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Linguistic Estrangement in Selected Science Fiction

Jazykové odcizení ve vybraných dílech vědeckofantastické literatury

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Abstract

This work is a discussion of the connections between language in science fiction, the formalist concept of estrangement, and gender studies. The thesis suggests that the language of science fiction features linguistic estrangement that manifests itself in the form of a device and an effect which is produced as a result of certain modification of language used in a science fiction narrative. As the device of linguistic estrangement can be aimed at highlighting various processes, this thesis focuses on a narrow category of the representation of the sexes in the English language and the transformation of gender-biased language and the unequal representation of sexes via the aforementioned device. The introduction to this work gives an overview of the current debate on the topic in order to introduce the reader to the relevance of the discussion. The first chapter explores the definition of science fiction through the theory of cognitive estrangement by Darko Suvin and explains the choice of this medium for the study of language and gender. Then, it gives a definition of the device of literary estrangement as well as explains the nature and the usage of linguistic estrangement in science fiction. The second and the third chapters exemplify this phenomenon in selected works, *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy and *Imperial Radch* trilogy by Ann Leckie, with a discussion of the connections between the texts, the device of linguistic estrangement, and the social background, in order to explicate which linguistic processes are addressed in the texts. The concluding chapter provides a summary of the theoretical work in conjunction with the analysis of the texts.

Abstrakt

Daná práce je diskusí o souvislostech mezi jazykem užívaném ve vědeckofantastické literatuře, formalistickém pojetí odcizení a genderovými studii. Práce naznačuje, že jazyk vědeckofantastické literatury představuje jazykové odcizení, které se projevuje ve formě prostředku a efektu, který je výsledkem určité modifikace jazyka používaného ve vědeckofantastickém příběhu. Vzhledem k tomu, že nástroj jazykového odcizení může být zaměřen na zvýraznění různých procesů, je tato práce zaměřena na úzkou kategorii zastoupení pohlaví v anglickém jazyce a transformaci genderově předpokládaného jazyka a nerovnoměrného zastoupení pohlaví prostřednictvím výše uvedeného prostředku. Úvod do této práce poskytuje přehled o aktuální diskusi na toto téma s cílem seznámit čtenáře s významem diskuse. První kapitola zkoumá definici vědeckofantastické literatury prostřednictvím teorie kognitivního odcizení Darka Suvina a vysvětluje výběr tohoto média pro studium jazyka a pohlaví. Poté definuje literární odcizení a vysvětluje podstatu a využití lingvistického odcizení ve vědeckofantastické literatuře. Druhá a třetí kapitola ilustrují tento fenomén ve vybraných dílech, *Woman on the Edge of Time* od Marge Piercy a trilogie *Imperial Radch* od Ann Leckie, s diskusí o souvislostech mezi texty, prostředkem jazykového odcizení a sociálním pozadím, aby bylo možné poskytnout vysvětlení tomu, jaké jazykové procesy jsou v textech řešeny. Závěrečná kapitola obsahuje shrnutí teoretické práce ve spojení s analýzou textů.

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Linguistic Estrangement in Selected Science Fiction

Introduction

As many voices of feminist philosophy of language agree, language was conceptualized as a feminist issue with Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* published in 1975. Around that time, before the appearance of Lakoff's study, a different event was gaining momentum, namely the introduction and promotion of *Ms.*, a female honorific devised to replace both *Mrs.* and *Miss* with the intention of mirroring *Mr.*, the male honorific that does not convey information about one's marital status.¹ Although it was first created to eliminate all status-related distinctions whatsoever, it became an identity and ideology marker signaling that a woman is single, separated, divorced, or a feminist before the speakers began considering it a neutral form of address.² Moreover, in the same decade, the Anglophone world could note a similar change in the language and gender discourse, namely the introduction of another honorific, the *Mx.*, which was devised by those who did not want to reveal their gender or identify with the gender binary. Despite the word's existence in the English lexicon over a considerable number of years, it was added to the dictionaries fairly recently: in 2015 it was included in *Oxford English Dictionary* and it appeared in *Merriam-Webster Unabridged* in 2016. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *Mx.* is now used 'increasingly on various official forms in the UK, including driver's licenses and banking documents.'³ *Mx.* is not noticeably widespread around the world at the moment, but neither was *Ms.* soon after its introduction. While the introduction of *Mx.* was considered a remedy against the broken symmetry of male and female forms of address, its use invites one to consider the development of new linguistic forms not in terms of male-female symmetry, but rather in terms of gender continuum with fluid borders.

¹ Eva-Maria Thüne, et al., eds. *Gender, Language and New Literacy* (New York: Continuum, 2006) 7-9.

² Thüne, et al., 8.

³ 'Mx.' *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2019 <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/MX>> 23 May 2019.

Since the appearance of pioneering essays on language and gender, linguists and speakers have grown incredibly sensitive to the language that expresses gender bias, and this sensitivity has spawned a number of reforms across languages. One such case is a recent notorious (2015) appearance of ‘point médian’ (middle dot) in French. The reform was proposed by the inclusive writing advocates who suggest that words should visibly entail both genders as in ‘militant·e·s’ – a proposition that sparked debates across country creating two general points of view, the first being pro-reform, seeing it as helpful, and the other describing it as ‘degrading’ and adding ‘unnecessary’ complexity to language.⁴ In a similar vein, some innovations were suggested to Spanish speakers, namely the @-form, rendering ‘the students’ ‘l@s estudiantes’ including both feminine and masculine genders, or the X-form, found in left-wing feminist political contexts, creating thus ‘lxs estudiantes’, ‘lxs españolxs.’⁵

Although some of these innovations are regarded superfluous or unhealthy, they signal that up to this point in time, the discourse of language and gender is still developing and that speakers continue to look for the forms that would describe a particular, personal situation. Therefore, current language and gender debate exhibits not only the feminist critique of language but more of a quest for linguistic inclusion along the wide gender spectrum.

This quest became the subject of various works of science fiction (SF) that explore gender otherness and the ways to accommodate it in and through language. SF is an apt medium for considering these questions, as it describes thought experiments and explores the

⁴ ‘Inclusivity putting French language in “mortal danger”, claims l’Académie française.’ *The Conversation.com*, Nov. 2017 <<https://theconversation.com/inclusivity-putting-french-language-in-mortal-danger-claims-lacademie-francaise-87408>> 23 May 2019.

⁵ Christiane Kaufmann and Gerd Bohner, ‘Masculine generics and gender-aware alternatives in Spanish.’ *ResearchGate*. May 2014. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277620247_Masculine_generics_and_gender-aware_alternatives_in_Spanish> 23 May 2019.

consequences of reforms and inventions, whether it be about technology, social organization, or language and its ties to a certain ideology. Language readily becomes an object of study in SF, as the narratives of this genre contain linguistic signs for things which do not exist – or, to be more precise, which exist only in a particular fictional system of signs, and eventually familiar language used in a science fiction text undergoes a transformation validated by the cognitive logic of the text. The estranged, exotic language of SF, estranged English in particular, is to be approached in this work via the formalist theory of estrangement which encourages looking at conventional models with a degree of detachment allowing one to explore familiar linguistic forms presented differently. Benjamin Lee Whorf wrote in one of his studies that the exotic language is like a mirror held up to our own⁶ – the language of science fiction becomes an exotic language, English in this case, holding up a mirror to the standard English and to the standard ways of discussing many phenomena, including gender.

The present work describes two sets of texts: the first one, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, came out around the time of the beginning of the modern feminist critique of language, whereas the second series of texts, *Imperial Radch* trilogy, is contemporary writing. The original idea was to study the phenomenon of estranged gender in science fiction along the continuum, from the early works on this subject through the middle grounds towards contemporary writing; however, such an analysis would require more space. Eventually, the two texts were chosen for their representational value, as they feature similar linguistic processes. The present work will attempt – relying on Suvin's theoretical framework of cognitive estrangement that explains the veracity of fictional innovations described in texts of science fiction – to demonstrate how literature collaborates with linguistics in creating new expressions and

⁶ Benjamin Lee Whorf, 'The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language,' *Language, Thought, and Reality*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1956) 138.

asking more questions about language, gender and the politics of power between men, women and the non-binary.

