

## Revisiting Vocative *γύναι* in John 2:4: A Plea for Linguistic Realism

Vitaly Voinov\*

### 1. Introduction

In John 2:4, Jesus addresses his mother with the vocative term *γύναι* “woman”, a word choice that has raised many eyebrows among readers of the New Testament and has over the years been discussed in many publications by Bible scholars and translators.<sup>1)</sup> The text of John 2:1-5 is presented below for ease of reference.

1 Καὶ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ γάμος ἐγένετο ἐν Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας, καὶ ἦν ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐκεῖ· 2 ἐκλήθη δὲ καὶ ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν γάμον. 3 καὶ ὑστερήσαντος οἴνου λέγει ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ πρὸς αὐτόν, Οἶνον οὐκ ἔχουσιν. 4 [καὶ] λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, **γύναι**; οὐπω ἦκει ἡ ὥρα μου. 5 λέγει ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ τοῖς διακόνοις, Ὁ τι ἂν λέγη ὑμῖν ποιήσατε. (GNT<sup>4</sup>)

1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to

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\* Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Texas at Arlington. Director and translation consultant at the Institute for Bible Translation in Russia/CIS. [vovoinov@hotmail.com](mailto:vovoinov@hotmail.com).

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him, “They have no wine.” 4 And Jesus said to her, “**Woman**, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” 5 His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” (NRS)

The present paper revisits the issue of whether it may in certain languages be justifiable to translate this specific case of vocative γύναι as “mother”, as has been proposed by commentators and translation scholars, most notably Eugene A. Nida,<sup>2)</sup> and followed in practice by modern Bible translations in various languages, e.g., F. S. Ballentine’s *Modern American Bible* (1901), Ferrar Fenton’s translation (1905), NEB, CEV, BFC, Turkish *Kutsal Kitap*, the Azeri Bible, and the Tuvan Bible. Some scholars make strong assertions to the contrary, such as Gert Knepper, who forcefully states that “under no circumstances should γύναι be translated with a term meaning ‘mother’, for this is exactly what the text so strikingly avoids communicating.”<sup>3)</sup> Knepper argues that Jesus’ address of his mother as γύναι is in fact as distancing in Greek as it sounds in the English rendering “woman”, although not necessarily with overtones of disrespect. I argue here that objections of this nature are overstated and do not sufficiently take into account important linguistic factors, such as contextual pragmatics, the nature of corpus analysis, and audience expectations that Bible translators need to be aware of when producing a new Scripture version. My conclusion is that the decision to translate the address term as “mother” in John 2:4 is fully viable as a possible rendering in terms of both exegesis and translation principles.

## 2. Initial arguments pro and contra

Let us start out by briefly summarizing the main reasons that Nida and others have put forth over the years for the validity of rendering γύναι as “mother” in

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2) E.g., J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988); E. A. Nida, “Translators’ Creativity Versus Sociolinguistic Constraints”, A. Beylard-Ozeroff, J. Králová, and B. Moser-Mercer, eds., *Translators’ Strategies and Creativity: Selected Papers from the 9th International Conference on Translation and Interpreting, Prague, September 1995* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998), 127-136.

3) Gert M. Knepper, “Nida’s Γύναι: Eugene Nida’s Views on the Use of Γύναι in John 2:4”, *The Bible Translator* 66:2 (2015), 167.

John 2:4 in some languages. Since Knepper has already examined these arguments in his article, I also provide a synopsis of his objections to each of them.

1) First, Nida points to other uses of vocative γύναι in the NT (e.g., Mat 15:28) and also in Greek literature that are courteous, not abrasive as a direct English translation makes this vocative sound. This is an argument about the pragmatics of the source language.<sup>4)</sup> Eleanor Dickey has demonstrated that γύναι is a “neutral” form of address for a woman.<sup>5)</sup> (In the present article, I prefer to use the term *politic* when referring to this concept of linguistic neutrality, since it is more accepted than “neutral” in contemporary politeness studies.<sup>6)</sup> A politic linguistic form is one that is expected in a given context according to a specific socio-cultural norm. Politic terms cause no offense, but neither are they seen by speakers of the language as particularly polite or extra-respectful.)

