PERSONIFICATION OR SEXIFICATION OF COUNTRIES IN ENGLISH?

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Abstract

In the article, we analyze the metaphoric associations which are the basis for the personification of countries in English. We try to find out in what discourse types countries and cities are personalized. We identify the main factors which stand behind the use of she-reference with countries.

Keywords: ***metaphoric associations, personification of countries.***

Rezumat

În articol, supunem analizei asociațiile metaforice care stau la baza personificării țărilor în limba engleză. Încercăm să stabilim prin ce mijloace ale limbii menționate acestea sunt personificate. Descriem factorii principali care motivează personificarea în cauză prin pronumele „she”.

Cuvinte-cheie: ***asociații metaforice, personificarea țărilor.***

Personification takes various interesting forms, and although it is usually associated with literary discourse types, it is widespread in a variety of other registers, ranging from the semi-literary (e.g. journalism) to the colloquial ones. Thus it is far from 'marginal'[103]. In present-day English, in fact, it has taken on a new lease of life in the media, especially film and advertising, although literary critics like Northrop Frye[104] might well believe it is 'devalued'. However, Paxson is not right in his too general claim[105] that 'in their poetry and fiction, mainstream American and British writers eschew personification entirely'.

Although English relies more or less straightforwardly on the criteria of humanness and biological sex in gender assignment, the congruence between sex and gender is not absolute. Most grammarians note that ships, boats, cars, airplanes, nations are sometimes referred to as 'she'. Despite several decades of linguistic reform, it is not hard to find examples of personalizing of the given entities in contemporary usage. In this article, we are going to examine the personification of countries and cities, and namely

[103]Joly, 1975, p. 235.
[104]***apud*** Paxson, 1994, p. 172.
[105]Paxson, 1994, p. 172.

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what metaphoric associations or stereotypical symbolism underlies this kind of personalizing of objects.

"Linguistically, personification is marked in one or more of the following devices:

1) potentiality for the referent to be addressed by ***you*** (or ***thou);***
2) the assignment of the faculty of speech (and hence the potential occurrence of ***I***);
3) the assignment of a personal name;
4) co-occurrence of personified NP with ***he/she;***
5) reference to human / animal attributes (e.g. 'the sun slept')."[106]

The general problem is that for personification (of animals as well as objects) much the same tendency is observed as for linguistic gender, namely, for male reference to predominate. Personification is indeed sexification, just as to pronominalize in the third person is indeed to sexualize, so that features 3-5 above tend to be male orientated. There is no reason to think that 'dual-gender' nouns denoting animals such as ***elephant, rabbit, horse*** should be mentally conceived of or interpreted in a totally different way from dual gender nouns referring to types of people; or nouns referring to objects personified as neither male nor female, or both. Hence, with some important exceptions, to which I shall return, personification (including the personalizing of plants) in informal, unpremeditated discourse tends to be male orientated, with ***he*** as the (male) 'norm'. Wales[107] gives examples of ***he*** used quite spontaneously for a golf-tee and biscuit tin lid, both of which moved perversely, and were thus animated. As far as the reference to animals is concerned, ***he*** is also expressive, empathetic, vivid, etc.

Moreover, there is the same kind of sexism with personification as with generic reference traditionally. Just as men have been traditionally treated as the 'superior' sex, so men can thus be traditionally regarded to be placed 'higher' than women in the animateness hierarchy or Chain of Being, within the class of human beings. And just as 'higher animals' are conceived as being closer to human interests than 'lower' animals, so many personifications can be regarded to be closer to male interests than to women's. Certainly, many kinds of personification in many discourse types reflect stereotypical associations or qualities of the male, or a male sphere of influence or activity. Again," just as 'heroes' numerically predominate, outnumbering 'heroines' in fiction with their active and public life-style and power, so male personified heroes outnumber female, e.g. in children's

[106]Wales, 1996, p. 146.
[107]Wales, 1996, p. 148.

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fiction and the media: from Rupert Bear and Peter Rabbit to Gumdrop the vintage car (Val Biro) and Thomas the tank engine (the Rev. W. Awdry)"[108].

Sexism is deep-rooted in the native speakers' understanding and interpretation of gender, no matter a layperson or a traditional grammarian, so much so that gender assignment (including pronominal reference) may seem 'unconscious' (as Halliday[109] thinks personification generally is) and therefore 'normal', rather than culturally determined. Some traditional grammarians, from the eighteenth century onwards (e.g. James Hams, John Fell, James Beattie, Lindley Murray, Jacob Grimm) were convinced that even 'grammatical' gender was not arbitrary in origin but somehow connected to the biological sex. They have tried to group the lexical items of different genders from classical and Germanic languages according to a kind of a sex(ist) symbolism or a 'metaphorical gender'[110].

