The Psammead or *It*: The Re-naming/Re-gendering of E. Nesbit's Mythical Creature in French Translation

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Abstract

Translating a name in children's literature can be a delicate process, one that may be further complicated when the protagonist involved is a "Psammead", a truly magical beast that is grammatically referred to with the pronoun "it". This paper looks at the naming solutions utilized in three different French translations of E. Nesbit's work. *It* examines the difficulties of translating names from English, a language with natural gender, into French, a language with grammatical gender. Using close text analysis and reader-response surveys, this article investigates readers' cognitive responses, and determines whether readers of the English and French texts construct the same mental representation of the Psammead. As will be shown in this study, naming decisions made for translations can modify more than just the grammatical gender seen on the page. When an "it" becomes an "elle" or "she", a mythical creature can become completely re-gendered.

Keywords: children's literature, French translation, E. Nesbit, gendered grammar, translation studies, naming, zoonym

1. Introduction

The Psammead's creator, British author Edith Nesbit (1858–1924), has long held a place in the canon of Anglophone children's literature. With an impressive oeuvre of over sixty titles, Nesbit's work encompasses a wide range of genres, for both adult and child readers. A founder member of the Fabian Society, Nesbit was a pioneering, if slightly eccentric, Socialist. Close friends with H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, she rallied against increasing urbanisation and, throughout her life, diligently campaigned for the alleviation of poverty in London. Married to fellow Fabian Hubert Bland, she began writing in a professional capacity to supplement their precarious income and provide for her growing family. Fortuitously, Nesbit's quirky stories for young readers proved to be a resounding success and effectively changed the established didactic pattern of Victorian children's literature. Nesbit has been described as "the first modern writer for children" (Briggs 1987, xi) and numerous authors, including C.S. Lewis, Neil Gaiman, Jacqueline Wilson, and J.K. Rowling, have openly acknowledged the impact her writing has had on their own work. Indeed, Nesbit's stories, filled with tales of adventure, time travel, and magic, founded a new approach to writing for children which is still widely used in children's literature today.

In 1902, the English magazine *The Strand* serialized a new children's story by Nesbit featuring a wonderful mythical creature. The tale of 'The Psammead' (1902) revolved around a cantankerous old sand-fairy—an unusual protagonist, but one that quickly captured readers' hearts. By the end of the year, the story had been repackaged just in time for the Christmas market. The new version was a full-length novel that was published under a new title many of us still recognize today: *Five Children and It* (Nesbit 1902b). Fellow author Rudyard Kipling, whose children were great fans of the Psammead series, quickly took Nesbit to task over the change in title, writing that it

> should not have been *Five Children and It* because everyone calls him by his own Christian name. I forget if I wrote you on this appearance. It is criticism and I trust you will not be vexed: but a name is just as important to a Book as a Baby as it is born more frequent (Briggs 1987, 255-6).

Kipling's indignation would appear to have been misdirected for Nesbit had not employed the term *Psammead* as a first name, but rather used the term to refer to the character's species. In fact, no personal designation is ever given to the creature, and Nesbit refers to her imaginary animal quite unassumingly as *the Psammead* or simply "it". Despite the initial name controversy, the novel proved to be a resounding success, with Nesbit going on to complete the Psammead series with two further books: *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904) and *The Story of the Amulet* (1906b). Although there is an intrinsically English flavor to her writing, Nesbit's work has been extensively translated and is still published widely around the globe today.

Translating Names in Children's Literature

Literary translators are effectively re-writing works of fiction. Consequently, the translation choices they make can have a major impact on how their final texts are received. When translating fiction for a young audience, translators frequently change the names of the characters to suit the target audience of young readers. Whilst personal names are often treated as if they were sacred in fiction aimed at adults, this stance is not always taken

when translating children's literature (Van Coillie 2012, 123). For young audiences, name changes may be made for a variety of reasons. For example, underage readers could be alienated by foreign names that are considered too difficult to pronounce or read. Names that have neutral or positive associations in the original language may have completely different connotations in the target language and may therefore warrant changing in the translation. Thus, although the first function of a name is to identify a character, its role can be far more complex than simple indexicality. The name of a character may also incorporate important information about the figure, evoke an emotional response in the reader, or provide entertainment by incorporating an amusing play on words. The choice of proper names in literature is then essentially "motivated and meaningful" (Parianou 2007, 409). In theory, if a name is translated successfully, it should effectively fulfil the same roles and functions in the translated text (Van Coillie 2012, 123-4), yet unfortunately in practice this is not always possible. In the case of Nesbit's work, the original term *Psammead* clearly foregrounds the essence of the character. The question is how successful translations of Nesbit's work accomplish this goal.