While admitting this “neutral” or politic pragmatic function of vocative γύναι in general, Knepper and others note that none of the attested examples of γύναι elsewhere in ancient Greek literature occur in the specific context of addressing one’s mother. Knepper demonstrates that Nida was likely mistaken in his claim that there exist Greek papyri letters attesting to vocative γύναι in a respectful address of one’s mother.<sup>7)</sup> For Knepper, the existing evidence in Greek literature only shows that vocative γύναι is used when addressing women who are not related to the speaker. Tokens of vocative γύναι in other NT passages and Greek literature therefore cannot be used as evidence for Jesus’ address of his mother as being politic in John 2:4; Knepper interprets Jesus’ use of this address form as an intentional distancing of himself from Mary, portraying their relationship as a

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4) It seems rather unlikely that Jesus actually spoke Greek with his mother or other Jewish or Samaritan women that he encountered in the Gospels, leaving interpreters with the question of what Hebrew or Aramaic word stood behind the Greek γύναι in this and other occurrences of γύναι on Jesus’ lips. (The Canaanite woman in Mat 15:28 is likely an exception, since Jesus may have spoken Greek to her.) It is hard to find any Aramaic or Hebrew term of address that could naturally correspond to Greek γύναι as an address form, so it is likely that John did not translate the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus in this address form, but rather reproduced his *ipsissima vox*. The exact nature of this *vox* in this passage (courteous or distancing) is the question that interpreters are trying to settle.

5) E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address. From Herodotus to Lucian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86.

6) R. J. Watts, *Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

7) G. M. Knepper, “Nida’s Γύναι: Eugene Nida’s Views on the Use of Γύναι in John 2:4”, 165.

non-family relationship. Knepper finds the phrase *Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί* in John 2:4 as unequivocally confirming Jesus' intention to distance himself from his mother in this episode.<sup>8)</sup> Some sort of unusualness in Jesus' use of *γύναι* here has also been assumed by many other commentators, including *TDNT*<sup>9)</sup> and those listed by Knepper as proponents of the “distancing” interpretation.<sup>10)</sup> However, Knepper goes beyond most commentators in stating that such an explicit distancing form in address to one's mother “cannot but have shocked” the original audience of John's Gospel.<sup>11)</sup> This can be compared to the more moderate appraisal of Raymond Brown, who states that “[t]his is not a rebuke, nor an impolite term, nor an indication of a lack of affection”, although he does note that “there is no precedent for this [a son addressing his mother as “woman”] in Hebrew nor, to the best of our knowledge, in Greek.”<sup>12)</sup> Some scholars see Jesus' use of *γύναι* to his mother as being in line with the high Christology of John's Gospel, i.e., as one more verbal means of underlining that Jesus is not like other men. He is separate and exalted, and stands above normal social convention, such as needing to address his own mother as other sons do.

2) A second, crucial argument that Nida and others offer (also having to do with the pragmatics of the source language) is that Jesus' similar use of the same address term to his mother in John 19:26 clearly confirms that he did not intend it to be either disrespectful or distancing in John 2:4.<sup>13)</sup> Nida was not the first to

8) G. M. Knepper, “Nida's *Γύναι*: Eugene Nida's Views on the Use of *Γύναι* in John 2:4”, 166.

9) “When Jesus addresses His mother in this way ... it excludes the filial relationship.”, G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 777.

10) G. M. Knepper, “Nida's *Γύναι*: Eugene Nida's Views on the Use of *Γύναι* in John 2:4”, 167, fn. 7.

11) *Ibid.*, 166.

12) R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, Anchor Bible Commentary Series (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 99.

