

# The Highlighted Traits of Female Interpreters as Represented in the Media and Scientific Articles

## Medyada ve Bilimsel Makalelerde Temsil Edildiği Haliyle Kadın Çevirmenlerin Öne Çıkan Özellikleri

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of female interpreting is underresearched in literature. Of the limited studies, there are some studies which focus on one linguistic aspect of the female interpreters as well those which focus on a nonlinguistic aspect in comparison to male interpreters. This study aims to give an overall view on how they appear in media and scientific articles. It was conducted on the basis of an analysis of the hits of some keywords: gender, interpreting, female interpreting, female interpreters and their Turkish counterparts. As a result of the study, these traits are identified as linguistic traits, physical traits and identity, elegance as part of stance and the same-gender advantage. They collectively show that the established prejudices against women prevail. The specified classifications made for the purposes of this study are primarily for ease of analysis, and surely open to new items to be added by the further developments in the sociological climate accompanied by resultant scholarly studies.

### ÖZ

Çeviribilim alanyazını özelinde kadın çevirmenler konusu pek ele alınmış bir konu değildir. Sınırlı çalışmalar ya erkek çevirmenlerle kıyaslandığında kadın çevirmenlerin gösterdiği bir dilsel özelliği, ya da dilsel olmayan bir yönü ele almıştır. Bu çalışma ise medyada yer bulan ve bilimsel araştırmalarda incelenen kadın çevirmenlerin genel olarak nasıl ön plana çıktıklarını mercek altına almaktadır. Çalışma bulguları internet üzerinde arama motorlarına hem İngilizce hem Türkçe olarak toplumsal cinsiyet, sözlü çeviri, sözlü çeviri yapan kadınlar, kadın çevirmenler vb. sözcükleri girilerek elde edilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda öne çıkan özelliklerin genel olarak bakıldığında dilsel özellikler, fiziksel özellikler ve kimlik, kişisel kendini sunumun bir parçası olarak zarafet ve aynı cinsiyetten olmanın getirdiği avantajlar olarak saptanmıştır. Bütün olarak değerlendirildiğinde, kadınlara karşı yerleşik olarak halihazırda var olan ön yargıların bu konuda da hüküm sürdüğü dikkati çekmektedir. Bu araştırma kapsamında yapılan sınıflandırma yalnızca çözümlene kolaylığı için gerçekleştirilmiş olup, sosyolojik iklimin değişmesi ve bunun sonucunda yürütülecek daha sonraki araştırmalar ile yapılabilecek olası eklemelere açıktır.

**Keywords:** Female interpreter, interpreting, gender

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kadın çevirmen, sözlü çeviri eylemi, toplumsal cinsiyet

### Introduction

The public recognition of interpreting in Türkiye goes back to the Gulf Crisis in 1991, when the Turkish viewers got the war news from simultaneous interpreting around the clock, whereas the origins of simultaneous interpreting is actually traceable to Nuremberg Trials in 1945. It is known that interpreting, irrespective of the type is most carried out by female professionals in Türkiye, as also reinforced by Diriker (2022). It follows that female scholars who publish articles on interpreting outnumber that of male scholars, which was found to treble between 2008 and 2018 according to a study (Çalık, 2019). Indeed, this is not exclusive to Türkiye. Conference Interpreters UK argues that the ratio of female to male interpreters worldwide is about 3 to 1 (CIUK Interpreters, 2018). Nevertheless, up to now, there are a few studies as to how the interpreters stand out and represented in the media among the others, being Diriker (2003) and Cho (2017a). Even less studies were conducted, focusing only on female interpreters. This may be partly because what Bulut, being a successful representative of female interpreters as well as

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scholars in Türkiye, argued: the discussions on translation generally revolve around a title including translation/interpreting rather than translators/ interpreters, which results in the fact that they are overshadowed and their invisibility is acknowledged (2006). Turkish Translation Studies scholar Gürçağlar's (2019) study, which includes interviews with three Turkish female interpreters is an exceptional case in point. These interpreters, having played an important role in professionalization and institutionalization of interpreting in Türkiye have underlined that the feminine dominance is traceable to the male perception that the profession does not offer stability and argued that female strength stems primarily from solidarity. Actually, this perception of instability is not limited to interpreting but covers translation as well, as reinforced by a study by Yücel and Orhan (2018), which indicates that the profession of translation is seen as a temporary work by women who have been involved in the translation between 1980 and 2002, as well as a more recent interview with a female ÇEV-BİR member, Aslı Takanay (2021) who said that being mostly freelancers, the translators (in the country) are doomed to work without stability (Parça başı çalışan işçileriz, 2021).

