

# Cross-Cultural Pragmatics of Third-Person Pronouns in English, Arabic, And Uzbek

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the cross-cultural pragmatics of third-person pronouns in three linguistically and culturally distinct languages: English, Arabic, and Uzbek. Drawing upon a corpus of literary, political, and religious texts, the study investigates how gender, number, and pragmatic reference influence the interpretation and translation of these pronouns. Findings demonstrate substantial variation in how each language encodes gender and number, underscoring the importance of contextual sensitivity and appropriate translation strategies in cross-cultural and multilingual discourse.

**Keywords:** Third-person pronouns, cross-cultural pragmatics, gender in language, deixis, translation strategies, English–Arabic–Uzbek.

**Introduction:** Third-person pronouns are more than mere grammatical tools; they act as pragmatic bridges between linguistic form and communicative intent, anchoring discourse participants to the social and cultural fabric of language use. In multilingual and multicultural contexts, their interpretation, use, and translation require not only grammatical precision but also a nuanced understanding of sociocultural conventions and referential pragmatics.

This study focuses on the cross-cultural pragmatics of third-person pronouns in three typologically and culturally distinct languages: English, Arabic, and Uzbek. Each language encodes gender, number, and referential hierarchy differently. For instance, Arabic strictly marks gender and number through morphological agreement (e.g., *huwa* ‘he’, *hiya* ‘she’, *hum* ‘they – masculine’, *hunna* ‘they – feminine’), while English, although traditionally gendered (he/she/they), has recently witnessed a pragmatic shift toward gender-neutral pronoun use, especially with the singular “they” in inclusive and non-binary contexts (see Nord, 2022; Huang, 2023). Uzbek, on the other hand, represents a Turkic structure in which third-person pronouns (*u*, *ular*) are grammatically genderless but are contextually rich and flexible in their pragmatic deployment across formal, informal, and culturally

nuanced settings.

The primary aim of this paper is to examine how gender, number, and pragmatic reference are expressed and interpreted across literary, political, and religious discourse genres in the selected languages. Drawing upon a comparative corpus analysis, the study highlights how the deictic and anaphoric functions of pronouns often lead to ambiguity or misinterpretation when transferred across languages and cultures without adequate contextual or cultural adjustment.

Furthermore, the paper investigates how translation strategies (e.g., explicitation, reformulation, contextual amplification) are employed to preserve pragmatic meanings during interlingual transfer. Understanding these mechanisms is not only vital for enhancing translation accuracy, but also for fostering intercultural competence in global communication settings, where assumptions about gender or referential clarity can significantly influence the interpretation of a message.

By bridging linguistic structures with cultural pragmatics, this study contributes to contemporary translation theory, intercultural linguistics, and the broader field of discourse analysis. It also provides practical insights for translators, educators, and linguists who work with gender-sensitive or culturally marked texts.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative comparative analysis approach to investigate the pragmatic functions and referential variability of third-person pronouns in English, Arabic, and Uzbek. The analysis was grounded in a cross-cultural pragmatics framework, with a focus on how gender, number, and social deixis are linguistically and pragmatically encoded across discourse types and how they pose challenges in translation.

### Corpus Selection

A purposive sampling technique was used to construct a multilingual corpus comprising 30 representative texts, evenly distributed across three culturally salient and pragmatically rich genres:

1. **Literary fiction** – selected to illustrate narrative and character-based reference shifts;
2. **Political speeches** – to observe formal deixis, ideological positioning, and distancing strategies;
3. **Religious discourse** – to explore divine reference, elevated language, and reverential deixis.

The selected corpus included the following:

- a. **English:** Political speeches by Barack Obama (e.g., A More Perfect Union), excerpts from the King James Bible, and gender-conscious narratives from Jane Austen's works;
- b. **Arabic:** Qur'anic verses (e.g., Sura An-Nisa, Sura Al-Baqara), Friday sermons (khutbah), and segments from classical Arabic literature such as Al-Jahiz's prose;
- c. **Uzbek:** Prose writings of Alisher Navoi, presidential addresses from 2020–2024, and Sufi-influenced religious texts authored in contemporary Uzbek.

### Analytical Procedure

Each occurrence of third-person pronouns within the corpus was closely examined according to three main dimensions:

1. **Morphological encoding** – analysis of gender and number marking (e.g., masculine/feminine/plural suffixes in Arabic vs. neutral forms in Uzbek);
2. **Contextual referent clarity** – identification of explicit and implicit referents, referential ambiguity, and the need for pragmatic inferencing;
3. **Translation-related issues** – identification of mismatches, omissions, and necessary reformulations during interlingual translation, especially where pronoun usage deviates from target language norms.

These dimensions were cross-compared to reveal patterns of pragmatic equivalence, referential shifts,

and cultural constraints on pronoun use and interpretation.