By comparing the French translations and re-translations of Nesbit's Psammead series, this paper explores the difficulties of translating the name of a creature that is only referred to as "it" in the original text: As will be shown, this challenge is particularly great when translating from the natural gender language[1] of English into the grammatically gendered language[2] of French. More specifically, this investigation explores the effects of re-naming the mythical *Psammead* for a French-speaking audience by examining the proper nouns used to describe the creature that intriguingly remains not only nameless, but also largely gender-neutral throughout the body of the source text. This article further studies the resulting cognitive responses of both French and English readers when faced with an excerpt of text describing Nesbit's *It* and considers how the re-naming of the Psammead, and the consequent deployment of both gendered grammar and morphologically marked nouns, may affect the readers' perception of the creature.

2. Methodology

To provide a comprehensive view of the process involved in translating names and proper nouns from the natural-gendered language of English into the grammatically-gendered language of French, this study had three methodological parts. Part One involved interviewing one of the translators responsible for the French translation. Part Two consisted of a close textual analysis of the source and translated texts. Part Three involved conducting a reader response survey to look at cognitive response to re-naming and re-gendering the character in the source and translated texts.

Only two of the three books that make up the Psammead series have been translated into French. As a result, the study was limited to the works shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Source and Translated Texts, Original Publication Years (PY), and the Translators' Names

Source Text	PY	Translated Text	PY	Translator
The Psammead	1902	*La fée des sables*	1906	Jeanne Heywood
The Story of the Amulet	1906	*Le secret de l'amulette*	1997	Marie Wallace
Five Children and It	1902	*Une drôle de fée*	2004	Bee Formentelli
		Re-titled: *Cinq enfants et moi*	2007	

2.1 Part One

An attempt was made to contact the translators: a rich source of primary material all too often overlooked. Regrettably, only one of the translators of the Psammead books was obtainable for comment, Jeanne Heywood having passed away in 1909, and Marie Wallace proving to be untraceable. However, Bee Formentelli was tracked down and she graciously provided valuable insight with regard to decisions made in the re-naming process (see Section 3.13).

2.2 Part Two

This portion of the investigation, involving a close textual analysis of the English source texts and their French translations, was undertaken using an approach laid out by Berman in the seminal work *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne* (1995). This method draws out zones that point to cultural adjustments in the narrative and identifies divergences of style and voice within the translated texts. The translated text is approached first and read twice in succession. The first reading, under the guise of a "receptive gaze" (Berman 2012, 249), approaches the translation as a literary work in and of itself. During this phase, the plot is explored,

and its essence savored. This initial reading is followed by a second active reading of the work as a translation. This time, the reader's gaze is more focused, and the translation unpacked to identify significant textual zones (Connor 2014). The same process of reading and re-reading is then applied to the source text. During this phase, the reader notes zones that stand out as being particularly remarkable in style, nature, and/or content. Subsequently, secondary materials (prefaces, end-words, etc.) are reviewed, followed by research about the translator(s) in order to contextualize their work. It is only after this lengthy preliminary work that an actual comparative analysis between the original and the translation is attempted, thereby anchoring "the work of the translator within a specific horizon, showing its historical and geographical situatedness" (Massardier-Kenney 2010, x). Following this model, in this study, each text was examined for the narrative zones that make mention of the creature. Assigned nouns and pronouns were vigilantly noted; and all proper nouns and pronouns assigned to *It* in the translated texts were sorted according to their French grammatical gender.

Regrettably, it was not possible to use automated corpus analysis software for this task as each pronoun/proper noun had to be correctly identified as referring specifically to *It* and not another character or situation. Previous studies concerning automatic name-gender recognition (Naldi et al. 2005; Lax et al. 2016) have offered solutions to identifying names within a set corpora, but as these are largely based on the use of existing lists of first names (Nazar et al. 2021), they do not consider the case of non-naming. Therefore, in this study, all the data had to be manually collated.

