


Nida's $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$: Eugene Nida's Views on the Use of $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$ in John 2.4

The Bible Translator
2015, Vol. 66(2) 159–169
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2051677015590812
tbt.sagepub.com


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Abstract

This article considers the way Eugene Nida's view and corresponding arguments on the use of $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$ in John 2.4 have changed over more than fifty years. It appears that little by little he favoured a more toned-down meaning of this particular address, while at the same time producing gradually more and ever-changing arguments for his view—a view that still cannot be sustained, however. The article then offers a short summary of recent opinions on the matter, and ends with a remark on the translation of $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$.

Keywords

address, connotative meaning, Eugene Nida, Gospel of John, John 2.4, $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$

Introduction

On numerous occasions the late Eugene Nida has, alone or together with another author, expressed his opinion on the meaning and translation of the word $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$ ¹ in John 2.4. In this article I will examine the development of his views on this issue, and the validity of his arguments. I will conclude with recent views on the subject.

“Words do not always carry the same meanings in one language as they do in another.” This view, expressed by Eugene Nida in 1952, prompted him at that time to give an example to which he would often return: the use of $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$ in John 2.4. He used this as an illustration of recognizing and

¹ For the sake of readability I have used the Greek spelling $\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$ throughout this article, also in quotes where the original text has the transcriptions *gunai* or *gynai*.

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translating *connotative meaning*, a concept he would describe later as, “th[e] aspect of the meaning which deals with our emotional reactions to words” (Nida and Taber 1969, 91).²

The example in question runs as follows:

How strange it seems to us that Jesus would address his own mother as “woman” after her request at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. . . . Such a term seems to indicate severity in Jesus’ own nature and appears to imply some reproof for the mother who had been so faithful to Him. This is because we do not realize that in the Greek of New Testament times the use of the word γύναι “woman” implies both respect and endearment. In fact, the use of “woman” indicates more affection than if Jesus had used the more formal word “mother.” This may seem incredible to us, but we must never make the fatal mistake of judging other languages by our own. (Nida 1952, 67-68)

Below I will first give a chronological list of additional quotes in which Nida, alone or together with a co-author, gives his opinion on the meaning of γύναι in John 2.4.

Nida and γύναι: Summary of quotes

- 1) “[Γύναι] has a connotatively more favourable value than woman does in English” (Nida and Taber 1969, 95).
- 2) “Jesus’ use of ‘woman’ . . . in direct address was normal and polite (compare Matt 15.28). It showed neither disrespect nor lack of love, as can be clearly seen by the parallel use in 19.26. . . . [The translation ‘woman’] tends to convey the impression that Jesus was disrespectful. . . . [In some] languages, to address one’s mother as ‘woman’ would be insulting; it could even be interpreted to mean that Jesus was denying that Mary was his mother” (Newman and Nida 1980, 57).
- 3) “In Greek γύναι has an associative meaning which is far more favourable than the English term *woman*” (Wendland and Nida 1985, 18).
- 4) “As a form of address, γυνή was used in Koine Greek in speaking politely to a female person: ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις ‘Lady, your faith is great’ (Mt 15.28). In John 2.4 Jesus uses γυνή to address his mother courteously. In a number of languages it would be totally impossible to have Jesus address his mother merely as ‘woman.’ To do so in some languages would imply that Jesus was denying that

² “Connotative meaning” as a scientific concept was not coined by Nida. For a much earlier use see, for example, Haig 1861.

Mary was his mother. . . . Accordingly, in a number of languages there is simply no other way in which Jesus could address his mother than as 'mother' or 'my mother'" (Louw and Nida 1988, 1:109 s.v. *γυνή*).