The fact that the issue of female interpreting is underresearched is not exclusive to Türkiye, though. It follows that, scientific articles concerning female interpreting in Türkiye and abroad, are yet to increase in number, kind and depth. Those available in literature now are mostly linguistics-based, as in the few examples by Magnifico and Defrancq (2017, 2019). But the gender related issues for female interpreters are of course, not limited to the linguistic aspect, only. These nonlinguistic issues are mostly dealt with in media, as will be seen here. In this regard, this study is a step forward to give a snapshot of the outstanding traits of female interpreters as they are represented in the media and studied as scientific articles worldwide.

### ***Methodology and Discussion***

This study is based on an analysis of the hits of some keywords: gender and interpreting, female interpreting, female interpreters. Besides, for Turkish researches on the other hand, as Diriker (2022, p. 198) stated, as Turkish has no single established word for interpreter, both *tercüman* and *çevirmen* were used and then if the news items were about translators rather than interpreters, they were excluded from this descriptive study. As a result of the said searches, a thematic grouping was made, which will be submitted systematically below. Accordingly, these traits are identified as linguistic traits, physical traits, elegance as part of stance and the same-gender advantage.

### ***Linguistic Traits***

Since the 1980s, linguistic features that were labeled "female" have gradually become considered as part of the powerless linguistic style, in contrast to linguistically powerful male features. Powerless language includes, but is not limited to elements such as tag questions, intensifiers, hedges, hesitation forms, gesture forms, questioning intonation and statements, which are lacking in powerful language (Lakoff, 1975; Morgan, 2008). Actually, the powerlessness does not arise from the language itself. As O'Barr (1982) concluded, the tendency for more women than men to use 'powerless' language stems from the greater tendency of women to occupy relatively powerless social positions. Holmes (1986) claims that women do not necessarily employ more hedges than men but that their use of hedges tends to focus more on interpersonal relationships while men's is more on propositional precision. This is confirmed by a more recent study that in political interpreting, females would use vague words to describe people and events, whereas males only describe events with the use of "seem." (Xiong, 2022). Also, there is a conflictive result concerning the frequency of use of hedges, which are obtained from interpreting during press conferences that male interpreters use hedging more (Pan & Zheng, 2017). Furthermore, gender is also known to influence the use of self-repairs. For example, women use more editing terms as self-repair and more hedges in interpreting and in English booth, in the European Parliament (EP) (Magnifico & Defrancq, 2019).

Nakane (2008) states that although the female interpreters were found to use honorific expressions much more than male interpreters, it would be a simplistic conclusion to concern the linguistic realization of politeness to the gender variable, since the study highlights the complexity of relationships among politeness markers, gender and the interpreter's role in the context of police interview.

Another study indicated that female interpreters downtone fewer FTAs than their male counterparts (Magnifico & Defrancq, 2016). Face-saving thus appears to be primarily a male strategy. In fact, this may be due to differences in male and female interpreters' norm sensitivity. While female interpreters tend to make a faithful translation, male interpreters are less preoccupied with professional norms and take more liberty with the source utterance. Besides, cultural differences must be explored for underlying reasons. One of the few examples, relating the linguistic behavior to culture, was conducted by Hu and Meng (2018). In this study, it was indicated that male interpreters have a tendency to adopt strategies such as strengthening, weakening, and addition more often than female interpreters, whereas female interpreters tend to remain closer to the original text than male interpreters, due to the authors' argument of China's social expectations of men as being more innovative and creative versus of women as being passive and submissive. However, a female diplomatic interpreter may take the reins and act as a gatekeeper (Gülmez et al., 2020) as seen in the utterance made by interpreter Ha Yeon Kim regarding her interpreting from English into Korean during

presidential elections that she shortened what Trump said as it would be more aggressive and less formal if she would not have done so (Hincks, 2018).

When using the powerful language, women interpreters seem to attract more negative attention, even when the speaker whom s/he is interpreting for, uses such language. This can be exemplified by the case in December 1983 when vice president George H.W. Bush went on a secret mission to El Salvador during a civil war. During the mission, he was accompanied by Stephanie Van Reigersberg, as interpreter, being then the head of the interpreting division of the Office of Language Services of the U.S. Department of State. Even when Bush “cursed the people there out”, Van Reigersberg said. “having a woman interpreter using that kind of language really got their attention” (Diplomatic Interpreting, 2019).

Kimura and Seal (2003) found that irrespective of the task type, being verbal or nonverbal, women can deal with and perform these problems better. In addition, male and female interpreters also showed difference in performance of interpreting numbers, dates and figurative language. Verdini (2019) indicated that female students of interpretation were outperformed by male students in interpreting dates and numbers, but were better with figurative language. Cecot (2001) analyzed pauses in simultaneous interpretation through 11 interpreters, and concluded that women interpreters use more filled but shorter pauses while men demonstrated an adverse pattern. Furthermore, Russo (2016) stated that when female and male interpreted speeches were analyzed at EP through the European Parliament Interpreting Corpus (EPIC), female interpreted speech was found to show a richer vocabulary. Later in 2018, she also identified through the aforementioned corpus that for read speeches, females’ mean delivery rate was faster than that of males’ and the male interpreters produced shorter length.