2.3 Part Three

In the third and final component of this investigation, a reader response questionnaire was designed to examine the possible cognitive effect of translating names and proper nouns from a non-gendered language to a gendered language. Two parallel surveys were devised to study the potential influence of grammatically gendered language on the readers' perception of *It*. The first survey solicited responses from 124 native Francophone readers; and a second control study involved 153 native Anglophone readers. Contributors were recruited from across multiple social media platforms in an attempt to reach a broad cross-section of the population with regard to both age and gender (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Distribution of Anglophone Respondents (AR) and Francophone Respondents (FR) by Age-Group, Frequency (F), and Percentage.

	Age Groups												
	18−24		25−34		35−44		45−54		55−64		65−74		75+	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
AR	19	12.42	28	18.30	22	14.38	35	22.88	33	21.57	13	8.50	3	1.96
FR	12	9.45	27	21.26	23	18.11	21	16.54	27	21.26	13	10.24	4	3.15

Table 3: Distribution of Anglophone Respondents (AR) and Francophone Respondents (FR) by Self-identified Gender Category

	Male		Female		Non-Binary		Prefer to self describe		Prefer not to disclose	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
AR	28	18.30	117	76.47	7	4.58	1	0.65	0	0.00
FR	27	21.26	93	73.23	5	3.94	1	0.79	1	0.79

Online reader-response surveys were created, and two parallel surveys were conducted: one appraising the reactions of Francophone readers to the translated text, and the other looking at the reactions of a control group of Anglophone readers. The Francophone volunteers were provided with the first paragraph of *Le secret de l'amulette* (1997), and the Anglophone volunteers were given the corresponding paragraph in *The Story of the Amulet* (1906b). This short excerpt, which introduces and describes the character *It,* was kept deliberately devoid of any identifying markers (no title, author, etc.) to limit any preconceived ideas the participants may have had concerning Nesbit's work. Respondents were asked to read the text carefully and then visualize *It*. With that image firmly fixed, but without referring to the text, they were then asked to consider whether the creature they had imagined was male, female, or neutral (neither specifically male nor female). The results were then assessed according to the declared gender of each respondent to assess whether this factor may also have had a discernible effect on the responses given (see Table 7).

Each survey was posted online for a five-day period and participants were reminded of the importance of responding immediately after reading the extract and providing their first instinctive response. This directive was issued to dissuade participants from returning to the extract and reconsidering elements in the text that might influence their decision-making. As the survey was conducted remotely, compliance with this instruction could not be closely monitored, but it was assumed that the majority of participants followed the stated guidelines to the best of their abilities.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Textual Analysis and Translator Contributions

3.1.1 The Psammead: Naming a Mythical Species

Nesbit's pugnacious old fairy with "eyes [...] on horns like a snail's eyes, […] ears like a bat's ears, [...] its tubby body [...] shaped like a spider's [...], and [...] hands and feet like a monkey's" (Nesbit 1902b, 11), called for an equally inventive name. The zoonym she created for this new species of imaginary beast was *Psammead:* a neologism she cleverly devised by amalgamating "psammos*",* the Greek name for 'sand', with "dryad*"* and "naiad*",* terms which refer to tree and water nymphs in Greek mythology (Briggs 1987, 223). The name *Psammead* is thus imbibed with both informative and creative functions. It was designed to intrigue her readers, inviting older readers to use their prior knowledge to unpack its etymology whilst sparking the imagination of her younger readers. Recognizing that the pronunciation of the enigmatic name could have proven to be a stumbling block to her reading audience, she cleverly averted the problem by having one of the protagonists give phonological assistance:

> "A Sammyadd? That's Greek to me."
> "So it is to everyone," said the creature sharply.
> "Well in plain English, then, a *Sand-fairy*" (1902b,16).

An additional humoristic function is served by the wordplay Nesbit injects around the idiom "that's Greek to me": the protagonist employs the idiom to indicate that the name *Psammead* sounds like nonsense to them, whilst the Psammead itself choses to take the expression quite literally. The reader, laughing at this waggish miscommunication, is also skillfully told how to pronounce the elusive fictional zoonym.

Throughout the series, Nesbit portrays *It* as a thoroughly slippery character, poised to sink back into the sand at any moment and slip away through the realms of time. This intangible quality is further compounded by the very nature of its relative nameless-state, and even its gender remains largely indeterminate. For although the Psammead is very occasionally referred to by other characters in the books as "he", 85.00% of the pronouns used to describe the creature in *Five Children and It* have been kept deliberately neutral, a figure which increases to 96.87% by the third book in the series (see Table 5). Indeed, when the story was published in book form, the amended title *Five Children and It* moved the Psammead from center stage and hid the creature firmly behind a neutral pronoun. This deliberate act of naming and non-naming creates a palpable tension in the text. For whilst Nesbit calls attention to the strangeness of the creature by branding the species with the exotic moniker *Psammead,* she simply refers to the creature itself as *It,* an entirely neutral, almost drab, designation.