Broadly speaking, 'masculine'-marked words were classified according to supposedly 'manly' attributes and 'feminine'-marked words according to 'womanly' attributes: such as strong, active, aggressive, powerful, clever, big, fierce, giving ("manly"), versus weak, timid, passive, loving, soft, helpful, beautiful, small, moral, receptive ('womanly'). So it was assumed that ***the sun*** was 'masculine' in many languages because it gave light (active), and ***the moon*** was 'feminine' because it received it (passive)**.** The moon, for example, is personified predominantly as 'female' in classical mythology and English poetry, to Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a wintry night' (1917) and beyond. And the sun is personalized as male from ancient literary tradition to the popular Henry Hall song of 1932, ***'The sun*** has got ***his*** hat on'.

Poetic discourse has also tended to preserve many conventionalized attributions inherited from classical literature and mythology which are probably based quite simply on the grammatical gender of words in Latin. Nonetheless, stereotypical symbolism still occurs in poetic language, by a continuous synchronic process of creative re-etymologizing, and so becoming inextricably associated with poetic personifications. It is definitely still present in the personifications of colloquial speech.

In her investigation of some of the metaphorical associations between women and topography, Weigel[111] has spoken of the tendency for both wilderness as well as the town/city to be conceived of as feminine. Weigel is concerned with the ramifications of this within the symbolic system underlying western history, literature and art. Another linguist, Suzanne Romaine, has commented on how this metaphor has been played out in linguistic systems, both in languages like English with no grammatical

[108]Wales, 1996, p. 148.
[109]Halliday, 1985, p. 25.
[110]Baron, I986, p. 94.
[111]1990, ***apud*** Romaine, 1997, p. 61.

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gender, as well as in languages like German with grammatical gender. She noted that "Not only are both concepts grammatically feminine in German, ***Wildnis*** 'wilderness' and ***Stadt*** 'town / city', as is nature ***die Natur,*** but parallels extend to other European languages (cf. Italian ***la citta,*** French ***la ville,*** Spanish ***la ciudad*** 'city / town')."[112]

A woman is nature embodied, that's why she is regarded as 'the other'. The underlying conception of a woman within this metaphor is that she has a dual nature. She conceals an essentially wild inner nature, though she appears outwardly civilized. A woman is symbolic in the conflict between nature and civilization attracting men with her beauty, tempting them with her charms, but dangerous and hence in need of conquest. The idea of a woman as wild, in need of taming and domestication, probably it provided the theme for Shakespeare's **"**Taming of the Shrew". A woman is also symbolic of foreign, strange and wild territory to be colonized and subject to the male conquest, as it is reflected in the English expression such as the 'virgin territory'. Weigel[113] cites references to discourse between military commanders in the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) in which conquered cities are described and referred to as conquered virgins.

Cities are conceived of as feminine since they behave as feminine territories, fortresses to be overcome and conquered, concealing within them sensual pleasures as well as the dangers of seduction. The expression ***the girl of the town*** (since given way to ***the woman of the street)*** stood for a prostitute. The wrath of God descended on the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, names that today are synonymous with sexual licentiousness, as punishment for the depraved life of its inhabitants. Weigel notes how travelogues longing for a distant city is depicted as sexual longing for a woman. The city, however, is at the same time the place of civilization, the site where the wild nature has been brought under control and domesticated. Men make their mark on the landscape by constructing cities which provide refuge from the harsh wilderness. The theme of female space existing outside or apart from a male dominated society is played out in some feminist speculative fiction, such as Sally Miller Gearheart's **"**The Wander ground: Stories of the Hill Women" (1978), where women live in a wild territory, while men control the city.

Romaine (1997) analyzes the claim made by male grammarians that men's place was in the affairs of state because the word for 'state' is masculine in languages such as French and German. While the argument is clearly grounded in a belief of male superiority, she believes there is an apparent patterning in gender assignment in nouns lexicalizing the topographic domain. To explain it, we need to distinguish between the territory as soil,

[112]Romaine, 1997, p. 61-62.

[113]1990, ***apud*** Romaine, 1997, p. 62.

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earth or ground as opposed to the territory as country, state and nation. Where the territory is conceived of in its 'natural state', i.e. as dirt, soil, earth, etc. from which its fertility arises, in most cases the gender assignment is feminine. Compare, for example, the French ***la terre,*** the Italian ***la terra, the*** Spanish ***la tierra, the*** German ***die Erde,*** etc. Given the land's association with fertility, it is not surprising to find similar patterns in non-Western languages too. According to Maori cosmology, for instance, the primeval parents were Rangi awatea, the Sky Father above, and Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother below. Here we see quite clearly the metaphoric association of nature with the body of a woman.