13) It has been recognized by interpreters that in Joh 2:4 and 19:26 *γύναι* also has at least one narrative/theological function besides its real-world pragmatic function. This vocative ties these two episodes together – Jesus' mother was with him both at the very beginning of his ministry (Cana) and at its very end (cross). John's use of *γύναι* in 19:26 can trigger the reader's memory of what happened in Cana and thus tie the two miracles together symbolically: in Cana Jesus provided wine that gave people joy, while on the cross his blood gave them life. This is a complex interrelation of sacramental imagery — red liquids, both of which can be drunk (Jesus called people to drink his blood in Joh 6:53) — that must have already been familiar to the Christian part of John's audience. On the narrative relatedness of these two passages, see, among others, R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 133.

make this argument. As E. J. Goodspeed summarizes, “Would Jesus address his mother that way [i.e., disrespectfully], especially in view of the attitude of consideration and affection for her which the Gospel of John reflects (19:25-27)?”<sup>14</sup> Brown also points to John 19:26-27 (Γύναι, ἴδε ὁ υἱός σου ... Ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ σου: “Woman, behold, your son! ... Behold, your mother!”) as confirming that Jesus was showing affection for his mother when speaking to her from the cross.<sup>15</sup> This line of reasoning has been accepted as fundamental by many other commentators writing on John’s Gospel. Knepper, however, argues against the relevance of this parallel passage and discounts it, saying that since “in all Greek literature nobody ever addresses his own mother as γύναι”, we cannot simply assume that Jesus is using this vocative courteously here.<sup>16</sup>

3) Nida’s third argument (focusing on recipient-language use) is that a literal translation of the vocative as “woman” in this passage is unthinkable in certain languages because it would indicate to readers that Jesus is intentionally dishonoring his mother. J. P. Louw and Nida point out that in some languages, there is no alternative way to address one’s mother in a politic manner other than to call her “mother”.<sup>17</sup> See A. Tabalaka’s article for a confirmation of this viewpoint in the Setswana language of southern Africa.<sup>18</sup> Knepper responds that since the address form in John 2:4 must have been shocking even to the original Greek-speaking audience, translations of this passage should use an address term that is sufficiently distancing in the recipient language even if it shocks readers.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the starting point of Knepper’s rebuttal of the potential acceptability of rendering γύναι as “mother” in this passage is in effect an argument from silence. In its essence, it runs as follows: Since vocative γύναι is nowhere else in ancient Greek literature used to address one’s mother in a politic manner, it simply cannot be the case that Jesus is doing this in John 2:4 or 19:26. Similar uses of vocative γύναι occurring in contexts other than address of one’s mother

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14) E. J. Goodspeed, “Problems of New Testament Translation”, *The Bible Translator* 3:2 (1952), 70.

15) R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, 99.

16) G. M. Knepper, “Nida’s Γύναι: Eugene Nida’s Views on the Use of Γύναι in John 2:4”, 163.

17) J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1:109.

18) A. Tabalaka, “A Tension Between Linguistic Semantics and Pragmatics: The Translation of the Word ‘Woman!’ (Gunai) Into ‘Mosadi!’ in the Setswana Bible”, *Scriptura* 81 (2002), 453-461.

19) G. M. Knepper, “Nida’s Γύναι: Eugene Nida’s Views on the Use of Γύναι in John 2:4”, 166.

may not be adduced as evidence for the acceptability of this usage in John 2:4 and 19:26. Therefore, translations of these passages should not make Jesus' address to his mother sound like a politic address of one's mother in any recipient language, especially if the term used in the Receptor Language wrongly indicates that Jesus was acknowledging her as his mother.