Chapter I

Science Fiction: The Definition and the Specifics of the Genre

‘Science fiction is less a genre [...] than an ongoing discussion’⁷ – this is how Farah Mendelsohn introduces the genre in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, commenting on the difficulties that come with the attempts to define it. What is excluded from the genre by one critic is welcomed by another, for instance: according to Darko Suvin and Carl Freedman’s critical thoughts, fantasy in any form cannot be present in science fiction; whereas for Ursula K. Le Guin, elements of fantasy can exist in a work that claims the name of science fiction.⁸ In this vein, Damon Knight, an American author, commented on the definition problem saying that science fiction is simply what one points at saying ‘science fiction.’⁹ Although it is a witty take on the subjective nature of the definitions provided for the narratives of this genre, it is not unfair to the actual state of things in the field. The definition suggested by Isaac Asimov that science fiction is ‘that branch of literature which deals with the human response to changes in science and technology’¹⁰ expresses an important facet of this literary genre, yet it is significantly narrow, as it focuses only on the technological transformations and excludes possible changes in the social aspect of human life.

It is not a less complicated endeavor to name a certain time period when the first works of the genre appeared. The timeline of science fiction compiled by Joseph Norman begins with Thomas More’s *Utopia* written in 1516. On the contrary, Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan,

⁷ Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 1.

⁸ Jessica Langer, ‘Case Studies in Reading 2: Key Theoretical and Critical Texts in Science Fiction Studies,’ *The Science Fiction Handbook*, ed. Nick Hubble and Aris Mousoutzianis (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 109.

⁹ Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder: Essays on Modern Science Fiction* (Golden: Advent Publishers, 2016) 23.

¹⁰ Thomas D. Clareson, ‘Toward a History of Science Fiction,’ *The Science Fiction Reference Book*, ed. Marshall B. Tymn (Washington: Starport House, 1981) 3.

influential science popularizers, described Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (1620) as the first science fiction novel.¹¹ Other critics trace the roots of SF even farther back in time: Adam Roberts argues that it begins with the Ancient Greek novel.¹² Carl Freedman observes that the term can possibly encompass a very broad spectrum of works, 'including the classical utopian line from More onward, the tradition of arealistic travel literature from Lucian to Rabelais, Cyrano and others,'¹³ as well as 'a modernist and postmodernist tradition of work not actually marketed as science fiction, from Kafka and even Joyce to Samuel Beckett and Thomas Pynchon; and even such world-class epic poets as Dante and Milton,'¹⁴ where his categorization of Dante and Milton as science fiction writers is explained by the fact that their works 'take the reader far beyond the boundaries of his or her own mundane environment, into strange, awe-inspiring realms thought to be in fact unknown [...].'¹⁵ However, the definition of science fiction as a kind of stories that take the readers to unexplored worlds is deemed too broad and inclusive. *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* states that the imaginary voyage to the unknown worlds was the first narrative form of science fiction, although later, the imaginary voyage became overshadowed by the future war story that in the 19th century expanded into the genre of 'scientific romance' and later into the 'interplanetary romance.'¹⁶ As the 'explosion of the periodicals' happened in the UK and the US on the verge of the 19th and 20th centuries, the tradition of speculative fiction shifted again towards the prehistoric phantasy, apocalyptic phantasy and extraterrestrial adventure stories.¹⁷ By the mid-twentieth century, periodicals became the major stage for the science fiction narratives, and the tradition experienced a makeover with the appearance of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing*

¹¹ Joseph Norman, 'An Annotated Science Fiction Timeline,' *The Science Fiction Handbook*, ed. Nick Hubble and Aris Mousoutzanis (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 16.

¹² Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) vii.

¹³ Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000) 17.

¹⁴ Freedman 17.

¹⁵ Freedman 15.

¹⁶ James and Mendlesohn 23.

¹⁷ James and Mendlesohn 29.

Stories, a magazine founded in 1926 that was publishing short stories about travels, arrivals in unexplored places and technological marvels.¹⁸

It was Gernsback who came with the term ‘scientifiction’ that he was using in the popular science magazines in order to promote various technological devices that he imported and sold; later this term transformed into ‘science fiction.’¹⁹ In *Critical Theory*, Carl Freedman observes that the magazine era changed the understanding of science fiction for the general public in that it erased the earlier works by More, Kepler, and others from the readers’ view and established the magazine as the only source of the science fiction writing. He states that: ‘for the general public (as well as for the commercial marketing system employed by publishers, bookshops, and the vendors of the newer electronic media), the name of science fiction has always suggested the pulp tradition,’²⁰ by which he means the tradition coming with ‘the magazine era’ and being about space journeys, unknown planets, and aliens.²¹ Since the appearance of Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories* and until the 1960s, the genre depended on the magazines and came to the book-format only after that. This period was undoubtedly a turning point in the development of science fiction, as the magazine medium provided the space not only for the writers but also for the critics of science fiction to express their views on the developing genre, opening thus a critical debate on the definition, specifics, and poetics of science fiction that is still ongoing.²²

¹⁸ James and Mendlesohn 33.

¹⁹ James and Mendlesohn 30.

²⁰ Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000)14.

²¹ James and Mendlesohn 32.

²² James and Mendlesohn 30.

Defining the Genre through Estrangement

Darko Suvin, one of the first influential theoreticians of science fiction,²³ prepared what he called a formal framework for the genre, outlining constitutive elements of science fiction in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.²⁴ First of all, he distinguishes science fiction from other non-naturalistic genres like myth, fairy-tale, and fantasy, for the reason that science fiction approaches the world's phenomena as something that is liable to change: it explores the tendencies in the world, applying imagination to the possible developments and consequences of the world's phenomena, and considers a 'creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation [...] of the author's environment.'²⁵ However, such a transformation should invariably occur in accordance with the logic of cognitive estrangement. Therefore, the presence of the so-called cognitive estrangement and a novum is considered by Suvin a decisive factor for classifying a work as science fiction. Nevertheless, the concept of estrangement was not first devised by Suvin: it went a long road before he reformulated it for the use in the science fiction context. Estrangement effect, sometimes referred to as alienation effect,²⁶ is best established in the work of Bertolt Brecht, who introduced it as *Verfremdung effect* or *alienation effect*.²⁷ The concept emerged in the context of performative art, and one of the main functions of estrangement was to distance viewers from the passive acceptance of the events happening on the stage as well as to encourage them to analyze the action consciously and critically.²⁸ Before Brecht's application of estrangement in the theatric

²³ Hubble and Mousoutzakis 174.

²⁴ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 8.

²⁵ Suvin 10.

²⁶ Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008) 80.

²⁷ Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting,' *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974) 91. Also, in an alternative translation: Bertolt Brecht, 'Verfremdung Effects in Chinese Acting,' *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 151.

²⁸ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, et al. 91.

context, the term had already existed in the theorizing of the Russian formalist school under the name of *ostranenie*, ‘making-strange,’ as coined by Viktor Shklovsky in 1917, also translated as *enstrangement*.²⁹ Nonetheless, estrangement as a device, as well as an effect is not a product of Modernist formalism: Douglas Robinson writes that this concept is one of the ‘central ideas of German and English romanticism and German Idealism,’³⁰ hence a similar phenomenon is described in *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge opens a discussion of W. Wordsworth’s aspirations in *Lyrical Ballads*: ‘to give a charm of novelty to things of every day by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom.’³¹ It is visible that the concept of estrangement existed for a long time, although the formalist school provided this phenomenon with a theoretical framework.

In Brecht’s and Shklovsky’s models, the concept of estrangement was defined against general familiarity or a habit that prevented one from seeing the nature of things.³² The task of estrangement, according to both theoreticians, is to remove the lens of familiarity through which one perceives everyday objects and phenomena, and consequently, to make one aware that their perception is automatized and driven by habit.³³ Nevertheless, the techniques of estrangement differ: for Shklovsky, estranging effect can be achieved through special narrative techniques that present familiar objects, actions or events as unfamiliar to the reader, or, in other words, that make the familiar seem strange.³⁴ Therefore, according to Shklovsky, art in general, and literature in particular, is capable of producing the estrangement effect that could alter one’s perception of the world. Brecht’s estrangement effect, or the V-effect, is

²⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Art as a Device,’ *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991) 1-15.

³⁰ Robinson 80.

³¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 76.

³² Shklovsky 1-15.

³³ Robinson 89.