How this is to be interpreted has been widely disputed. Knoepflmacher argues that the Psammead can be construed as an androgynous creature (1987, 309–10), whilst Rudd considers the Psammead to be "exactly as Nesbit describes 'It'—namely: neuter, sterile, barren" (2006, 136). Whichever position one takes, Nesbit's use of *It* remains an admirable literary ruse. By intentionally leaving the Psammead's gender unstated, Nesbit endows her creature with universal appeal, opening up endless possibilities for her readers and allowing them to envisage the gender of the creature as they so choose. Yet it is precisely this employment of neutrality that caused such consternation when translating the text from English into French.

In order to study this more meticulously, close textual analyses were performed across all five novels. This permitted an appraisal of the distinctive nouns and pronouns used to describe *It* in both source and translated texts (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: Grammatically Gendered/Non-gendered Nouns Assigned to *It*: Source Texts (ST) and Translated Texts (TT)

| | The Psammead | | Five Children and It | | | | The Story of the Amulet | | | |
| | ST 1902 | | TT 1906 | | TT 2004 | | ST 1906 | | TT 1997 | |
Nouns	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Feminine	0	0	113	91.87	172	96.6	0	0	237	99.16
Masculine	0	0	10	8.13	6	3.37	0	0	2	0.84
Neutral	144	100.00	0	0	0	0	211	100.00	0	0

Table 5: Grammatically Gendered/Non-gendered Pronouns Assigned to *It*: Source Texts (ST) and Translated Texts (TT)

| | The Psammead | | Five Children and It | | | | The Story of the Amulet | | | |
| | ST 1902 | | TT 1906 | | TT 2004 | | ST 1906 | | TT 1997 | |
Nouns	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Feminine	0	0	85	92.39	63	98.44	0	0	58	100.00
Masculine	15	16.00	7	7.61	1	1.65	2	3.13	0	0
Neutral	85	85.00	0	0	0	0	62	96.87	0	0

The findings confirmed that in both source texts, every noun referring to the Psammead is non-gendered (see Table 4). The Psammead thus remains of an undefined sex, retaining a neutral status. This allows for an invisible opening in the text, whereby the reader is free to create their own image of the creature. In contrast, in the translated texts, the reader's imagination is more subtly guided, as over 90% of the nouns defining the Psammead are female-gender marked. A similar pattern can be seen in the use of pronouns (see Table 5). In the source texts, the pronouns denoting the Psammead are predominantly neutral (it/itself): no female-marked pronouns are used, although a small number of masculine-marked pronouns (he/him) are in fact scattered through the text. Equally, the pronouns employed in both French translations of *Five Children and It* remain primarily feminine, as are 100% of those employed for the Psammead in the translated version of *The Amulet*. If we engage the premise that grammatical gender may have a certain degree of influence on a reader's perception of the actual sex of an object/person (See section 3.12), this use of gender-marked grammar may influence the readers perception of the Psammead, leading to a very different creature to the one visualized by the anglophone reader.

3.1.2 La fée des sables (1906)

The first French translation of Nesbit's work, *La fée des sables* (1906), was not of *Five Children and It* but rather of the earlier magazine version of the same story: 'The Psammead'. Entitled *La fée des sables* (The sand-fairy), this translation was also initially issued as a magazine serial before it was later published as a full-length book. It is in this 1906 book edition that we find the only mention of the term *Psammead* that appears in any of the French translations. Although Heywood employs the term *fée des sables* throughout the majority of the translated text, she retains the term *Psammead* in the passage which clarifies the creature's name for her target readers. However, as shown below, Heywood severely pares down Nesbit's original explanation about the origins of the word *Psammead*:

- Une Psammead? Qu'est-ce que c'est que cela?	– A Psammead? What's that?
- En bon anglais, une fée des Sables. (Nesbit 1906, 14)	– In good English, a Sand-fairy. (back translation).