### Theoretical Frameworks

The analysis was informed by the following theoretical lenses:

1. **Levinson's (1983) Deixis Theory:** Provided the foundation for understanding person deixis, referent tracking, and discourse anchoring;
2. **Nord's (2022) Functionalist Translation Model:** Offered insights into translator decision-making based on communicative function and cultural acceptability;
3. **Huang's (2023) Model of Reformulation in Intercultural Pragmatics:** Helped elucidate how pragmatic meaning is restructured or expanded across language boundaries, particularly when dealing with gendered and honorific reference systems.

Together, these frameworks allowed for a multi-layered analysis, integrating linguistic structure, cultural context, and pragmatic function, which is essential in examining pronouns as culturally loaded and pragmatically dynamic elements in communication.

## RESULTS

The comparative analysis of third-person pronoun usage across English, Arabic, and Uzbek revealed substantial cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variation in the domains of morphological encoding, referential clarity, and pragmatic function, especially in politically and religiously loaded contexts. The results are presented in thematic clusters below.

### 1. Morphological Encoding of Gender and Number

- a. Arabic exhibited overt morphological marking for both gender (masculine/feminine) and number (singular/dual/plural) in its third-person pronouns (e.g., *huwa*, *hiya*, *hum*, *hunna*). This rigid structure ensures referential specificity but also imposes a strong gender binary, which was especially evident in religious texts where divine agency is consistently gendered (e.g., Allah referred to as *huwa* despite the metaphysical nature of divinity).
- b. English, by contrast, displayed a moderate gender distinction in third-person singular (*he/she/they*) but no overt gender marking in the plural (*they*). Notably, the increased use of singular "they" in contemporary English literary and political texts signaled a move toward gender-neutrality, particularly in inclusive political rhetoric and socially progressive fiction.
- c. Uzbek showed a complete absence of grammatical gender in third-person pronouns (*u*, *ular*),

aligning with broader Turkic typology. However, number distinction was retained (u vs. ular). Interestingly, referential clarity in Uzbek was often achieved through repetition of proper names or contextual inference, especially in written literary genres.

## 2. Referential Clarity and Ambiguity

a. In Arabic texts, especially the Qur'an, pronouns often functioned with delayed or implicit antecedents, requiring readers to rely on contextual, theological, or exegetical knowledge to accurately resolve referents. This led to complex layers of interpretation, particularly when translating into languages with different deixis systems.

b. In English political discourse, referential clarity was generally maintained, but strategic ambiguity was occasionally used (e.g., avoiding "he" or "she" in references to opponents or institutions). Literary texts, on the other hand, often played with pronoun shifts to manipulate perspective and narrative voice.

c. Uzbek political speeches tended to avoid overuse of pronouns altogether, favoring repeated use of titles (e.g., Prezident, xalqimiz) to maintain formality and reverence. In religious discourse, pronouns such as u zot ("that person" in reverential tone) replaced plain u, serving both pragmatic and cultural-politeness functions.

## 3. Pragmatic Functions and Sociocultural Deixis

a. In Arabic, third-person pronouns carried additional layers of deference, especially in religious discourse. The use of huwa to refer to God was not merely grammatical but indexical of divine authority, signaling reverence embedded in language itself.

b. English texts showed a shift toward gender-inclusivity and social equity, particularly visible in government documents and inclusive religious paraphrases (e.g., replacing "He" with "God" or "They" in reference to a deity or person of unknown gender). In fiction, "they" allowed authors to portray nonbinary characters without disrupting the narrative.

c. Uzbek discourse pragmatics reflected the influence of cultural collectivism. In both political and religious registers, plural forms (ular, o'sha kishilar) were sometimes used to refer to singular high-status individuals, as a politeness strategy known as plural of respect. This suggests that even in a language without grammatical gender, hierarchical deixis can manifest through number manipulation and lexical strategies.

## 4. Translation Implications

Significant translation challenges emerged from the asymmetry in gender encoding:

a. Translating from Arabic to English/Uzb often required interpretive expansion, especially in gendered pronoun cases where the target language lacked equivalent markers. For example, hum (masculine plural) might become simply they or ular, potentially erasing gender specificity important in the source text.

b. Translating from English to Uzbek posed fewer structural issues, but pragmatic mismatches occurred when English texts used "they" for singular referents, which had no precise equivalent in Uzbek. Translators had to choose between u (risking misgendering) or paraphrasing to maintain politeness and clarity.

c. When translating Uzbek to Arabic, especially in sacred or formal registers, the absence of grammatical gender in the source complicated the encoding of Arabic's strict gender expectations. This often resulted in forced gender assignments that were not present in the original.

## DISCUSSION

The findings from the comparative analysis of third-person pronoun usage across English, Arabic, and Uzbek underscore the profound interplay between grammatical systems, pragmatic conventions, and sociocultural ideologies. The divergent encoding and usage patterns of third-person pronouns in these languages not only reflect structural typological differences but also signal deeper pragmatic and ideological functions, particularly in politically and religiously charged discourse.