³⁴ Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008) 34.

directed primarily at a theatrical performance, although he considered its application beyond the stage as well.³⁵ Brecht famously invented the techniques, or stagecraft that would actually ‘estrangle’ the audience to prevent their identification with what was enacted on stage.³⁶ Additionally, Brecht has another take on estrangement: to reveal that the habitual or the ‘natural’ is, in fact, ‘historical,’ which is ‘a corollary to the political,’ something that has been ‘made or constructed by human beings and thus able to be changed by them as well, or replaced altogether.’³⁷

Therefore, the device of estrangement, both in Shklovsky’s and Brecht’s theorizing, aims at changing the viewer’s perception of the habitual, familiar events, where Shklovsky is interested in general, universal context, and Brecht’s interest is rooted in the social and political situation. It was nonetheless Brecht’s reframing of the estrangement theory that Suvin later employed in order to create the theory of cognitive estrangement, applicable in the context of science fiction.³⁸ Cognitive estrangement is thus a complex notion consisting of estrangement and cognition, where cognition is closely tied to the special way the author should use the imagination when constructing a narrative in order to explore the tendencies of the real world and possible ways of the development of present conflicts, as contrasted to something implausible and having no connection with reality.³⁹ The resulting product of authorial imagination is not an end in itself, like flying carpets in folk tales, but a connection of the marvelous with the empirical creating a world estranged from reality, but yet a possible one, having necessary intersections with reality. Therefore, in order to define science fiction, we could adhere to Suvin’s conclusions that science fiction is a narrative operating on the

³⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998) 39.

³⁶ Jameson 39.

³⁷ Jameson 40.

³⁸ Suvin 6.

³⁹ Suvin 7.

principle of cognitive estrangement, where a crucial part is played by the ‘novum.’

The way towards cognitive estrangement goes through the concept of the novum or ‘a strange newness,’ a fictional innovation that is dominant in the narrative and that is ‘validated by cognitive logic.’⁴⁰ Suvin writes that the novum ‘is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality.’⁴¹ The novelty in question ‘entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof.’⁴² In addition, it should create a tension between the author and the implied reader’s reality, and ‘the Other, the Unknown’ in the fictional universe.⁴³ This feature can be exemplified by a famous element from *Brave New World*, where infants are bred in tubes on the assembly line which creates tension between our empirical environment and the fictional environment on which the novum operates. Additionally, the novum is a dynamic phenomenon in a sense that it can take up a different form and be of a different degree of magnitude: the novum might take the form either an of an invention (a gadget that is of significance in the story), setting, or agent (characters).⁴⁴

What Suvin does not include in his explanation of the novum in *Metamorphoses* is the linguistic component, the fact that language itself can become a novum. If science fiction is a genre that portrays alternative worlds justified by cognitive logic, the language of the portrayed worlds undergoes a similar process of defamiliarization or becomes ‘estranged.’ The language of science fiction is defamiliarized as a result of certain direct modifications of the ordinary language, such as the use of neologisms for the descriptions of various alien

⁴⁰ Suvin 63.

⁴¹ Suvin 64.

⁴² Suvin 64.

⁴³ Suvin 64.

⁴⁴ Suvin 64.

phenomena and circumstances. At the same time, speaking of language as of a system that is predicated on an agreement between the signifier and the signified, in a fictional world, a familiar signifier can correspond to the signified within a different frame of reference and thus establish a relationship that exists only within the framework of a specific story. For instance, in James K. Morrow's *Towing Jehovah*, the terms *feminine* and *masculine* become distorted if they are approached in familiar terms: in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*⁴⁵ Brian Attebery writes that for the alien species of Aleutians, gender becomes something akin to astrology for humans, with the terms *masculine* and *feminine* standing for certain traits of character and habits: 'Feminine people, according to the lore of Atha's kind, are the people who'd rather work through the night in the dark than call someone who can fix the light...'⁴⁶

The estrangement of language can appear in the form of a semantic change, for instance, in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, where the terms *woman* and *man* lose all traditional connotations and come to indicate merely the biological characteristics (which will be explained in the following chapter). Also, estrangement can be incorporated as a stylistic device and a plot element, as can be exemplified by the Nadsat language Burgess creates in *A Clockwork Orange*, a slang that grew out of English merged with Russian and British Cockney and that is significant as a formal element as well as a fictional one, as it turns the violent language of propaganda into actual physical violence. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Newspeak is another example of defamiliarized English that functions in a similar way and constitutes a formal device necessary for the presentation of the story, as well as a plot element: language becomes modified in order to reduce the speakers' critical thinking by eliminating the linguistic constructions undesired by the party, establishing thus the relationship between the language of the oppressor and the oppressed. To sum up, linguistic estrangement in science fiction occurs as a device and as an effect: estrangement as

⁴⁵ Brian Attebery, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 163.

⁴⁶James K. Morrow, *The Godhead Trilogy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999) 243.

a device involves the use of special narrative techniques, neologisms, and alternative syntax; whereas, estrangement-as-effect occurs when a SF text changes the familiar relationship between the familiar signifiers and the signified, as well as in a more traditional sense, when a familiar linguistic form is presented as unfamiliar. Additionally, estranged language can function as a plot element.

Linguistic Estrangement in the Language and Gender Discourse

The effect of linguistic estrangement is achieved through various linguistic novae that can be found in science fiction texts. If, for instance, a text makes use of a term *womankind* instead of *mankind*, it could be considered a linguistic novum, and the relationship between the reader and the language would be that of estrangement. The linguistic estrangement-as-device, just like the formalist concept of estrangement, can focus specifically on selected phenomena so that the reader gains an opportunity to approach them from a critical stance. In the present work, it will be observed what kind of language is created in the alternative worlds of chosen science fiction texts with regard to gender equality and inclusivity, how the device of linguistic estrangement operates in these texts and what the defamiliarizing effect reveals about the English language.

Nevertheless, prior to the discussion of estranged English, some words should be said about the language and gender discourse. The roots of this discussion stretch back at least to the 18th century, when various grammarians were considering the correct placement of the personal pronouns with regard to the higher social position (especially known is the ‘female should go after male’ rule). Ann Bodine shows how androcentrism in prescriptive grammar can be traced through different periods: for instance, a prescriptivist ‘attack’ on the singular ‘they’

and ‘he or she’ in favor of inclusive ‘he’ that was happening at the end of the 18th century, and a feminist ‘attack’ on the sex-indefinite ‘he’ which began in the 1970s.⁴⁷ To date, the pronoun issue has not been resolved and modern linguistics keeps facing questions on how to make languages as gender-inclusive as possible. Speaking of modern initiatives, English adopted such terms as ‘gender fluid’, ‘bigender’, ‘ambigender’ (some of which are not officially in dictionaries, but used nevertheless) and more gender-open terms begin replacing old gendered titles, such as ‘the leader and the follower’ instead of ‘the man’ and ‘the woman’ in ballroom dancing.

The concerns that both genders should be visible in an utterance are powered by the idea that the use of language has social implications and can reflect or even reinforce social inequalities. This can be seen, for instance, in such clichéd constructions as: ‘Mary is married to John’ and not married with John, and neither John is married to Mary, which was once explained as: ‘the woman is married to the man. ... as man is the larger, the stronger, the more individually important’ in an excerpt from a 19th century grammar book referenced by Ann Bodine.⁴⁸ Also, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet write that it has been historically established ‘that men should be mentioned before women on the grounds of male superiority.’⁴⁹ For centuries, grammarians have treated masculine gender as ‘more worthy’⁵⁰ or more important than the feminine.⁵¹ Ann Bodine cites an example from a textbook from 1967 that is teaching students how to follow a convention in order to avoid ‘awkward’

⁴⁷ Ann Bodine, ‘Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: singular “they”, sex-indefinite “he”, and “he or she,”’ ed. Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1990) 166.

⁴⁸R.G. White, ‘Marry’, *Everyday English* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1880) in Ann Bodine, ‘Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: singular “they”, sex-indefinite “he”, and “he or she,”’ ed. Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1990) 175.

⁴⁹ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 34.

⁵⁰ J. Poole, *The English Accidence* (Menston: Scolar Press Fascimile, 1646) in Ann Bodine, ‘Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: singular “they”, sex-indefinite “he”, and “he or she,”’ ed. Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1990) 172.

⁵¹ Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 34.

language, based on the rule that as it comes to grammar, the masculine gender comes first as more important:

English has a problem in that it has no common gender [in the third person singular] ... The most awkward solution is to use both the masculine and the feminine pronoun: ‘Everyone should raise his (or her) hand when he (she) is ready.’ We usually try to avoid this by following the convention that, grammatically, men are more important than women. For reference to mixed groups, we use just the pronoun *he*. Everyone should raise *his* hand when he *is* ready.⁵²

These concerns stretch farther than to encompass the syntax and lexicon of the English language only: when the theme of language and gender came into the new limelight in the 1970s, a number of assumptions appeared condemning language as an abstract system created by the masculine part of humanity, and, therefore, unable to express women’s concerns. In this vein, relying on science fiction as a playground for the ideas about social change and language, Suzette Haden Elgin made an attempt at creating an alternative fictional language that would be well-equipped for registering the experiences of women.⁵³ The language known as *Láadan* appeared in her *Native Tongue* series, with a sampler included in the first novel of the series.⁵⁴ The *Native Tongue* trilogy imagines a dystopic future where women are deprived of civil rights and become second-class citizens. In the course of the novels, the linguist women collaborate on constructing a language that could be used exclusively by women in order to power a rebellion for women’s rights. Elgin went farther than to include her

⁵² P. Roberts, *The Roberts English Series* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967) 354-5, in Ann Bodine, ‘Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: singular “they”, sex-indefinite “he”, and “he or she,”’ ed. Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1990) 178.