### *Physical Traits and Identity*

For competitiveness, aesthetic labor in interpreting is proven by the recent media phenomenon of *good-looking interpreters*. Accordingly, physically attractive female interpreters working on television have been sensationalized in the media in the case of Korea (Cho, 2017a). The focus thus seems to have shifted from language proficiency to personal aesthetics (Cho, 2017b) in Korea, and possibly in other countries. In the case of Türkiye, for instance, the data between 1988 and 2003 indicates that interpreting was even demonstrated as an alternative to modelling (Diriker, 2003). However, the prototype of female interpreters was drawn as those with neutral color clothes as far as the first female interpreters in Türkiye (Beköz, 2011). As for whether there is a dress code for female interpreters, an experienced freelance conference interpreter E.Tözüm (Tercümenin Görünmez Kuralları, 2013) was quoted as saying no, but she added that the female interpreters must always look for a formal ready made suit, and avoid wearing a low cut shirt/dress or mini skirt as they would not be considered appropriate during an interpreting assignment in a business meeting. Diriker’s (2022) most recent data, however, shows that let alone the discourse of female interpreters look, their visibility is highly gone, a fact she attributes possibly to an increasingly masculinized political setting in Türkiye. Very few news instances which contained female interpreters shifted from aesthetics to other issues, mostly religious ones. For instance, the headscarf issue as in the case of Fatma G. Abushanab acting as the interpreter of Turkish President Erdoğan in the NATO Summit in 2021 (Erdoğan’ın tercümanı muhalefetle iktidarı karşı karşıya getirdi, 2021). Another instance went so far as questioning the identity of the famous actress Serra Yılmaz, also known as a successful female interpreter who was accused of being a Christian, simply because she interpreted for Papa XVI. Benedictus in 2006 when he paid a visit to Türkiye (Serra Yılmaz: “Papanın çevirmenliğini yaptım diye...”, Hürriyet, 2014).

When disliked by the viewers, the physical performance may overshadow the performance of a female interpreter, as in the case of the interpreting by the woman with purple hair during the US-Sino talks. As it is known, China and the United States held a high-level strategic dialogue amidst the tense relations between the two countries. The choice of a purple-haired translator at the meeting caused the outside world to question what happened to American diplomacy. Some netizens bluntly stated: She “attended high-risk political occasions with purple hair, but was not immediately driven away. The United States is weak, and China knows it very well”. As it implied, the physical feature of an interpreter is even interpreted to suggest the weakness of a state, which assigned her to the meeting. Some people stated that purple and colorful hair are common in the art world, but are not suitable for diplomacy. Many foreign netizens also considered that dyeing her hair purple for international conferences seems to be very unprofessional in diplomacy (Archyde, 2021). Despite many mentions of her hair, her full name was not even revealed in many reports, which is thought-provoking.

When admired by the viewers, the physical appearance may also overshadow the performance of a female interpreter, as in the case of Zhang Jing who made an outstanding interpreting for China in the abovementioned US-Sino talks. The news started with the title “Beautiful interpreter”. Literature confirms that more attractive people –from all walks of life- are more likely to be employed and earn higher wages on average. An extreme incident of such alleged employment may be given for the one who served during the US-Russia summit in Osaka 2019. Stephanie Grisham, the former head of Trump’s press office, in her memoirs writes that Fiona Hill, being the top Russia adviser in the White House, told her that Putin used an unusually attractive female interpreter in the meeting, “whose presence seemed intended to distract the U.S. president” (Yuan & Dowsey, 2021). It was later

refuted by the related authorities but the fact remains that this story appeared in a noteworthy memoir by a top official and attracted wide attraction in the media.

Charismatic gestures of a female interpreter may also overshadow the performance of others involved in the interpreting setting, as was seen in the case of BSL interpreter, who was said to “steal the show” by the viewers in the Coronation concert (Carr, 2023).

### *Elegance*

Without succumbing to the prevalent hegemonic masculinity in the society, a female interpreter may show both elegance in look and knowledge in diplomatic meetings. Zhang, the Chinese interpreter who served at China-US talks, may be set as an example. Zhang, having been graduated from China Foreign Affairs University, was praised on Chinese social media for “fully showing the elegant demeanor of China’s diplomats in the new era” (Zhang, 2021).