### 1. Gender Encoding and Sociolinguistic Implications

One of the most salient cross-linguistic differences lies in the grammatical encoding of gender. Arabic's rigid morphological system aligns with Levinson's (1983) Deixis Theory, where person deixis is closely tied to indexical meanings embedded in the cultural and religious context. The consistent use of huwa for referring to Allah, for example, exemplifies how grammatical gender intersects with theological metaphors of authority, even in the absence of ontological gender.

In contrast, English demonstrates increasing fluidity in gender reference, especially with the rise of singular "they" in public and literary discourse. This shift, as observed in Obama's speeches and Austen's novels, reflects broader movements toward gender inclusivity and identity-aware language. Huang's (2023) framework on intercultural reformulation is particularly relevant here: speakers and writers actively reshape linguistic forms to better reflect contemporary cultural norms.

Uzbek's gender-neutral structure, while typologically consistent with Turkic languages, introduces pragmatic

challenges in domains where gender differentiation is semantically or culturally salient. This suggests that grammatical neutrality does not imply pragmatic neutrality—rather, cultural politeness norms (e.g., plural of respect) provide indirect strategies for encoding social distinctions.

2. Referential Strategy and Discourse Positioning

The variations in referential clarity also reflect different discourse priorities. English tends to emphasize clarity and anaphoric consistency, partly driven by stylistic conventions of modern writing. Arabic, on the other hand, leverages implicit reference and theological deixis, especially in Qur’anic discourse, creating interpretive richness that demands deep cultural-literary competence. In line with Nord’s (2022) Functionalist Translation Model, such differences necessitate purpose-driven translation strategies where functional equivalence outweighs structural fidelity.

In Uzbek, repetitive naming and use of honorific titles in place of pronouns reflect the cultural imperative of respect and hierarchy. Political discourse especially favors avoidance of pronouns to maintain distance and elevate the speaker’s tone, resonating with collective cultural values.

3. Pragmatic Flexibility vs. Grammatical Constraint

The analysis reveals a spectrum of pragmatic flexibility:

- English permits innovation (e.g., singular “they”), adapting to emerging social values.

Aspect	English	Arabic	Uzbek
Gender encoding	Flexible (he/she/they)	Rigid binary (huwa/hiya)	Absent
Pragmatic strategy	Inclusive innovation	Theological authority	Politeness via repetition
Referential clarity	High (explicit antecedents)	Contextual/exegetical	Avoidance or honorifics
Translation impact	Challenges in singular/plural and gender-neutrality	Forced gender assignment	Lack of gender expression can obscure intent

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the complex interplay between grammatical structure, cultural pragmatics, and translation challenges in the use of third-person pronouns across English, Arabic, and Uzbek. While all three languages employ third-person reference to manage discourse cohesion and deixis, the way they encode gender, number, and respect differs significantly—reflecting their unique typological and sociocultural profiles.

English, with its evolving use of gender-neutral

- Arabic maintains grammatical conservatism, aligning with classical norms tied to religious authority.
- Uzbek blends morphological simplicity with pragmatic complexity, relying on sociocultural norms to compensate for grammatical gaps.

This variation demonstrates that the pragmatics of pronoun usage cannot be separated from cultural ideologies of identity, politeness, and power. Where one language encodes respect grammatically (Arabic), another encodes it lexically or contextually (Uzbek).

4. Translation Challenges and Deictic Misalignment

Translation across these systems is not merely a matter of lexical substitution but requires navigating deictic misalignments. The absence of gender in Uzbek creates difficulties in translating gendered source texts (e.g., Arabic or English). Conversely, the compulsory gender marking in Arabic forces translators to infer and sometimes impose gender distinctions that may not be present or appropriate in the source.

In terms of cross-cultural equivalence, the study supports Nord’s (2022) assertion that translation should prioritize functional clarity over formal equivalence. Moreover, Huang’s (2023) model highlights the need for reformulation strategies that accommodate cultural differences in deixis and politeness.

Summary of Key Interpretations

pronouns such as singular they, reflects a broader socio-political shift toward inclusivity and flexibility in identity representation. Arabic maintains rigid gender distinctions rooted in a classical grammatical tradition, with additional theological and cultural dimensions—especially in religious discourse where pronoun use is deeply ideological. Uzbek, in contrast, offers a morphologically gender-neutral system that nonetheless conveys nuanced social meaning through repetition, honorifics, and pragmatic strategies sensitive to age, status, and respect.

These findings support the claim that grammatical form

alone cannot capture the full spectrum of pragmatic function. Translation between these systems requires not just linguistic equivalence but also cultural interpretability. The use of pronouns, especially in political and religious texts, demands contextual awareness to avoid misrepresentation of social roles, power dynamics, or gender identity.

In line with Levinson's (1983) theory of deixis, Nord's (2022) functionalist translation model, and Huang's (2023) intercultural pragmatics framework, this study underscores the need for context-sensitive, functionally motivated translation and interpretation strategies. As languages continue to evolve and as global discourse becomes more multilingual and multicultural, understanding the socio-pragmatic underpinnings of even seemingly simple grammatical elements like pronouns remains a critical priority in linguistics, translation studies, and intercultural communication.

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