⁵³ Suzette Haden Elgin, ‘Láadan, The Constructed Language in *Native Tongue*’ <<http://www.sfw.org/members/elgin/Laadan.html>> 23 Jun. 2019.

⁵⁴ Suzette Haden Elgin, *Native Tongue* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001).

constructed language in the fictional universe of *The Native Tongue* series: she was curious to know whether Láadan could gain popularity outside of the fictional universe. One of the hypotheses that she had set out to test was ‘that if women were offered a women’s language one of two things would happen — they would welcome and nurture it, or it would at minimum motivate them to replace it with a better women’s language of their own construction.’⁵⁵ Thusly, Láadan was offered to the world to learn, with various sources available online, including dictionaries, grammar, and simplified lessons. Nevertheless, Elgin’s experiment was not a success, as she concluded after a ten-year time-limit she had set for the language to spread.

Láadan was devised as a solution to one of the questions that the feminist language philosophy raises, namely whether the existing languages are able to express the experience of women. Láadan is based on a proposition that women experience a wider range of feelings and emotions than men and that the existing Indo-European languages are not enough for their articulation. Láadan contains special markers for expressing an emotional state of the speaker, such as speech act morphemes that signal whether an utterance was ‘said in jest,’ ‘said in celebration,’ ‘said in anger,’ ‘said in love,’ etc. Additionally, Láadan features ‘state of consciousness’ markers, devised to express the affective states of the speaker, such as ‘ecstasy,’ ‘in meditation,’ ‘linked emphatically with others,’ ‘in a state of shock’ and others.⁵⁶ There is also a Láadan sampler included in the appendix to *Native Tongue*, with such terms as ‘*raduth*: to non-use, to deliberately deprive someone of any useful function in the world, as in enforced retirement or when a human being is kept as a plaything or pet’ and ‘*ranem*: non-

⁵⁵ Suzette Haden Elgin, ‘Láadan, the Constructed Language in “Native Tongue” Books’, *Láadan Language*, WordPress <<https://laadanlanguage.wordpress.com/articles/articles-by-suzette/laadan-constructed-language/>> 23 Jun. 2019.

⁵⁶ Suzette Haden Elgin, ‘Láadan Reference Material’ *Láadan Language*, WordPress <<https://laadanlanguage.wordpress.com/articles/articles-by-suzette/laadan-constructed-language/>> 23 Jun. 2019.

pearl, an ugly thing one builds layer by layer as an oyster does a pearl, such as a festering hatred to which one pays attention'⁵⁷ – again, the aim of Láadan is to capture the inner, emotional life in greatest detail.

During the ten-year trial period, the language did not gain as much popularity as other constructed languages, such as the Klingon language from *Star Trek*, and it remains a lesser-known fictional language among the readers of science fiction. Nevertheless, Láadan does raise a discussion of how expressive human languages are when their task is to convey information about a particular experience. There is an episode in *The Judas Rose (Native Tongue II)* to exemplify it: a linguist woman explains her rendering of an English utterance in the language of women:

And the whole line,' said Father Dorien slowly, 'is to be translated "Thou braidest my hair with Thine own hands."...and that is supposed to be the Langlish translation of "Thou anointest my head with oil"?' – 'Yes, Father...A woman would not wish to be anointed with oil. That would be a messy procedure, you see; afterward, she would have to wash her hair, and probably her clothing as well....'⁵⁸

This example of text transcreation illustrates a cultural gap between men and women – here, they meet as the representatives of two different peoples coming from two different cultural backgrounds, who are unable to recall similar concepts having heard the same words. Elgin shows how alien the experiences of women can be to those of men, as she is trying to make connections between the feelings and the language needed to express them. In this utterance, linguistic estrangement appears during the translation of the experience between men and

⁵⁷ Suzette Haden Elgin 303.

⁵⁸ Suzette Haden Elgin, *The Judas Rose* (New York: Feminist Press, 2002) 210.

women as if between different cultures. Thusly, Elgin successfully captures the issue in her writings; however, in practice, the solution by means of constructing a tongue for women did not prove effective.

There might be many reasons as to why Elgin's language was not a success: the language is too complex to learn, women do not need a women's tongue, or language per se is inadequate in expressing the subtleties of human's emotions and making one's thought available to others. Her ideas were also criticized in accordance with a proposition that language as an abstract system cannot be sexist, yet it can be used to create sexist discourse. In that regard, in a review of Dale Spender's *Man Made Language*, Maria Black and Rosalind Coward consider a syntactic rule as opposed to 'ideological pronouncement,' or, in other words, how the grammar of a language is employed to create conventionalized sexist structures such as 'Mary is married to John' and not 'John is married to Mary'⁵⁹ They suggest that gender-bias stems from these conventionalized constructions, which implies that language has the capacity to be gender-neutral once such constructions are eliminated.

The Gender-Directed Language Reform in Selected Texts

The following chapters include a discussion of two science fiction texts that reflect on the possibility of a sexist language reform observed at two different periods. The novels discussed below provide examples of other ways of speaking about people with regard to – and also regardless of – gender and test the connection between a social change and language

⁵⁹ Maria Black and Rosalind Coward, 'Linguistic, Social and Sexual relations: A Review of Dale Spender's *Man Made Language*,' *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. ed. Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1990) 118.

change. By means of linguistic estrangement, these texts resist the automatization of what is perceived as sexist language, although each series (or novel) has a different approach and focuses on slightly different issues. The first discussed novel is Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Its protagonist, Connie, a Chicana woman living in a poor neighborhood in the US gains an opportunity to make a telepathic journey to the 22nd century, where life changes beyond recognition, and various environmental and social problems of the past are solved. The novel displays a striking contrast between the two worlds: Connie's contemporary America that is a violent and abusive place for an individual and for a woman in particular, and America of the future that becomes a society living by the policy of non-violence and appreciation of every individual, regardless of race, gender or any other distinction. The novel especially emphasizes the social change that has occurred in the society, including the effacement of gender distinctions that make the language of gender itself irrelevant.

Of particular interest to this analysis is the language change that comes with the social change and introduces new gender-related terminology into familiar English. The situation described in the novel can be viewed in connection with the existing visions on sexist language change and social change mentioned earlier: the novel advocates an active language change although possible only if preceded by the social one. The text addresses such issues as naming new genderless social roles and creating neologisms for referring to people living in a society that does not distinguish gender. When gender is eliminated as a notion, men and women abandon gender markers, both social and linguistic: they do not convey information of their being men or women through the social roles they play, behavior and manners, clothing, and, most importantly, language. Drawing on that, the familiar social roles like mother or father, wife, husband, etc. should be all reformulated, and the role of the language is to record the change

and enable people to name the new categories – this will be addressed in the following chapters.

The second set of texts is Ann Leckie's *The Imperial Radch* that is a series about the questions that arise out of the technological advancement of artificial intelligence. The novels address the issues of post-humanity, such as whether personal identity can develop in the machine powered by artificial intelligence and what the nature of AI of the future could be. At the same time, the series is a thought experiment on language and how it structures and violates our perception of the gender of the characters we are reading about. The novels state a question of what would happen if a language deliberately employed a single pronoun to refer to both (or all, in case there are more than two) genders, and specifically, if the pronoun encompassing both females and males was 'she.' The second set of texts makes use of linguistic estrangement explicitly, as a device violating the meanings of pronouns and propelling the readers to look for other linguistic and non-linguistic gender markers, questioning thus the necessity of gender as a notion. Therefore, in the present work, the texts are analyzed in order to ascertain particular instances of linguistic estrangement directed at gendered language. The aim of the analysis is to see how estrangement operates as a device as well as an effect and what issues it highlights. At the same time, it is necessary to understand the background of the linguistic changes discussed or presented in selected texts to trace the connection between a linguistic issue in context and how it is addressed in a science fiction text.