A female interpreter can also show elegance by her speaking style, as demonstrated by the research conducted with EPIC on English, Spanish and Italian source and target speeches that having a considerable linguistic variety in interpreting, female interpreters are “probably perceived as being stylistically more refined by their clients” (Russo, 2016, p. 319).

### *The Same-Gender Advantage*

Flotow (1997) underlined that translation is a special case enhancing solidarity in the women’s movement. To exemplify, female interpreters are known to provide access to populations and areas that all-male units cannot engage or search in a military operation (Egnel, 2016). As a case in point, the female translators are praised by the Female Engagement Team (FET) as the only way to communicate with Afghan women, who are not allowed even to look at unrelated men.

Female interpreters also offer help by being the voice of oppressed women who suffer violence. The use of the interpreter of the same gender is also encouraged by the official bodies, in gender-related violence for reasons of cultural modesty e.g. see Mahret al., 2007, p. 41). To name a few, Butler (2008) investigated how female interpreters “make sense of and cope with interpreting rape stories” and Norma and Garcio-Caro (2016) studied gender issues in the practice of professional interpreters assisting migrant women in Australia. Such examples show the need for interpreters to have specialised training to build communication bridges between the public services and the victims (Del Pozo-Triviño & Toledano-Buendía, 2016, p. 192).

Some issues may be culturally sensitive, which may require the authorities to look for the female interpreters only. For instance, in Türkiye, it is known that female interpreters are prioritized to be involved in some mediated activities for womanly talk on e.g. sanitary pads for women in order to facilitate cooperation, as reported by an anonymous scholar (personal communication). During the tragic earthquake disaster in February 2023 in Türkiye, a female interpreter, Tülay, Çağlıtütüncügil was reported as saying how it was important for a Turkish earthquake victim from Southern region to have a Turkish interpreter of the same gender in healthcare units as she would culturally see how hard it may be for a local female to express that she feels her privacy is violated while being inspected by an international doctor (in that case, Spanish) where a male technician is around. When warned by the female interpreter, the Spanish team immediately changed the location of the ultrasound device, after which no privacy issues were expressed. Likewise, in Sweden when talking of intimate areas, an interpreter of the same gender as the one in need of help with interpretation may be recommended, e.g. a pregnant woman and her health (Hadziabdic & Hjelm, 2013). An example from India is that a female interpreter is preferable, since some Hindu women remain shy about communicating personal issues through a male interpreter (Thakrar et al., 2018).

The last but not least aspect is that a female interpreter is role-modeled by the females, as seen in the case of the famous Chinese interpreter Zhang Jing. She “helped convey China’s voice to the world through her specialty; and compared to the US translator, she performed far better. She also showed the “power of Chinese women” one netizen commented on Sina Weibo (Shera, 2021). This role modelling self-confidence becomes much more important in the broader contexts of culture and politics. A female interpreter, during a community interpreting said that “I also tell the clients I am Roma (Romani or Gypsy)” . . . “You have to stand behind your nationality” . . .”) (Bischoff et al., 2012). Another example is what a female interpreter stated after a military conflict: “I’ve been shot at; it’s happened four times.” she said. “It’s normal now” (Montgomery, 2011), demonstrating that women are as brave as their male colleagues, even in life-and-death matters, which may invalidate a traditional view of the relative bravery of the men and women”.

### **Conclusion**

The highlighted traits of female interpreters in the media and the scientific studies, though limited in number and depth, in Türkiye as well as the world are identified in this study as linguistic traits, physical traits, elegance as part of stance and the same-gender advantage. As it is indicated by the aforementioned findings and examples, face-threatening acts, boldness are assumed to be a given trait for men and the women who show such traits have yet to make news or unexpected scientific claims, as exemplified by the more use of FTAs by female interpreters in this study. In the same vein, the physical traits and identity as well as elegance

which are almost never referred to in the case of a male interpreter occupy much space for female interpreters in media, and even may overshadow the overall quality of their translational performance. How they look, how they wear culturally may prove to be an item for female interpreters in countries like Korea, Türkiye and others. In addition, depending on the political developments, the visibility rate may change, as argued in Diriker's (2022) study. The same-gender advantage, also found in the study is worth noting for women empowerment, providing a voice for the oppressed and a secure outlet for talking on taboo issues. Last but not least, acting as a female interpreter serves as a role model in confidence-building for the next female generations to come, apart from what they achieve while doing their job.

The specified classifications made for the purposes of this study are primarily for ease of analysis, and surely open to new items to be added by the further developments in the sociological climate accompanied by resultant scholarly studies.

They collectively show that the established prejudices against women prevail and the reaction shown to them varies from one female interpreter to another, as indicated by Gürçağlar's (2019) study. The fact remains that an awareness must be grown against them not only among the same sex but also the opposite one so that a lasting benefit could be obtained from the cultural and symbolic capitals of female interpreters.

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