In Heywood's translation, there is no mention of the Greek derivation and the associated wordplay; nor is any help given with the pronunciation. Readers are only offered a perfunctory clarification that the Psammead is in fact a Sand-fairy: an explanation incongruously labelled as 'good English'. The edited version of the translation printed in the French children's magazine *Mon Journal* simplified matters even further with the name *Psammead* being completely removed from the text and the creature being only referred to as *La fée des sables* or *La fée:* the Sand-fairy or the fairy. Perhaps early twentieth-century editors considered the term untranslatable and wanted to avoid use of a neologism that might confuse or alienate their young target audience.

The neutral gender of the Psammead confronts a cultural and linguistic challenge when translated into French, a language that employs binary grammatical marking whereby nouns are obligatorily classified as either masculine or feminine. Heywood chose to bestow a feminine qualifier on the creature and referred to it

as *une Psammead*. This choice accords with the feminine qualifier used in French for fairy: *la fée,* a designation assigned to the Psammead in the next line of the text in the example shown above. Indeed, throughout Heywood's translation, 91.87% of the nouns and 92.39% of the pronouns used to refer to *It* are grammatically feminine (see Tables 4 and 5). *It* is referred to as *la fée, la bête, la chose, la créature,* and so on (fairy, beast, thing, creature, etc.), all nouns which carry feminine grammatical markers. This feminine classification is reinforced by the use of gender marking in nominal agreements: the Psammead is described as "vieille, très vieille" [old] (feminine-marked adjective), [very old] (feminine-marked adjective) (Nesbit 1997, 7). Although the Psammead is assigned a feminine qualifier, in theory this fact alone does not fix its gender: for example, French also assigns feminine qualifiers to words such as "la personne" and "la giraffe", yet not every person, nor every giraffe, is female. Nevertheless, as Boroditsky and Schmidt (2000) showed, the grammatical gender of an object does indeed affect the properties readers associate with that object (Deutscher 2010). The work of Boroditsky and Schmidt in the field of linguistic relativity shows that the structure of a language often affects the way in which its speakers conceptualize their surroundings. Therefore, the assignment of a feminine gender to the creature may encourage the reader to subconsciously associate it with traditional feminine traits and behavior (Sera et al. 2002, Boroditsky et al. 2003). The association of manhood or womanhood could therefore be present in readers' minds. As Deutsche (2010) explains, even when not actively sought, "the habits of grammar can spill over into habits of the mind beyond grammar" (214).

However, the results on grammatical gender and the way in which it may influence a reader's concept of the world as 'female' or 'male' do not always converge (Pavlidou & Alvanoudi 2019, 2). Whilst some studies state that grammatical gender affects only languages with a two-gender system, such as French and Spanish, (Sera et al. 2002; Vigliocco et al. 2005), others assert that languages with three gender systems such as Greek and German may equally be affected (Boroditsky & Schmidt 2000, Beller et al. 2015; Bender et al. 2016). Some studies suggest that grammatical effects may be limited to specific semantic categories, such as animals (Vigliocco et al. 2005). However, other investigations have reported no such restrictions (Mills 1986; Flaherty 2001; Sera et al. 2002). So, could gendered grammar alone influence the reader's perception of *It*? Or are other factors at play?

3.1.3 *Le secret de l'amulette (1997) and Une drôle de fée (2004)*

The next French translation of the Psammead series appeared over ninety years after the publication of the third book in the Nesbit series, *The Story of the Amulet*. In the first book, Nesbit vacillated between the terms *Psammead* and *Sand-fairy*. By the third book, the zoonym *Psammead* had become readily recognized and accepted by her young readers. Nesbit virtually abandoned the term *Sand-fairy*: she only used it twice in this tome. By comparison, the term *Psammead* appears 209 times in the same work. Consequently, for her translation, *Le secret de l'amulette,* Marie Wallace decided on a very different approach. Rather than using the ubiquitous *fée des sables* favored by Heywood, Wallace chose to re-christen the Psammead with a brand-new name: *la mirobolante*.

According to the *Larousse dictionary* (1998), the term "mirobolant" refers to something which is "trop extraordinaire, trop beau pour être réalisable" (too extraordinary, too beautiful to be feasible) (1166), a definition which would no doubt have appealed to the Psammead's own peculiar sense of vanity. However, "mirobolant" is not a noun, but an adjective that has been playfully repurposed as a suitable appellation for the Psammead. Like Heywood, Wallace chose to couple the zoonym with a feminine modifier "la". She also added a French suffix "e" to "mirobolant" to complement the feminine agreement. Unfortunately, as Marie Wallace could not be located for an interview, it was not possible to ask her about her naming decisions. The publisher, Gallimard Jeunesse, no longer had any contact details for her and *Le secret de l'amulette* was the only translation published under this name.