Chapter II – Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Introduction

Woman on the Edge of Time appeared in 1976 as a response to the questions posed by the second-wave feminist movement; it considers the definition of women as the dependent class and envisions a future where it is no longer the case and where men and women have reached the social power equilibrium. Apart from that, the narrative discloses disturbing images of harassment and abuse of women in the marginalized areas of American society, specifically, the women in a Hispanic-American community. The novel is looking hundreds of years ahead to envision a radical transformation of the ideas of gender, along with the social implications of femininity and masculinity, and a change in the relationship of power and oppression between the sexes. Exploring stirring themes of her time, Piercy strives to create a perfectly balanced futuristic world without any form of oppression. Before entering the utopic world, the novel is leading the reader through the troubles that a woman in similar conditions to those of the protagonist has to deal with. The novel begins with graphic scenes of a day in a Latin-American neighborhood, where a 37-year-old Connie Ramos struggles to make her ends meet, deprived of parental rights due to an accident and wishing to reunite with her daughter. Connie’s pregnant sister, involved in prostitution at the will of her lover, seeks help from her. A fight starts between Connie and her sister’s lover, Geraldo, and Connie ends up attacking the latter. The episode resolves with Connie put in a mental institution, where she is treated as a dangerous psychotic patient. While in hospital, Connie is visited by a person from the future calling herself Luciente, able to make telepathic journeys from the 22nd century to Connie’s time and back. It is not entirely clear whether Luciente is a real person from the future or Connie’s delusion – this point is open for other interpretations, –

nevertheless, Connie gets an opportunity to see an alternative world of the future. As Luciente invites Connie to visit her in her time, the narrative divides into two different loci: the hospital, where Connie is at present, and Mattapoissett, a settlement in the 22nd century, where she travels telepathically, with her body remaining in the asylum. The two changing realities of the mental asylum and Mattapoissett stand for two different modes that the novel constantly switches between: the naturalistic description of Connie's life of privation, coercive experimental treatment and overall medical neglect and struggles against the authorities, as opposed to her telepathic voyages to the utopic world.

Mattapoissett is designed as the opposite of Connie's dystopic reality, allowing for parallels to be drawn between the two worlds, as pertaining to what the issue is and what the possible solution might be. Therefore, the realistic mode of the novel poses the questions of the social and financial insecurity of women, questions in childrearing, adequate medical treatment, and others, while the futuristic mode offers clear-cut solutions. The critics like M. Keith Booker suggest that the narrative is based on the idea that Connie's environment is a dystopia that needs to go through a transformation and become a better world such as 22nd century Mattapoissett.⁶⁰ Connie learns that by that time, humanity will have resolved the majority of its problems: there will be ecological crises no more, resources shortage will be solved, and the citizens of the new world will have learnt to distribute social and economic power equally among individuals; the government will be fully in the citizens' hands, social divisions will disappear, oppression along any lines, be it race, gender, or age, will become impossible, and diversity will be welcome. At the same time, having presented these images of a bright future of humankind to the reader, the novel briefly switches to a different scenario, in which humanity lives in a futuristic dystopia, with all its present problems exacerbated. These

⁶⁰ M. Keith Booker, 'Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy,' *Science Fiction Studies* 21.3 (1994) 339 JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240370>> 09. Apr. 2018.

radically different perspectives are presented to Connie, as she is chosen by the people from the better future to help to bring about the change; therefore, Connie's role in the story is to help to save the world from the worst-case scenario.

Speaking of women's oppression in the novel (and in its historical context), it is necessary to point out the individual instances as well as explain how they are portrayed and communicated to the reader. The oppression of women becomes visible in the scenes of outright violence, especially in the opening scenes of the book, and in the passages juxtaposing the two worlds, where the readers are invited to make comparisons. For the aims of this work, it is necessary to observe how oppression is manifested verbally, during the characters' interaction. The most graphic scenes feature specific language that adds to either abusive or defensive behavior of the characters. Not unexpectedly, people of utopic Mattapoisett speak a different language from that of Connie's times, although their futuristic language is English that underwent several revisions, following vast social changes. In the novel, language becomes a marker and a tool of oppression that exists in Connie's reality, whereas in Mattapoisett, language becomes a marker and a tool of equality. Deborah Cameron notes that 'it is interesting to note that in feminist utopias – imaginary ideal worlds ... there is often some attempt at a modified language. A female utopia could not be content with what we have now.'⁶¹ Hence, the positive mode of the novel reinvents the language to keep it in tune with the reinvented social reality. In order to see how estranging language operates in the novel and how it takes root in the novel's socio-historical context, one needs to take the following steps: first, it is important to know what particular linguistic issues become the focus of estrangement. In order to see that, we need to consider the language used in Connie's reality and how it reflects women's passive and oppressed condition. The second

⁶¹ Deborah Cameron ed., *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1990) 13.

step is to see how the language changes for the better in the envisioned positive future. Finally, we need to consider the outside-of-the-text linguistic background of the text, i.e. a broader context for feminist views on language during the second wave of feminism and beyond.

The Present and the Future

As has been mentioned, the novel opens with a conflict between Connie and her sister on one side, and Geraldo, her sister's lover, on the other; the opening scenes display various forms of physical and verbal abuse that women in Connie's community live with, considering them the norm. Overly graphic in places and described in full detail, these episodes raise the readers' awareness about a man's place in the life of women like Connie: men set the rules for living in a household and beyond it, men like Geraldo threaten physical punishment in case the rules are not obeyed. For Connie, Geraldo's attack on her is a reminder of all past experience with physical abuse coming from a man: this scene becomes a symbol of the continuity of female oppression in her community and in the world in general, as she is thinking that 'Geraldo was her father, who had beaten her every week of her childhood. Her second husband, who had sent her into the emergency room...⁶² Remarkably, physical violence in these scenes is supported by strong language, characterized by the males' great degree of participation in it, as opposed to women's silence.

As it comes to cursing, men and women use their resources differently. In one of the scenes Geraldo comes into Connie's house with curse words aimed directly at her ('Open the door you old b***h! Open or I'll break it down').⁶³ His communication with the women is

⁶² Piercy 9.

⁶³ Piercy 6.

characterized by directed intentional cursing and the use of physical force. At the same time, the women are portrayed as weak and defensive: they do not retaliate, they do not curse in response and only appeal to sympathy and sentiment; yet, as soon as the two women are alone, they use derogatory expressions against the man, although indirectly, to keep it between themselves when they are not heard. Shulamith Firestone writes in *The Dialectic of Sex*⁶⁴ that direct verbal abuse is a male's privilege for the reason that the use of the strong language reflects the power struggle between the sexes: the dominant group is entitled to use direct cursing, as the oppressed one is not. According to this argument, women do not use direct strong language against men because they do not have the 'right' or the power to do it. The women in the novel can conspire against men in private discussions and complaints, within their own oppressed group, because they are of the same status. Firestone claims that: 'A man is allowed to blaspheme the world because it belongs to him... – but the same curse out of the mouth of a woman or a minor, i.e., an incomplete 'man' to whom the world does not yet belong, is considered presumptuous, and thus an impropriety or worse.'⁶⁵ Therefore, the communication between men and women is characterized by the use of profanities and direct cursing by the former and passivity by the latter.

Various researchers recognize swearing as a traditionally male domain, noting that men use profane language more readily than women. Additionally, Haas and Lakoff claim that swearing is used by men as a marker of strength and greater social power (Lakoff 1975, Haas 1979). Lakoff writes: 'we tend to excuse a show of temper by a man where we would not excuse an identical tirade from a woman: women are allowed to fuss and complain, but only a man can bellow in rage.'⁶⁶ In the novel, this becomes exemplified: swearing is used as an

⁶⁴ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970) 88-89.

⁶⁵ Firestone 89.

⁶⁶ Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*, Mary Bucholtz ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004) 45.

attribute of a group with greater social power, and women acknowledge and accept their lesser status through the passivity of their communication with the men. In these scenes, one can observe how female oppression and male dominance find expression through the linguistic forms that the characters use; these scenes belong to the realistic mode in the novel, meaning that following the logic of the novel, they are supposed to display the actual use of English in similar circumstances.

