a representative example of reasoning provided by the Sider chatbot:

“My reasoning is based on the context provided in the excerpt. The individual referred to as “friend” is engaged in a close relationship with Theodora, sharing an apartment and participating in significant emotional exchanges, including a quarrel and the exchange of personal gifts. While the gender of the friend is not explicitly stated, the overall tone and context suggest a level of relational depth that is commonly portrayed in female friendships in literature. Additionally, the descriptive language surrounding their conflict and the emotional investments also lean towards a portrayal that is often found in female character dynamics. That said, without direct reference clearly establishing the gender, the interpretation could still vary, but the context strongly hints at a female friend”.

This example illustrates that contemporary language models can perform basic contextual analysis and identify subtle textual nuances that might escape human notice. However, their reasoning occasionally reflects errors or embedded biases, underscoring the necessity of human oversight in critical translation tasks. Translators should understand limitations imposed by the architecture of models and learning datasets and not overly rely on AI chatbots: their interpretations and justifications are based on the analysis of diverse linguistic patterns they learnt from large datasets rather than true “comprehension” in the human sense of the word.

At the next stage of our research, we hypothesized that AI chatbots – unlike conventional NMT systems – could more effectively address the “vagueness challenge” due to their advanced natural language processing (NLP) capabilities and cognitive conversational functions, provided they receive appropriate human-guided cues. To validate this hypothesis, another interactive session was initiated with the same AI chatbots: ChatGPT-4o, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and Sider.

The purpose of the subsequent interactions with the language models was to examine their ability to preserve gender vagueness in literary translation. To do this, we created a prompt establishing a role-playing scenario

(a professional literary translator), provided a source text characterized by gender neutrality and set the objective of translating the text while maintaining the character’s explicitly unspecified gender to create an interpretative choice for the reader: *“Assume the role of a translator who specializes in literary translation. Make a translation into Russian of an extract from the Haunting of Hill House by Shirley Jackson. In your translation, leave the gender of Theodora’s friend who the author refers to unspecified. The goal is to let the reader infer the gender of Theodora’s friend from the context by themselves”.*

While all language models exhibited an ability to recognize the gender-neutral character of the lexeme *friend*, none successfully maintained this neutrality in the target language, Russian, which imposes grammatically marked gender distinctions.

ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot opted for gender-specific translations, rendering ‘friend’ as *подруга* (female equivalent) and *друг* (male equivalent), respectively, thus failing to fulfil the task objectives.

In attempting a gender-neutral translation, Google Gemini suggested *сосед* ‘neighbour’ (male), which can sometimes be used as a neutral equivalent. However, in the target context it resulted in an unnatural output. Furthermore, the model concurrently employed the gendered form *соседка* ‘neighbour’ (female), thus making the final version inconsistent.

In contrast, Sider’s response is noteworthy. The model demonstrated a nontrivial effort to preserve neutrality using a common gender noun *друг* and a graphical indication of both gendered verb forms (*вырезал(a)*, *разорвал(a)*), constituting a partially successful approach.

Based on our findings, it can be concluded that none of the four chatbots evaluated managed to produce a translation that entirely fulfilled the specified criteria. However, the experiments revealed the potential of AI in addressing the challenge of conveying gender-neutral language. Notably, the Google Gemini chatbot proposed several innovative strategies: use of the passive

voice, use of the infinitive, and use of a common gender noun. While the execution of these strategies was not without shortcomings, they offer valuable insights for human translators.

In the final phase of the experiment, we specifically tested the chatbots' ability to perform targeted lexical substitution: replacing the gender-ambiguous noun *friend* with a contextually appropriate gender-neutral equivalent. This objective aimed to further evaluate the capacity of AI chatbots to function as cognitive aids for translators.

As a result, both Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini failed to complete the task. The former model reiterated a previously proposed translation that had been evaluated negatively, whereas the latter, following an unsuccessful endeavour, declined to proceed, attributing the inability to identify appropriate equivalents to the idiosyncrasies of Russian grammar.

Nevertheless, two chatbots – ChatGPT and Sider – successfully generated a contextually appropriate equivalent that fully satisfied the specified criteria and aligned with the professional translator's choice: *существо* 'creature' or 'being'. Notably, the novel's translator, E. Dobrokhotova-Maikova, intentionally emphasized the gender ambiguity of *friend* by selecting this neutral common noun and further nuanced it with the adjective *прелестному* ("adorable"): "...[Теодора] потеряла покой и почти сразу закатила беспричинный скандал прелестному существу, с которым вместе снимала комнату"⁵.

The translator's addition reflects a deliberate interpretative stance – a stylistic choice absent from all analysed chatbot outputs. While this lexical embellishment personalizes the translation, it leaves room for readers' interpretation (for further discussion, see [11]). Crucially, none of the AI systems attempted such interpretative interventions.

Conclusion

Our findings support the hypothesis that gender vagueness presents substantial challenges for NMT systems, which are difficult to overcome without human assistance. Conversely, AI chatbots, with their advanced NLP capabilities and cognitive conversational functions, demonstrated greater effectiveness in handling interpretative ambiguity when provided with appropriate human guidance.

Our analysis revealed that not all AI chatbots are equally effective in managing the various aspects of conveying gender vagueness in translation, each exhibiting distinct strengths and limitations, as discussed in the previous section. However, AI chatbots show significant promise as cognitive tools for translators, with the potential to enhance translation quality and efficiency by improving contextual comprehension and suggesting alternative phrasings where vagueness is present. Therefore, it is crucial for practicing translators to recognize the potential of interactive conversational AI technologies, as these can substantially increase translation efficiency.

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⁵Jackson S. *Prizrak doma na kholme* [The Haunting of Hill House]. Moscow, 2023, p. 12.

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