Nevertheless, Wallace's choice of term for the Psammead was to have a lasting effect. Seven years later, the publishing house Gallimard Jeunesse commissioned a different translator, Bee Formentelli, to produce a re-translation of the first novel in the series, *Five Children and It*. Although Formentelli presented Gallimard with several different ideas for translating the term *Psammead,* all of Formentelli's suggestions were rejected in favor of Wallace's *mirobolante*. The publisher's reasoning was simple. The new translation, *Une drôle de fée,* was to sit alongside *Le secret de l'amulette* in Gallimard's Folio Junior collection. It was therefore essential, the publisher argued, that the two translations be as cohesive as possible. Thus, though topsy-turvy, Wallace's translation of the third book in the Nesbit series ended up dictating the names used by Formentelli for her translation of the first book in the series. Awkwardly for Formentelli, the Greek origins of the term *Psammead* are explained to the reader in Nesbit's first book. This was of course non-applicable to Wallace's coin *la mirobolante*. Formentelli was forced to rewrite the original passage accordingly in her translation:

- Une miro ... quoi? C'est du latin pour moi.	– A Miro…what? That's Latin to me.
- Ça l'est pour tout le monde, répliqua d'un ton acerbe l'étrange créature. Une Myrobolante, avec un y, du latin	– It is for everyone, replied the strange creature in a cutting tone. A Myrobolante with a y, from the Latin myrobolanus…In

myrobolanus ... En français moderne, une mirobolante ou, si vous préférez, une fée des sables. (Nesbit 2004, 21)	modern French, a mirobolante or, if you prefer, a Sand-fairy". (back translation)

As shown in the above passage, Formentelli manages to retain some of the features present in the original source text. She clarifies the origin of the word, although she attributes it to Latin and not Greek. She also provides a translation of the term for her readers, and correctly labels it as French and not English. Although Formentelli doesn't provide assistance for pronouncing the unusual name, she acknowledges that this may be a problem for her young readers by having the protagonist stumble over the correct pronunciation, "*Une myri..., une myra, ..., pardon, une myro...*" (Nesbit 2004, 21); and through the process of mimesis, she succeeds in narrowing the gap between reader and protagonist. However, there is no potential for wordplay here: "It's Latin to me" means exactly that in French. There is no secondary meaning to draw upon, as the French equivalent of 'It's all Greek to me' would be "C'est du chinois" (It's all Chinese to me). Here we have an excellent example of how external factors can influence the naming process in translation: a decision made in 1997, by another translator, severely limited Formentelli's control over her name choices in 2004 and restricted the number of transferable functions available to her. Despite these limitations, Formentelli rises to the challenge.

Unlike the earlier translators, she appears to have been particularly sensitive to Nesbit's intentional use of gender-neutrality when referring to *It*. She sympathetically translates the initial pronouons used by the children in the story, when they first encounter the creature, as illustrated below:

"but it said something. It really truly did" (Nesbit 1902, 9).	"Eh bien, il ou elle a parlé. Je vous jure que la bête a dit quelque chose" (Nesbit 2004, 17).	"Well, he or she spoke. I swear the beast said something" (back translation).

Formentelli's use of "he or she", to replace the source text's use of the gender-neutral pronoun "it", signals to the reader that there is an underlying sense of ambiguity concerning the gender of the creature, but whether this is sufficient to outweigh the influence of gendered grammar present in the rest of the text is debatable. It was found that 96.63% of the terms Formentelli used to refer to the Psammead in *Une drôle de fée* are grammatically feminine. Interestingly, as shown in Table 6 below, across all three of the translations, the vast majority of terms used to denote the Psammead are grammatically gendered as feminine and could be seen as potentially influencing the reader's perception of the creature itself.