As the narrative switches to the futuristic mode, the language changes to reflect the new reality. What Connie learns in the very beginning of her acquaintance with the new world is a shifted understanding of gender roles and the language of gender. Explaining the details of life in Mattapoisett, Luciente describes people as *men* and *women*; however, these terms are not what Connie would mean by the same words. Saying *woman*, Luciente means *female*, while *man* means *male*: in her utterances, these words become totally synonymous. Now, this change draws on a principle that in English, the words *man* and *woman* have a set of connotations that accompany the primary meaning of these words because *man* and *woman* are tied to sex and gender. When Connie speaks about her life and herself, for her, as well as for her community, the term *woman* is tied with maternity, taking care of the house and the family, having a husband, etc. – a standard set of connotations that this term carries. One can see Connie’s frustration with being a woman defined by the restraints of the term *woman* as she remembers her mother’s words: ‘You’ll do what women do’ and ‘There’s nothing for a woman to see but troubles.’⁶⁷ Largely, she attributes her impossibilities to pursue a different path, not to the fact of being a woman but being defined as a woman, defined by a word with a set of limitations. On the other hand, Luciente and her people have a different understanding of the same term. In the future, *man* and *woman* lose their connotations and come to stand for

⁶⁷ Piercy 45.

something closer to *male* and *female* – that is, making reference to the biological sex, not gender. This idea needs to be explained within the social context of Mattapoisett to be clear. In this fictional world, males and females are not expected to have behaviors and social roles appropriate to their gender. This phenomenon can be explained with the aid of the theory formulated by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, who discuss gender from a standpoint of the theory of performative gender, saying that gender is a notion of social practice that is exercised and communicated by ‘gendered acts through way of talking, mannerisms, clothing, social roles, etc.’⁶⁸ The discrepancy between two ideas occurs: *woman* understood as a human with a female set of reproductive organs and *woman* as a person who is surrounded by specific connotations brings out linguistic estrangement. This is what Connie herself experiences asking Luciente if she was female and what the reader is invited to experience considering all the variety of connotations that the term entails. It is necessary to say that this is possible in Mattapoisett, where gender ceases to exist as a notion, so this semantic change occurs naturally. When Luciente visits Connie, she shows her that in the world of equality, language is not used as a limitation: their take on language is to eliminate as many limiting expressions as possible.

Another linguistic innovation, more conspicuous than the latter, is the development of a new set of pronouns designed to refer to a genderless society. One of the most significant changes that the estranged English of Mattapoisett offers is the introduction of a common pronoun that refers to both genders: *person* (subjective case), as in ‘...stay with Luciente and *person* can show you the children’s house,’⁶⁹ and *per* (objective and possessive cases), as in ‘My child

⁶⁸ Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 4.

⁶⁹ Piercy 123.

named perself, this month too,⁷⁰ or ‘I wouldn’t call per blind.’⁷¹ These forms completely replace the pronouns *he* and *she*, as well as their forms marked for gender. This is an example of how a new gender-inclusive social order is supported by a gender-inclusive language. The neologisms are based on the English language, and therefore such representation of English is estranging, in a way that shows that the set of pronouns it already has to our disposition is essentially divided into male-female which supports the division of society and further gender inequality. At the same time, it shows that it is possible to use a pronoun in a language without referring to gender, thus freeing the referent from any possible gender-related associations. In Mattapoisett, linguistic gender marking is unnecessary because according to their ideology, gender is an unnecessary notion restraining individuals and creating inequality. The leading principle here is that social categorization into men and women is itself a source of inequality, and consequently, categorizing language supports it. Conversely, when a language does not have gender markers, it is easier to create an equal society, because the speakers will not have to choose between the existing linguistic gender categories, and therefore, will not have to focus on gender differentiation in social terms – that is what can be inferred from this language change. The neologisms described above are based on the English language and are essentially nothing short of English we know used differently. This is what the language used in the novel sheds light on: English that we use invariably supports the division of the world into male and female. Such an estranging representation of the English pronominal system - where *person* and *per*, pronouns not marked for gender are used in order to help the society make one step closer to gender equality. In addition, it shows that it is possible to use a pronoun in a language without referring to the gender of the referent, freeing the referent from the possible gender-related connotations (if there are any). It should be also pointed out that such modification of pronouns is a response to what is known as the false

⁷⁰ Piercy 127.

⁷¹ Piercy 132.

male generics which will be discussed in the next chapter in connection with Imperial Radch.⁷² If the text is read in terms of the feminist agenda of the time, i.e. that action must be taken not only in the economic and political spheres, but also in the linguistic sphere, then it is possible to say that the cognitive-linguistic estrangement of the system of pronouns of the English language that happens in the novel is aimed at providing the readers with an idea of how differently language could operate to contribute to gender in/equality.

The last feature of Piercy's futuristic English to be discussed is the nature of naming. The specifics of naming are critically assessed in this novel in terms of the inferior-superior scale, where the superior names the inferior. As it comes to the protagonist, travelling to Mattapoissett, she must explain the nature of her name to the locals, namely how her name consists of the names of her husbands: 'I was called Consuelo Camacho. Ramos is the name of my second husband: therefore, I am Consuelo Camacho Ramos'⁷³ – to which the locals replied that they had no equivalent naming practices. In Mattapoissett, in contrast, people choose the names themselves as soon as they enter their teenage years. Here, the novel makes a claim that women are oppressed just as children are oppressed by wearing names they did not choose. The novel thus foregrounds an idea that social equality can be supported by linguistic equality which includes the freedom of naming.

⁷² Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 3.

⁷³ Piercy 79.

Contextualizing *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Woman on the Edge of Time came out roughly a decade after the second feminist movement's onset in the United States. It is evident from the themes it deals with that it is a product of discussions on what changes are to be brought about in the world in order to ensure that women gain equal rights in political, financial and social spheres. Booker writes that this novel reflects the optimism that was part of the feminist movement of the seventies: its prognostications of the route that humanity will take in order to get to the gender equality are rather promising and go in hand with the ideas proposed by the feminists.⁷⁴ The novel attempts to respond to the concerns that the feminist groups were preoccupied with, namely fighting against the woman's role of a house-keeper and going as far as to question the necessity of a customary heterosexual marriage and matrimony per se.⁷⁵ J. Zeitz (2008) in her study of feminism of the 1970s writes that this period saw publications empowering women's awareness of their place in society, welfare and sexuality growing in popularity, and consequently, more women were apt to reassess their social position; for two decades since the movement's beginning, 'in the thousands of living-rooms around the country, converts of second-wave feminism met to discuss issues ranging as far and wide as sexuality and body image, workplace exploitation, consumer imagery of women, abortion, and the politics of the nuclear family.'⁷⁶ *Woman on the Edge of Time* grasps these ideas and puts them one at a time into a new futuristic form.

⁷⁴ Booker 340.

⁷⁵ J. Zeitz, 'Rejecting the Center: Radical Grassroots Politics in the 1970s – Second-Wave Feminism as a Case Study,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 43.4 (2008): 679 JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543229> 680.

⁷⁶ J. Zeitz 679.

Talking about the text in the context of the 1970s, one more aspect should be considered and that is LGBT rights social activism: alongside the feminist liberation movements, there was a struggle for the recognition of the rights of various LGBT groups in the US. It is historically connected with the feminist movements and it gets in full swing when radical feminists raise awareness of homosexual relationships. Michael Bronski writes: ‘By the end of the 1960s, radical feminism added an analysis of heterosexuality—an analysis often implicit in the writings of the homophile groups—to the understanding of women’s oppression.’⁷⁷ The novel is thus produced in the midst of two important strands of the fight for equality and inclusion. It portrays not a society where women are seen as men’s equals, but one where it is unnecessary to categorize people into men and women based on gender at all. This is a significant transformation, as it made all individuals who we now refer to as *ambigender*, *bigender* or *gender-fluid*, etc. automatically included into social life, without the need to categorize or name them. By juxtaposing the world of Mattapoisett that is ‘gender-free’ to the contemporary Anglophone society where binary gender categories are used, the novel points out how language supports gender polarization.

⁷⁷ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011) 290.

Chapter III – Ann Leckie’s *Imperial Radch*

Introduction

The first book of the *Imperial Radch* trilogy, *Ancillary Justice*, came out in 2013⁷⁸; the other two, *Ancillary Mercy*⁷⁹ and *Ancillary Sword*⁸⁰ appeared in 2014 and 2015 accordingly. The series is a story of the adventures of a mutinous hero opposing the empire and its tyrannical leader. The action is set thousands of years in the future, in a world divided into the Radch Empire or ‘the civilized,’ and others, ‘the uncivilized,’ various peoples whose worlds have not been conquered by the Radch. The expansionist empire has vast territorial holdings and is the most powerful political, economic, cultural and military force in the universe. To maintain the established order, the empire employs artificial intelligence integrated into human bodies, known as *ancillaries*, as soldiers and as part of their military ships. The series follows Breq, an ancillary and a part of the artificial consciousness of the ship destroyed as a result of the civil war in the Radch space. Throughout the series, Breq is seeking revenge against the Lord of the Radch for destroying her ship and everyone on board.

In the narrow sense, *Imperial Radch* can be defined as a space opera: the trilogy abounds with conventional space-opera elements, including space travel, a tyrannical emperor, a brave rebel seeking the destruction of the tyrant and the liberation of the empire, as well as multiple instances of bloodshed and destruction in the expanses of space. In *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Gary Westfahl lists inalienable space-opera components, using the system of Wilson Tucker, who coined the term; these elements include

⁷⁸ Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* (London: Orbit Press, 2013), Kindle ed.