### 3. Objections to the objection

Along with Nida and others, I take a different starting point for evaluating the pragmatic force of  $\gamma\acute{o}\nu\alpha\iota$  in John 2:4. Instead of beginning with the supposed total absence of the linguistic form/function in question in the wider corpus of Greek literature (we will return to this below), a much stronger starting point is the presence of  $\gamma\acute{o}\nu\alpha\iota$  in the immediate context of the same work. I believe that Knepper and other scholars who agree with his point of view on the issue of  $\gamma\acute{o}\nu\alpha\iota$  have unjustifiably rushed past John 19:26 without granting this passage the tremendous interpretational weight that it is due. As Jesus is dying on the cross, he addresses his mother as  $\gamma\acute{o}\nu\alpha\iota$  in a speech act that fulfills his filial responsibility<sup>20)</sup> to her by placing her under the care of another man who will take care of her as her own son would do. In speaking to his mother and to his beloved disciple, Jesus is not merely showing that he loves his mother; he is specifically exercising his socially acknowledged role as son towards his mother. This is the contextual frame that helps hearers to determine the pragmatic force of the individual words used in the speech act. Taking the vocative  $\Gamma\acute{o}\nu\alpha\iota$  as a politic form here is not an assumption; it is a conclusion based on an analysis of the context. It is thoroughly unreasonable to argue that in the first part of this speech act ( $\Gamma\acute{o}\nu\alpha\iota$ ), Jesus is overtly disassociating himself from being Mary's son, as Knepper would have it, while in the second part of the same speech act he is explicitly exercising his role as her son. This line of reasoning is simply implausible given what we know of how human communication works in the real world. The conclusion that Nida and many Bible translators have rightfully drawn from the context of John 19:26 is that in addressing his mother as  $\gamma\acute{o}\nu\alpha\iota$ , Jesus is not distancing himself from her in terms

20) Called "filial piety" by J. McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), 403.

of family relationship. It would be an unthinkable behavioral oxymoron if in performing this specific social duty, Jesus used an address term that overtly negated the value of his speech act.

This is the primary reason that leads me to accept γύναι as having the same politic function in John 2:4. But there are also additional factors that reduce the validity of Knepper's argument. Let us take a look at some of them.

First of all, γύναι could also be used in ancient Greek by a man when addressing a close family member, specifically his wife, as pointed out by various scholars, including Dickey<sup>21)</sup> and more recently Arthur Quinn in the same issue of *The Bible Translator* in which Knepper published his article on γύναι.<sup>22)</sup> This usage has been found in various ancient Greek writers of different periods and makes it clear that a man could use vocative γύναι to address an in-group member in a politic way without the intention of distancing her. Granted, this is not the same as proving that a man could courteously address his own mother with this vocative,<sup>23)</sup> but it does bring us closer to this possibility by showing that vocative γύναι does not in itself have the pragmatic effect of positioning the addressee as being in a non-family relation to the speaker. It is misleading to imply as Knepper does that γύναι is pragmatically similar to the address term ἄνθρωπε, which “when used between people who know each other” is “the opposite of polite.”<sup>24)</sup> Husbands obviously knew their wives and did not speak in an unnatural or offensive manner when they addressed them as γύναι.

Second, the phrase τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί in John 2:4 (lit., “what to me and to you?”) is not by any means universally recognized by translators and commentators as necessarily creating distance between Jesus and his mother in this passage, contrary to Knepper's assumption. Although this is one of the possible functions of the Hebrew expression מַה־לִּי וְלָךְ underlying this phrase, we also see that in some places in the OT the function of this expression is not an attempt to distance the speaker from the addressee. For example, in 2Ch 35:21 Pharaoh

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21) E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address*, 86, 242.

22) A. G. Quinn, “The Vocative Singular in the Greek New Testament: An Exploration of Its Expression in North American English”, *The Bible Translator* 66:2 (2015), 155.

23) As pointed out by Joshua Jensen (p.c.), in many traditional cultures, the relative social standing of husband-to-wife (higher to lower) is the opposite of son-to-mother (lower to higher), which weakens the possibility of drawing a parallel from this politic usage in the son-to-mother context.

24) G. M. Knepper, “Nida's Γύναι: Eugene Nida's Views on the Use of Γύναι in John 2:4”, 166.

Neco says this to King Josiah through his envoys in an attempt to assuage possible hostilities between them. In effect, this expression in such a context could be expanded as saying something like “What (concern) is this (situation) to me and you?” or, more idiomatically, “Why should you and I get worked up about this?” NRS takes the function of this phrase in this very sense in John 2:4, as do several other translations, e.g., NAS, NLT, *Message*, CSB, ISV, WEB, indicating that the distance is between Jesus and his mother on one side and the circumstances described (the lack of wine at the wedding) on the other side, not between Jesus and his mother. John McHugh supports this interpretation of Jesus’ words to his mother here.<sup>25)</sup> Beasley-Murray calls τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί an “ambiguous expression”, and notes that there is “an analogical expression from east Syrian *Chaldee*” which “suggests not division but unity of thought.”<sup>26)</sup> Thus, the presumed distance between Jesus and his mother in this passage is only one exegetical possibility, not a foregone conclusion that dictates that vocative γύναι must also have a distancing function here.