Table 6: Names assigned to the Psammead: Source Texts (ST) and Translated Texts (TT)

The Psammead	Five Children and It		The Story of the Amulet	
ST 1902	TT 1906	TT 2004	ST 1906	TT 1997
Psammead	La psammead	La mirobolante	Psammead	La mirobolante
Sand-Fairy	La fée des sables	La fée des sables	Sand-Fairy	La fée des sables
Fairy	La fée	La fée	Creature	La créature
Thing		La chose	Beast	La bête
Creature		La créature		Une amie
Sandy thing		La bête		Un animal
Enchanter		Un enchanteur		
		Le truc vivant		

3.2 Reader-Response Survey

Speakers of languages with grammatical gender systems are often aware that grammatical gender does not directly reflect biological sex. However, readers may still consciously or unconsciously link grammatical gender and biological sex (Imai et al. 2014). The close text analysis clearly revealed that Nesbit's source text employs exclusively neutral nouns, and largely neutral pronouns, when referring to the Psammead. By comparison, the translated texts rely almost entirely on feminine-gendered nouns and pronouns. So, to what extent might this difference influence the reader's perception of *It*? Would Francophone and Anglophone readers have very different images of the Psammead? Is it possible that through the process of translation, *It* had been inadvertently assigned a new gender?

The results immediately revealed a vast disparity between Anglophone and Francophone readers: 82.26% of all respondents in the Francophone test condition replied that they had visualized the creature as being female. In comparison, just 11.76% of the participants in the Anglophone condition reported this gender-assignment (see Table 7). Conversely, in the Francophone test condition, just 4.03% of the respondents

reported a neutral sex assignment, whereas the participants in the Anglophone test condition indicated were nearly evenly divided in assigning the creature either a neutral or masculine sex. The results obtained from the French and English surveys showed very little variation between replies supplied by the respondents who identified themselves as being male or female. However, those participants who registered their own gender as non-binary had a greater tendency to see *It* as neutral when compared with the other groups in the study. This result could suggest that this group may either be less influenced by gendered language, or be more acutely sensitive to issues surrounding matters of non-binary gender assignment.

Table 7: Gender Identity of Participants and Their Perception of the Psammead

	Perceived Sex of the Psammead											
	Francophone Respondents						Anglophone Respondents					
	Female		Male		Neutral		Female		Male		Neutral	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Male	20	80.00	5	20.00	0	0	1	3.57	16	57.14	11	39.29
Female	78	84.78	12	13.04	2	2.17	17	14.52	50	42.74	50	42.74
Non-binary	4	57.14	0	0	3	42.86	0	0	2	25.00	6	75.00
Total	102	82.26	17	13.71	5	4.03	18	11.76	68	44.44	67	44.44

However, a closer look at the English readers' results reveal that the gender of the respondent may have also played a part in their perception of the Psammead. With just descriptive vocabulary, rather than gendered grammar, to guide them, it may seem that English readers have a greater degree of liberty when conjuring up their own image of *It*. Nevertheless, within the Anglophone group, male respondents were more inclined to imagine a male creature over a neutral one (57.14% compared to 39.29%), and, although the majority of female readers conceived the Psammead as either male or neutral, 14.52% women saw the creature as female, compared with just one male reader. A similar phenomenon occurs amongst the French readers, although due to the use of gendered grammar, the results would appear to be less marked (see Table 7), thus suggesting that certain readers may be inclined to create a mental picture of the creature more in line with their own gender identity.

It would have been easy to have stopped the study here. The results appear to confirm earlier linguistic studies into the influence of grammatical gender on speakers'/readers' concept of the world as being divided up into 'male' or 'female' (Boroditsky & Schmidt 2000; Boroditsky et al. 2003; Saalbach et al. 2012; Pavlidou & Alvanoudi 2013; Imai et al. 2014;). The results obtained also concur with those reported by Vigliocco et al. (2005) who found that the effects of gendered grammar are particularly present in certain semantic categories such as animals. The same was true here, albeit in our case imaginary beasts. However, whilst gendered grammar may have played a subconscious role in conceptualizing the Psammead, debriefing interviews conducted with a number of participants revealed other factors that may also have influenced their assessments.