⁷⁹ Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Sword* (London: Orbit Press, 2014), Kindle ed.

⁸⁰ Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Mercy* (London: Orbit Press, 2014), Kindle ed.

space travel, an adventure, and a formulaic plot,⁸¹ which, on a very basic level, make up the body of *Imperial Radch*. Nevertheless, operating within the conventional space opera framework, this narrative covers several themes that are not considered standard for a traditional space-opera. In the first place, the trilogy is a tale of the so-called technological singularity, which means that it considers the time so far in the future that the technological advancement becomes unpredictable and it is hard to tell what might follow.⁸² Apart from the technological variable, the text considers the questions of race, class, personal identity, and gender.

The discussion of language and gender in the trilogy begins with the protagonist's comment: 'Radchaai don't care much about gender, and the language they speak – my own first language – doesn't mark gender in any way. This language we were speaking now did, and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong form.'⁸³ The narrator's fictional language is called Radchaai, which is also the language of the ruling empire in the story. Although Radchaai is frequently spoken about, the readers do not have the opportunity to see this language in use: English appears to be serving as a mask to the foreign tongue used in the story. Throughout her narration, Breq uses English expressions without equivalents in the fictional Radchaai, making English the only accessible tongue of the Radch empire in the story. Based on that, it is possible to say that English serves as a fictional counterpart to Radchaai, even though Radchaai is not referred to as English. As for the linguistic novae found in the text, the innovation rests in the fact that, instead of the traditional set of the masculine, feminine, and neutral pronouns, the language in the Radch empire retains only the

⁸¹ Gary Westfahl, 'Space Opera,' *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 197-198.

⁸² David M. Higgins and Roby Duncan, 'Key Critical Concepts, Topics and Critics,' *The Science Fiction Handbook*, ed. Nick Hubble and Aris Mousoutzanis (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 132.

⁸³ Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*, 'Chapter 1.'

feminine and the neuter, whereas the masculine forms are disposed of. In the story, the feminine pronouns are used in an unconventional way: all human beings are referred to as *she* by default (unless the narrator knows the terms of address in other fictional languages).

The Transformation of Language

As the readers learn from Breq's comments early on in the story, the people of the Radch do not distinguish gender, although the biological aspects of the Radchaai as a species remain unclear. In this respect, it is possible to view them in two ways: as similar to humans, i.e. males and females are biologically distinguished and represent two gender-defined groups, or there is a possibility to consider the Radch a world similar to Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, with essentially hermaphroditic species, who have no biological basis for gender-distinction. The present work adheres to the first scenario, the reason being that various other peoples outside of the Radch are able to differentiate between male and female Radchaai, although the passages when this can be seen are infrequent (for example, in the scenes happening outside of the territories of the Radch, and with the speakers of other languages Seivarden is referred to as male, and Breq as a girl). Ostensibly, the idea behind the given novum is to create the means of genderless reference in the Radchaai language as for its speakers, gender ceases to be of importance, according to Breq. Accordingly, English, as a Radchaai's counterpart, is recreated as a genderless language within the context of the story.

What is to be looked at in the first place is how generic *she* interferes with the readers' understanding of the gender of the characters in this set of texts. Throughout the history of the English language, generic *he* has been used as a neutral generic; its usage has been traced

back to as early as Chaucer.⁸⁴ The pronoun question has been one of the most engaging topics of discussion as it comes to language and gender, since it has been noted that the use of the masculine pronouns in the generic contexts like ‘each student must bring *his* book to the class’⁸⁵ contributes to the invisibility of women in the discourse and makes an utterance male-focused. As it comes to pronouns, the traditional expectations are that *man* and *he* can refer both to men and women, yet *she* or *woman* are used for referring only to females. Even though the use of the pronoun *she* is on the rise in the US, as shown by Twenge, Campbell, and Gentile⁸⁶, there is still a notion that the generic *she* is not a neutral generic in the pure sense and that it is associated with the feminist discourse. Now, in *Imperial Radch*, *she* is used with the generic reference that is supposed to act as a truly neutral form of reference, i.e. not invoking associations with women and being able to refer to humans (the species in the series) in general. This is where the effect of linguistic estrangement occurs: the world in the series is described with familiar English, yet the system of gender pronouns and linguistic gender markers is transformed, making the reader pay attention to a cognitive bias that might occur while reading the text – the bias that the generic *she* actually refers to women, whereas historically, generic *he* has traditionally been understood as a term that refers to both men and women. In a word, a linguistic transformation that occurs in the text rests in the fact that in English, the pronoun *he* can be used with the reference to both genders, whereas in the *Radch* series, the pronoun *she* is extended to refer to any gender. Evidently, *The Imperial Radch* is not the only story to modify its language this way: in June Arnold’s *The Cook and the Carpenter*,⁸⁷ *na* and *nan* substitute for all personal pronouns, similarly to *per* and *person* in

⁸⁴ Curzan 59.

⁸⁵ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 3.

⁸⁶ Jean M. Twenge, et al., ‘Male and Female Pronoun Use in U.S. Books Reflects Women’s Status, 1900–2008,’ *Sex Roles* 67. 9-10 (2012): 488-493, 07 Aug. 2012 < <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11199-012-0194-7> > 5 Aug. 2019.

⁸⁷ June Arnold, *The Cook and the Carpenter: A Novel by the Carpenter*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

Woman on the Edge of Time, as well as similarly to the generic *she* in the *Radch*; yet, in the *Radch*, this is done not through the use of neologisms, but using conventional pronouns unconventionally. Therefore, as a result of that transformation, the readers are left without an adequate linguistic device to rely on that would help them to assign gender to the characters; also, they are caused to stay aware of the misleading practices of the pronouns while guessing at the characters' gender. Nonetheless, since the people of the *Radch* appear to be human-like, it is possible to seek other, non-linguistic elements that act as the signifiers of gender and that are based on the traditional assumptions about the social representation of gender.

The absence of reliable pronouns causes the reader to search for other signs that could reveal the familiar trait: for instance, the characterization. The trilogy offers exhaustive descriptions of its characters and their surroundings: their appearance, favorite accessories, hobbies, political views, relatives and all other circumstantial details. However, here, the readers will find themselves in a situation similar to that of Breqs: she is alienated from the non-Radch'ai understanding of gender, while the reader is alienated from the narrator's understanding of gender. Thus, both the narrator and the reader have to go through the same process of assigning gender to the characters. As Attebery writes in *Decoding Gender in SF*, language and gender are both codes, and there are certain nonverbal signs that the gender code includes, such as clothing, cosmetics, hairstyles, posture, use of chemicals to mask or enhance body odors, gesture, vocal pitch, and inflection, and patterns of eye contact.⁸⁸ When someone employs some of these elements as the nonverbal language of gender, they participate in 'performing gender,' a term used by Goffman and then discussed in depth by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet.⁸⁹ Again, Attebery explained this process using such a marker as baldness

⁸⁸ Attebery 3.

⁸⁹ Erving Goffman, 'The Arrangement Between the Sexes,' *Theory and Society* 4.3 (1977) 301-331 JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/656722>> 27. Apr. 2019.

that can communicate specific meanings such as belonging to a violent group, deviant sexuality, or disease.⁹⁰

What one sees in the people of the Radch resembles a familiar picture; Breq, too relies on colors and fabric patterns to make decisions upon the gender of other people, although what she uses does not signal anything to us, readers: ‘She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike patterns quilting her shirt’⁹¹ – this is a language that does not speak to us. In the novels, the readers have access to various social situations where they could employ these traditional markers. For instance in these passages: ‘Most of them had adopted the simple skirt and added a light, loose shirt, as Lieutenant Awn had’ and ‘...All wore the jewelry that few Radchaai would ever give up – gifts from friends or lovers, memorials to the dead...’⁹² – it would be common practice to look for familiar gender markers in these passages which is an example of conventionalization of what is otherwise an arbitrary sign. The readers get to see that this is an arbitrary sign that has a conventionalized meaning in the novel, just as it usually happens in reality. In the alien world of this series, there are other gender coordinates which do not coincide with ours. This shows how arbitrary these gender markers are and how one can use them only in the context of a culture that inculcates them.

⁹⁰ Attebery 4.

⁹¹ Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*, ‘Chapter 1.’

⁹² Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*, ‘Chapter 2.’