Also, within this semantic field there are nouns referring to land in its natural condition as landscape and countryside, or cultivated as farm land, e.g. French ***la campagne,*** Italian ***la campagna,*** German ***die Landschaft*** (Note, however, Spanish ***el campo).*** Where land is conceptualized as a politicized entity under the jurisdiction of a nation-state, the terms referring to it are normally masculine, e.g. German ***Staat,*** French ***état,*** etc. Here land has been colonized, civilized and brought under male control. Yet, the symbolic associations of these male-governed nations and countries as abstractions are still feminine as one can see in the use of female figures to represent them, e.g. The Statue of Liberty, Britannia, her daughter Zealandia, and Marianne, the symbol of the French Republic, to name just a few. These abstractions are regarded as symbolic rallying points of affection and patriotism. While countries usually are founded by fathers rather than mothers, the country itself as one's native land in which one is born, is connected with motherhood and the fertility of the land itself, and is therefore often grammatically feminine, such as French ***la patrie,*** Spanish ***patria*** (but ***le pays, el pais)*** and French ***la nation,*** German ***die Nation,*** Spanish ***la nación,*** as are the names of the countries themselves, e.g. France, Italy, Spain, Ireland. Names of continents such as America, Europa and Asia are also feminine. Noteworthy exceptions include German ***Deutschland*** and ***Vaterland*** 'fatherland', which are grammatically neuter as a compound noun takes the gender of the final element, and the names for Portugal, which are masculine in Portuguese as well as in French, Italian, Spanish, but neuter in German, etc.

We can return now to the personification of countries in English. Countries (an also cities) belong to one particular class of 'abstract' concepts that is as frequently personified today as in classical times, and shows no signs of obsolescence. These concepts are usually ascribed to the class of feminine gender nouns in Latin. The staying power of this kind of

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personification accounts for its special regard by some present-day grammarians[114].

The main reason for such personalizing of countries is the metonymical transfer. Place-names can be considered to imply human beings metonymically in their reference, as their inhabitants. The main registers where such a personification occurs, mainly by co-reference with ***she,*** are journalism, political oratory and news-reporting. In this case the countries themselves are viewed from the perspective of being 'political/economic units', rather than strict 'geographical units'[115]. Note, for example:

(1) "The latest bank bailouts mean that ***Ireland's*** budget deficit will explode from 11 per cent to 32 per cent of ***her*** national income this year – three times that of the UK, some 10 times the EU's guideline, and the highest among the world's developed economies" ("Belfast Telegraph, Republic of Ireland on Edge of Economic Abyss", by Sean O'Grady**,** Friday, 1 October 2010);

(2) "As a member of the EU, ***Britain*** has lost control of ***her*** borders. Some 2.5 million immigrants have arrived since 1997 and up to one million economic migrants live here illegally" ("UKIP Manifesto 2010 Immigration & Asylum").

In many cases by personalizing a country the speaker shows his attitude of pride, respect, longing for it. As spoken by countrymen of the same country, this ***she*** sounds patriotic expressing affection to one's motherland:

(3) "Mr Salmond added: "He loved ***Scotland*** and ***her*** people - it was this commitment that drove Jimmy to defend the jobs and communities of the upper Clyde when he first shot to prominence nearly 40 years ago, with his inspirational and successful leadership of the UCS work-in" ("BBC NEWS Glasgow & West, Shipyard Union Leader Jimmy Reid dies", 11 August 2010).

In the following example, where an English county is referred to (Rutland), the female speaker/county councilor using she-reference sounds both affectionate and political:

(4) 'I have lived here since August 1959 and have come to love ***her*** enough to devote all my time to serving ***her*** as best as 1 can. But I would hate to see ***her*** reduced to a third-class community' (reported in **"**The Guardian"**,** 5 November 1993).

The problem is that extended personification of countries involving s***he*** rather draws attention to itself (like extended use of ***one),*** so that switching to ***it often*** occurs. Or else the 'usual' neuter gender pronoun ***it*** is used unconsciously after a stretch of utterance; or else there is apparent inconsistency if two or more countries are referred to and it is necessary to

[114]e.g. Leech ***et alii***, 1975; Swan, 1980; Crystal, 1988; Alexander, 1990; in addition to Quirk ***et alii,*** 1985, 5.111.