Another key point that needs to be made in this discussion had to do with the corpus size in question and the nature of linguistic arguments based on corpus analysis. The corpus of ancient Greek literature that is cited for failing to find γύναι in address of one’s mother is relatively speaking not that large. Dickey shows that she found 75 tokens of vocative γύναι in the literary corpus that she used, a significant portion of all ancient Greek literature.<sup>27)</sup> Of these, 43 occurrences were to one’s wife, while the other 32 were to a non-relative. That none of these uses is to one’s mother is not particularly surprising, giving the fairly small sample size of tokens. It is not really surprising even when we fail to find γύναι in address of one’s mother in a larger ancient Greek corpus, the Online Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, or TLG (<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/tlg.php>), which had a total of 110 million word tokens as of August 2017. Although this may sound like a truly enormous resource that is all-sufficient for researching even minute details of ancient Greek, it is not gigantic in comparison to other contemporary electronic corpora, such as the COCA American English corpus (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca>) with about 520 million word tokens (as of 1 August 2017) or the Oxford English

25) J. McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 403.

26) G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 34.

27) E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address. From Herodotus to Lucian*, 85.

Corpus (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/oxford-english-corpus>), which currently has about 2.5 billion word tokens. The important point here is that TLG may in fact not be large enough to allow language researchers to speak with confidence about certain very specific features of ancient Greek.

The reason is that linguistic function sometimes varies greatly across different registers of a language, i.e., some expressions that are used in spoken language with a certain function may occur only very rarely with this function in a written textual corpus.<sup>28)</sup> Vocative γύναι does occur fairly often in the corpus of ancient Greek literature as a word form; but this does not mean that the specific pragmatic context of people addressing their mothers occurs frequently enough in this corpus for us to deduce that the absence of vocative γύναι in such a context is significant. According to Dickey, people address their mothers with the Greek equivalent for “mother” or “mom” about 40 times in her research corpus, and with no other term.<sup>29)</sup> This is really not a sufficiently large sample size to conclude that this is the only acceptable way of addressing one’s mother in ancient Greek.

For comparison’s sake, let us look at an address form that has a very low frequency in written English. This is the morpheme written as ‘*m*, a shortened enclitic form of the polite vocative form *ma’am* that is still used to address women, including one’s mother, in the southern U.S.A. (Knepper is mistaken when he calls this form archaic;<sup>30)</sup> it is still a living linguistic form, but is restricted to a specific dialect of English.) Furthermore, this politeness morpheme is very limited in where it occurs in contemporary southern English, typically only following the affirmative answer *yes*, as in *yes’m*. When we search for the string *yes’m* in the aforementioned COCA corpus, we find that it occurs only twice in the entire corpus of about 520 million words. This is a ratio of 1 token for every 260 million words. The point of this comparison is to show that if one were to search for *yes’m* in a corpus of only 110 million words (the current size of the TLG ancient Greek corpus), the probability is that one would not find this usage at all. This of course does not mean that the usage does not exist (speakers of American English know for sure that it does because we have

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28) See, e.g., D. Biber, *University Language: A Corpus-based Study of Spoken and Written Registers* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006), 252.

29) E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address. From Herodotus to Lucian*, 269.

30) G. M. Knepper, “Nida’s Γύναι: Eugene Nida’s Views on the Use of Γύναι in John 2:4”, 167.

heard it in either real conversation or in films); it only means that the textual corpus was not large enough to find a word token with such a specific pragmatic function and such a low frequency in written texts. If the corpus size is increased from 110 million to 520 million words, as in COCA, then one does find two tokens of *yes'm*. But only one of these tokens is of a person addressing her mother (in a 2012 novel entitled *A Texan's Choice* by Shelley Gray.)