Making Connections

So far, the processes of the linguistic estrangement outside of the story have been discussed; nevertheless, a question of why the absence of gender becomes a part of an aggressive society on the verge of falling into a dystopia remains unanswered. The Radch is not a monodimensional construct to be characterized as entirely negative or positive: it has a complex system of social organization, it has reached a certain degree of positive technological advancement in many spheres, such as medicine and space travel; nevertheless, it shows a number of disturbing features. First of all, the Radch is a militarized world whose political priority is the expansion of its territories: the Radch sends its troops to other worlds, takes them by conquest, declares their other various other nations new citizens of the Radch and punishes the rebels by killing them or turning their bodies into tool-soldiers (ancillaries) controlled by AI. Apart from that, the Radch practices surveillance over its citizens, as well as the 'reeducation' or medical intervention into the minds of criminals and other 'unwanted people.' All in all, it is visible that the Radch is a state characterized by great political power, practices of enforcement and conquest.

One way of looking at the aforementioned connection is to consider gender another instrument of oppression that the Radch uses against the conquered territories. As it is expected that the conquered peoples will fully assimilate with the citizens of the Radch, they will also have to accept the Radch's gender system. The traumatic nature of this process can be seen in the episode when Brek travels to a station of the planet Athoek, where the people are of at least two sexes and where she learns about a peculiar genitalia festival dating back to the times when a deranged Athoeki king misunderstood the sex and gender of the Radch's and passed a decree after the conquest, forcing every male citizen to remove their

reproductive organs in order to become female for the purposes of full assimilation.⁹³ There is also evidence that many other peoples outside of the Radch have their own gender systems, as, for instance, the dwellers of the planet where the story begins call Breq a ‘tough little girl,’ and refer to Seivarden, her former lieutenant, as *he*. Now, when the Radch ‘annexes’ or conquers a new world, the citizens of that world must become Radchaai and follow the rules enforced by the Radch, including the laws, the etiquette, the language, and gender differentiation, which means to become genderless, just like Radchaai.

Therefore, the story turns gender into one of the tools of oppression, making various peoples with their own understanding of gender assimilate and thus lose their identity. Along with that, the reader’s perception is also attacked by Radchaai’s misleading representation of gender, as the text imposes feminine generics on every character. Thus, when the given text describes someone as *she*, the double misidentification occurs: first of all, the reader is forced to imagine the characters as female, and then, in the fictional world of the Radch, the characters who used to identify themselves in their own way are forced to be referred to as *she* and lose their identity. In this respect, within the context of gender-biased language critique, the trilogy opens a discussion on forced gender identification of human beings. This theme bears similarities to the issue of naming discussed above in relation to *Woman on the Edge of Time* showing that the practice of naming becomes oppressive when the superior names the inferior – here, the superior members of the Radch society define the gender status of the inferior groups, causing them to lose an opportunity of self-identification. At the same time, by constant misidentification of the characters in terms of gender, *Imperial Radch* makes another comment that gender is an unnatural yet powerful construct that heavily

⁹³ Leckie, *Ancillary Mercy*, ‘Chapter 3.’

influences one's perception and causes one take part in the identification of human beings which might prove misleading.

Chapter IV – Conclusion

About half a century ago, in her discussion of language, women, and writing, Adrienne Rich wrote ‘there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us.’⁹⁴ As we look back on the language and gender discourse, embracing all the challenges it has had to go through in order to come to this point in time, – can one say that a walk on ice is almost over, and that the conversation between language, gender and society has found stable ground and stable solutions that satisfy all parties? It is not easy to give a positive answer to this question, although it is evident that the speakers of what is called Western languages have developed a greater sensibility to the idea that language can liberate ones and restrain others through forms and structures that are used on a daily basis. Recent linguistic innovations in English, French, and Spanish that were mentioned in the introduction to this work are some examples of how this sensibility manifests itself in dictionaries, through practices of language planning and among speakers; in this vein, literature becomes another medium that reflects it.

The present work focuses on a specific literary niche, the literature of science fiction. As has been explained in the first chapter, the works of science fiction portray alternative worlds that are built on the principle of cognitive logic – the precept needed to connect the fictional and real worlds – that inevitably transform the reality to predict or create new models, locations, ways of social organizing, new species, etc. The language of these worlds also becomes transformed in order to name different objects, phenomena, and relationships, i.e. it becomes

⁹⁴ Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” *College English* 34.1(1972) 18-30 JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/375215>> 30 May 2019.

estranged from the language of everyday speech. It has been described in the previous chapters that linguistic estrangement can take the form of a device as well as an effect, and it can be used to draw attention to a wide range of matters, such as the operations of the language of propaganda, top-down language planning, and of course, the focus of this thesis, language that places genders inside a system of equality-inequality, gender-bias and gender-neutrality. Two texts were presented to discuss this matter; both deal with the issue of language and gender but approach it differently, revising the existing pronoun constructions and their semantics, or devising new expressions within the familiar language.

The text opening the discussion is *Woman on the Edge of Time* where linguistic estrangement operates predominantly as a formal device, and the elements of a fictional language are incorporated within the familiar English. In the novel, the futuristic English employs neologisms that create a tension between our use of English and the estranged use of English in relatively similar circumstances (if we accept that the dwellers of Mattapoisett are humans like ourselves but with a different understanding of gender). One can also see the tension between the language of the men as the oppressive and the women as the oppressed group, as contrasted with the language characterized by equality spoken in Mattapoisett. In this text, the effect of estrangement occurs as the result of the contrast between the two worlds: the realistic, or a negative model and the futuristic, a positive model, and as the readers switch between the worlds with the protagonist, they are invited to compare the vision of language in the futuristic world with our linguistic reality to see how English naturally reinforces inequality by using disparate terms for men and women without any adequate gender-neutral expressions. *Imperial Radch* series leaves the readers without adequate linguistic gender markers and imagines an inverted system of generic pronouns, which creates a discrepancy

between the conception of male-centered language as a norm and female-centered language as a deviation, and at the same time, considers the violent nature of false gender identification.

Another voluminous work mentioned throughout this analysis is *Native Tongue* trilogy by Suzette Haden Elgin. As stated earlier, it revolves around an idea that language is a system based on the principle of consent, and in its fictional universe, the women agree on learning the language that they secretly construct for themselves to redefine the social position of women with the help of language. Similarly, to decide whether to accept the ‘point médian’ is an agreement that should be made by the speakers of French and whether to accept *l@s* estudiantes is an agreement that should be made by the speakers of Spanish – whether to use Láadan’s vocabulary to describe the experience of women, as well as whether to use ‘per’ for everyone or to come up with new gender terminology – the movement that is actually happening within the Western languages today – is also a question of agreement. The texts discussed above, as well as many other SF works dealing with this topic are not suitable for prognostication of what the language will look like in the years to come, although it reminds the readers that language is something that stems out of use, historical traditions, political decisions and can and sometimes should be altered.

Thusly, linguistic estrangement that is produced as a result of various techniques employed by the authors reminds one that certain phenomena like gender markers do not exist because of their own natural development but come as a result of socio-historical and socio-political processes and are subject to change. In this regard, linguistic estrangement is closely tied with the ideas of Shklovsky, Brecht, and Suvin: as Shklovsky’s estrangement aims at the interruption of automatization of perception at its core principles, and Brecht’s strives to expose the socio-historical and political processes that govern certain phenomena, the task of

linguistic estrangement is to disrupt the continuum of language use with respect to certain considerations on the operations of language. By virtue of cognitive estrangement, a science fiction text becomes a playground for various language changes that are in contact with reality. The formalists' idea that convention is anesthetizing can be applied to the issue being discussed: Eckert and McConnell-Ginet write that 'the power of convention, or custom, lies in the fact that we simply learn ways of being and ways of doing things without considering any reasons behind them, and without recognizing the larger structures that they fall into.'⁹⁵ This is what comes as the automatization of sexist language or sexist discourse: certain expressions become fossilized, and by keeping them uncontested, one encourages sexist language to thrive. Although, what if there is a conventional, fossilized absence of certain linguistic forms? What if, as *Woman on the Edge of Time* suggests, we should have *per* and *person* available so that we could express that which does not have a name yet? It is important for a phenomenon to have a linguistic naming, as was once shown by Sapir and Whorf who famously studied language to show the interdependence of language and cognition and demonstrated the role of the language in organizing our understanding of the world in general and social relations in particular: human beings are inevitably defined through language and are thus called men and women and a multitude of other names. At this point in time, a predominant number of world communities regards gender as something of substance and sees the gender binary as a necessary and inalienable construct. Yet it can become another convention to be broken by estrangement, just as Adrienne Rich said, reading can become a re-vision, or 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes,'⁹⁶ of observing text and language from a new critical direction.

⁹⁵ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 34.

⁹⁶ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,' *College English*, 34.1(1972) 18-30. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/375215>> 30 May 2019.

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