[115]Quirk ***et alii,*** 1985, 5.111; also Poutsma, 1914, p. 332.

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use the same pronoun. The switching to ***it,*** interestingly, does not lead to 'depersonification' in these particular contexts, since the countries, by their metonymic force, continue to 'carry out' things associated with human beings, such as wage wars and make treaties. The double nature of such names, however, (country / people; personified / not personified) means that there is frequently also vacillation in the choice of ***who/which*** in co-reference.

Bauer[116] believes this use of ***she personalizing countries,*** to be on the decline, but we see no strong evidence for this. Indeed, there are signs that ***she-forms*** are now being used, as a rhetorical device of 'heightening' or 'intensifying', in contexts where the countries referred to are actually being viewed as geographical as well as political units: for example, in travel-brochure writing ***('Greece*** and ***her*** islands', ***SunMed*** (1988)). Heightening means to make the country more attractive, charming, beautiful. Though the country is regarded as a geographical entity, she-reference is used as a rhetorical device in its description. Note, for example:

(5) "France exports her mountains: ***France*** has the world's biggest skiing area. Every year ***she*** welcomes visitors from all over the world, who are delighted to take advantage of ***her*** high-quality facilities, both to practise winter sports and enjoy summertime activities. Their enjoyment contributes to the international reputation of France's mountain regions, but France Neige International, a body bringing together public- and private-sector partners, also contributes all year round to the export of France's now widely recognized expertise. France Neige International's mission is to develop winter-sports resorts in Bulgaria, Lebanon and Japan and provide the benefit of ***her*** expertise in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, China, Korea and Turkey, not to mention Argentina, Canada, the United States and even Norway. Set up in 1984, this body, which is the product of a partnership between the public sector and professionals from the mountain leisure industry, represents France's know-how beyond ***her*** borders" ("France in the United Kingdom, French Embassy").

This example is taken from the site of the French Embassy. France is presented as a geographical entity. The goal of this information is to show the country's attractiveness as a touristic resort. So she-reference is used as a rhetorical device of heightening. At the same time the article tells about the activity of France Neige International, a company that exports expertise. It means that the personification of France is also due to a metonymical transfer, that is, speaking about the country we mean the people of that country who carry out a certain activity.

Reference to cities by she-forms is in most cases rhetorical, and unmotivated by their political status, hence the personalizing of cities doesn't occur due to a metonymic transfer. Instead, it is found in eulogistic discourse as

[116]Bauer, 1994, p. 148.

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rhetorical device of heightening: e.g. Lionel Johnson's poem 'Oxford' (1891) ('Eternal in ***her*** beauty ...'); and E.M. Forster's poem 'Howard's End' (1910, ch. 14) (on London). The city of Alexandria is certainly the main character in Lawrence Durrell's poem 'Alexandrian quartet' (1957-60). ***She-reference to cities*** is also used as a sign of affection, as for example in the Dinah Shore song 'The last time I saw Paris': ***'Her*** heart was warm and gay'. See also the following example:

(6) "In July of '86, the railroad was finished through to Lincoln. And now, ***Cedartown*** would no longer sit out on the prairie by ***herself***. No longer would twenty-three miles of snow drifts or deep ruts of mud lie between ***her*** and the capital city." (B.S. Aldrich, ***A Lantern in Her Hand***, p. 123)

Here ***Cedartown*** is personalized as the speaker is both affectionate and proud of her native town. She-reference is used to express patriotic feeling to one's native town. Personalizing of the town is also a rhetorical device of heightening which allows to praise it, to show its significance.

Conclusions

Personification of countries in English is an ancient trend, it has existed for many centuries and it still persists nowadays. Though some linguists think that the given trend is in decline we haven't found strong evidence for this. She-reference with countries is found in different registers, mostly in journalism, political oratory and news-reporting. It is based on stereotypical symbolism or metaphorical associations. A country can be associated with masculine gender when it is conceived as a state or nation, and with feminine gender when it is conceptualized as soil, land or fertility. The symbolic image of a country, however, tends to be female, that is, people more readily associate the country with feminine gender because it is a place where you are born, it is your Motherland. A person always has patriotic feelings, affection towards his/her motherland. In present-day English countries are frequently personalized when they are regarded as political or economic rather than geographic entities. It means that the main factor of the personification of countries is the metonymical transfer. Speaking about countries we often mean people carrying out some actions of political or economic nature. Other factors triggering the personalizing of countries are expressing patriotic feelings and rhetorical heightening. She-reference makes the utterance more emphatic, emotional, vivid, etc. It is an attention-attracting device creating a certain psychological effect and providing foregrounding.

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