My primary point here is this: if John portrays Jesus as using γύναι to address his mother in a manner that was in fact politic in spoken Koiné Greek of the 1<sup>st</sup> century (politeness norms can easily shift within one or two generations), we have no reason to expect that this exact usage should necessarily be reflected in other written Greek texts, especially of different eras, when the available corpus is of this limited size. Given the nature of the available corpus, we have no persuasive reason for seeing vocative γύναι as idiosyncratic in reference to one's mother in spoken Koiné Greek. The numbers simply do not bear out this conclusion. If this line of reasoning is accepted, there does not remain any valid foundation for taking this vocative as distancing or an indication of a divine/human relationship rift (as per the high Christology interpretation) in John 2:4 and 19:26.

There are other ancient Greek forms of address that occur only rarely in the entire literary corpus when a person is speaking to his or her mother. For example, the diminutive term μαννάριον “little mama” is found only in Lucian's *Dialogi Meretricii* (6.1, 7.4).<sup>31)</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the speakers in Lucian's writings are using this word in an unnatural way which the original audience would find strange; it only means that this address term occurs very infrequently in written Greek texts. These related points about the nature of corpus data considerably weaken the main argument from silence used by Knepper to disallow that γύναι may have been politic in Koiné Greek address of one's mother. I therefore conclude that the contextual evidence of John 19:26 can reasonably be taken as establishing the politic use of γύναι to one's mother UNLESS linguistic evidence to the contrary can be produced, such as finding it used to one's mother in Greek literature in a way that obviously causes offense (which it does not do in John 2:4).

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31) E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address. From Herodotus to Lucian*, 80. Dickey suggests that the context of μαννάριον indicates that the term is used to emphasize “the closeness of the relationship between mother and daughter and to show special affection.”

#### 4. Translating γύναι as “mother” may be better than leaving it untranslated

I would also like to revisit the suggestion that has been made by some scholars, such as Goodspeed<sup>32)</sup> and Knepper,<sup>33)</sup> that in John 2:4 and 19:26, the best translation approach in certain languages maybe to simply omit any rendering of γύναι, in light of the difficulties in finding an acceptable translation equivalent for this vocative (with “mother” being too affectionate and “woman” being too harsh, according to Goodspeed.) Knepper calls this the *nuloptie* “zero option” in his Dutch-language paper on the same topic.<sup>34)</sup> Among English NT translations that do this are Weymouth (1903), the *20<sup>th</sup> Century NT* (1904), Philipps (1961), TEV (1966), REB (1989); among other languages, the Dutch NBV (2004), the Tatar Bible (2015), and the Uzbek Bible (2016). It is admittedly a tempting option to avoid having to make a decision about what exactly Jesus meant by addressing his mother as γύναι in John 2:4 and 19:26. However, closing readers’ eyes to this question in the hopes that the interpretational problem will go away may backfire and cause an even greater problem related to the acceptability of the translation.

As is generally recognized by Bible translators, acceptability, or perceived authenticity, is a major criterion of a good translation, together with accuracy, clarity and naturalness.<sup>35)</sup> The reality is that if the new translation’s primary audience is already familiar with the translation of John’s Gospel in a language of wider communication (as is the case in many Scripture translation projects today), it maybe unacceptable for them to find that the word “woman” or an equivalent has simply been left out of the translation. Many readers in churches compare new Scripture translations with existing ones in order to see whether they can trust the new translation. If they see such a blatant omission, they will

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32) E. J. Goodspeed, “Problems of New Testament Translation”, 71.

33) G. M. Knepper, “Nida’s Γύναι: Eugene Nida’s Views on the Use of Γύναι in John 2:4”, 167.

34) G. M. Knepper, “Wat aan mij en aan jou? Betekenis en vertaling van *gunai* in Johannes 2:4 en 19:26”, *Met Andere Woorden* 34:2 (2015), 9.