Although there were no formal post-survey interviews, numerous participants spontaneously reached out to discuss their responses. Two Anglophone respondents remarked upon the connection between the text and the film version of *Five Children and It* (*Cinq enfants et moi*) (Stephenson 2004). In this film, the Psammead is given a male voice. Several other participants, in both of the survey conditions, remarked that Nesbit's detailed description of the physical appearance of the Psammead suggested a more masculine creature. The fact that Nesbit likens the creature's body to snails, bats, spiders, and monkeys made some Anglophone respondents make an immediate connection to the traditional English nursery rhyme "Slugs and snails and puppy-dog tails, that's what little boys are made of" (Anon.). Amongst the Francophone participants, several indicated that one key phrase in the text very consciously cemented their conceptualization of the Psammead as female. That phrase was "la fée". In the post-survey commentary, without exception, every Francophone respondent who envisioned *It* as being female stated that upon reading "une fée des sables", their image of the Psammead immediately transformed into one that was strongly female. Several of these participants even mentioned that for them Disney's female character Tinkerbelle (1953) was the epitome of the archetypal fairy. Historically, the term "fairy" has been enchantingly gender-free in the English language, with numerous examples of male and female fairies scattered throughout the English literary canon. However, in French, the term "la fée" is only used to designate a female fairy. Male fairies, which are extremely rare in French folklore, are called "fétauds". By translating "fairy" into a grammatical feminine noun, an essential function of the original name is no longer transmissible and the quintessential sense of the Psammead's neutrality is entirely lost.

4. Conclusions

Examining the processes involved in naming the Psammead, or *It,* across different translations has highlighted the limits of translating neutral names and pronouns into grammatically gendered languages such as French. Due to legal constraints, the surveys in this study were restricted to readers over the age of eighteen. However, as the texts were originally targeted at readers aged from ten years upwards, it would be rewarding to replicate this study with younger readers, potentially gathering their responses in the form of drawings and oral replies. The results obtained would be useful for not only onomasticians, but also professional translators who regularly face such challenges. Indeed, responses gathered from today's young readers may help provide new strategies and additional solutions for translating gender-neutral names in the future.

Translating proper names frequently creates difficulties for translators who need to find "an equifunctional sign in the target language" (Salmon Kovarski 2002, 85): a task rendered even more problematic when one of the functions sought is gender-neutrality. However, language itself is fluid and forever evolving, and as such translators may also have different solutions available to them than those presented here. Although French traditionally has a fixed two-gender language structure, there is a growing movement to make it more gender-inclusive. An absence of neutral or non-binary pronouns has led to the proliferation of neologisms, the most prominent of which being "iel"*,* a combination of "il" (he) and "elle" (she).

First appearing in the early 2010s in the LBGTQ+ communities (Neveux 2022), the term *iel* has been slowly filtering into mainstream usage. In fact, in 2021, the French dictionary *Le Robert* noted such a substantial rise in the use of *iel* that it was added to their online edition, and it is due to be entered in the printed edition of 2023 (Bimbenet 2021). Other gender-inclusive language initiatives have also been successfully employed, including the increasing use of "écriture inclusive" (inclusive writing) which involves simultaneously applying masculine, feminine, and plural endings to words separated by a mid-dot, or median-period. The result is the creation of language forms that respect gender diversity, and which are starting to appear in 54% of public universities in France (des Moëres 2021). Nevertheless, the French Academy, the highest council for matters pertaining to the French language, have yet to embrace such changes. In an open letter issued in 2021, they declared inclusive writing to be "harmful to the practice and intelligibility of the French language" and "a dissuasive mode of writing likely to reinforce English as a lingua franca" [my translation](Carrère d'encausse et Lambron 2021).

In Wallace's translation of Nesbit's classic, the use of inclusive writing alongside the gender-fluid coin *mirobolant·e* may indeed present a solution that could work well with young independent readers. However, these options are all relatively recent developments in the French language and as such signpost a deliberate call for neutrality. In doing so, they present a dichotomy to the Psammead's own subtly neutral position: calling attention to *It* would be to steal from its elusive nature.

In conclusion, the decisions made in the French translations of Nesbit's work have altered more than the grammatical gender on the page. They have effectively reassigned a new gender to the creature itself. As a result, the translations not only can impact the reader's perception of the character, but they can have an effect on the overall reading experience. By renaming the Psammead *la mirobolante* and choosing to translate *Sand-fairy* as *la fée des sables*, *It* has become *elle* … but ultimately, the magic remains: the children had "found a fairy. At least they called it that, because that was what it called itself; and of course, it knew best" (Nesbit 1902b, 5).

Notes

[1] Natural-gender languages: gender classification is in accordance with the actual sex/gender identity of the object in question (often a person or animal) and, generally, inanimate nouns are not classified according to gender but remain neutral.

[2] Grammatical-gender languages classify both personal and inanimate nouns for gender. Whilst the grammatical gender of human nouns largely corresponds to the sex/gender identity of the referent, for inanimate objects this is often semantically arbitrary. These nouns in turn control the agreement of various other lexical categories such as determiners, adjectives, or pronouns (Gygax et al. 2019).

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