35) T. D. Andersen, “Perceived Authenticity: The Fourth Criterion of Good Translation”, *Notes on Translation* 12:3 (1998), 1-13; I. Larsen, “The Fourth Criteria of Translation”, *Notes on Translation* 15:1 (2001), 40-53.

likely interpret this as meaning that the translation team simply made a mistake in omitting this word. It is much harder for a lay Bible reader to understand how a total omission could be viable than to accept a non-literal rendering as valid. Of course, a translation that follows this strategy can try to cover its back by adding a footnote to show that the omission is intentional, as R. F. Weymouth did in his translation of John 2:4 and 20:13. But this option does not do much good in cultures that are not used to paying attention to textual footnotes, or if the Gospel text is presented as an audio recording (in which footnotes are of course difficult to reproduce.)

Therefore, if a translator is forced to choose between rendering “mother” (because no other term in the recipient language is appropriate for addressing one’s mother) and omitting the rendering of γύναι altogether, I suggest that “mother” is in fact the better option. As I have argued above, the term that Jesus used to his mother in John 2:4 and 19:26 was likely a politic address form, and therefore should be rendered with an appropriate politic address term in the translation, even if the most or only acceptable term happens to mean “mother”.

## 5. Conclusion

There are four general approaches taken by Bible translations in rendering the vocative γύναι in John 2:4:

- 1) Render literally “woman,” with possible addition of modifying semantic components, such as “dear woman”;
- 2) Render “mother”;
- 3) Render with another address term, such as “ma’am”, “madame”, “señora”, etc.;
- 4) Omit the vocative in the translation completely (the zero or null option).

In this article, I have argued that option #2 (rendering γύναι as “mother”) is a genuine translation option. From an exegetical point of view, it is as valid as option #3, and more preferable than either #1 or #4. The immediate contexts found in John’s Gospel (in particular, 19:26) point to γύναι as being a politic Greek address form for a man to use towards his mother without causing any offense. The absence of an exact parallel usage of this term with this pragmatic

function in other ancient Greek literature is fairly weak as an argument from silence, due to the distinct possibility that a low-frequency linguistic item may not show up in a language corpus of this size and nature. If more ancient Greek manuscripts are discovered in the future that reflect spoken Koiné of the period when John's Gospel was written, it well may be that independent evidence of γύναι in politic address towards one's mother will be discovered among them. Even if such direct literary evidence is never discovered, the argument I have made here cannot itself be considered argument from silence, since the contextual pragmatic evidence of γύναι on Jesus' lips in John 19:26 is strong enough to be taken as the starting point from which γύναι in John 2:4 is to be evaluated as a respectful address of one's mother.

<Keywords>

John's Gospel, terms of address, politeness, pragmatics, corpus analysis.

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<Abstract>

**Revisiting Vocative γύναι in John 2:4:  
A Plea for Linguistic Realism**

Vitaly Voinov  
(Institute for Bible Translation in Russia)

Many practitioners of functional Bible translation, including Eugene Nida, have seen nothing wrong in rendering Jesus' address of Mary as γύναι in John 2:4 as a duly respectful form using a recipient language term that means "mother." However, in recent years the scholarly pendulum seems to be swinging to a preference for the opposite interpretation, namely that this vocative should not be understood as an acceptable way to address one's mother in Greek. Some scholars have also argued that completely omitting the rendering of γύναι in a translation may be preferable to rendering it as a respectful form of address for one's mother. In this paper, I marshal arguments, primarily based on pragmatics, corpus linguistics, and translation practice, to argue that there is nothing unrealistic about understanding γύναι as a respectful address form for one's mother and translating it as such. In particular, I argue that: 1) the clear starting point for interpreting John 2:4 must be taken from the context in which this vocative is found in John 19:26, where it is clear that the usage cannot be disrespectful or distancing; 2) the Greek corpus that is used as a basis for claiming that γύναι cannot be a respectful address for one's mother is too small to be definitive; and 3) rendering γύναι as a zero-form (i.e., not translating it all) is not a good solution for many translation projects because the intended readership is often familiar with the passage in a language of wider communication and may not accept a complete omission of an address form in the translation.