- 5) "Jesus addressed his own mother as *γύναί*, literally 'woman' (John 2.4), but this vocative form was often used to express respect or affection (cf. Euripides and Theocritus, as well as later papyri). . . . In a number of languages the use of 'woman' in addressing his own mother could only be interpreted as a denial of her relation to Jesus" (Nida 1992, 15).
- 6) "Pressures for verbal conformity, despite crucial mistakes in connotative meaning, have resulted in readers seriously misunderstanding the manner in which Jesus addressed his mother as 'Woman' in the Gospel according to John 2.4. For many people this use of 'Woman' is equivalent to denying that Mary was his mother and for other people such an expression seems completely inappropriate and demeaning. In reality however the usage is entirely appropriate and even shows respect. This is precisely the expression found in papyri in Egypt involving letters written home by schoolboys asking for help from their mothers. Accordingly, most present-day Bible translators use the appropriate term 'Mother'" (Nida 1998, 129).
- 7) "In John 2.4 the Greek text has the word *γύναί*, literally 'woman' in a response by Jesus to his mother. . . . A literal translation of the Greek term seems not only harsh, but even disrespectful . . . In koine Greek, however, the term *γύναί* often occurs in polite papyri letters written by schoolboys requesting help from their parents" (Nida 2003, 30).

Analysis

It is remarkable how many times over a period of more than fifty years Nida has commented on this particular topic. Apparently he regarded the use of *γύναί* as extraordinarily illustrative of the fact that semantic domains often do not overlap perfectly, and that translating concordantly therefore all too often results in betraying the meaning of a phrase.

Two developments in his view can be noted:

- 1) The rather strong statement in Nida 1952, that *γύναί* indicates more affection than if the author had used "mother," does not return later. Instead, from 1969 on we find Nida defending a toned-down claim:

the term now is considered to be courteous/polite/respectful (although Nida 1992 still mentions “affection” as a possibility).

- 2) From 1980 on, Nida starts producing arguments for his claim that $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota$ is a respectful/courteous address. These arguments are actually always of the same nature: Nida provides parallels for this alleged meaning of $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota$. At first he limits himself to John 19.26 and Matt 15.28; but in Louw and Nida 1988 we find the general “Koine Greek.” In 1992 this has expanded to Euripides (i.e., Classical Greek), Theocritus (Koine), “as well as later papyri” (probably dating from the Roman era). Nida 1998 is silent about Classical Greek and Koine, but dwells upon the papyri mentioned in Nida 1992; these are from Egypt, “involving letters written home by schoolboys asking for help from their mothers.” And finally, in 2003, these papyri have become “polite,” and the schoolboys are asking help from their *parents*.

But how strong are Nida’s arguments really? If we want to find out, we should first determine what exactly Nida is trying to argue. His strong statement, “In fact, the use of ‘woman’ indicates more affection than if Jesus had used the more formal word ‘mother’” (Nida 1952), is not repeated after this one time. This may imply that Nida afterwards felt that his earlier view was not tenable. And, in any case, he nowhere gives any argument to support this view. This does not mean, of course, that the claim is necessarily false, but it does mean that it is not clear why we should accept it.

As we have seen, Nida seems to have shifted to the view that the use of $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota$ in John 2.4 does not so much express endearment and affection, but rather politeness and courteousness. Let us therefore examine the corresponding arguments for this view.

To begin with, Nida 1980 brings forward Matt 15.28 as an example of $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota$ being a normal and polite address. Here Nida is reasoning from the context, which indeed gives no reason to suppose that Jesus is addressing the Canaanite woman in an unusual way. This means that, as long as counter-arguments are not within sight, we are entitled to consider this particular use of $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota$ as normal and not necessarily without respect. But what does that tell us about the use of this word in John 2.4? Matthew 15.28 shows little more than that it is *possible* to address an unknown woman as $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota$ without being disrespectful. And Nida might also have pointed to Luke 13.12, where $\gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\iota$ functions in a similar context. But a look at Luke 22.57 shows that it is equally possible to use the same address in a context where politeness is out of the question.

Nida’s next argument is the “parallel use” in John 19.26. Now, exegetically there is every reason to speak of a parallel use: 2.4 and 19.26 are the

only texts within the Gospel of John where we meet Jesus' mother (who, by the way, is never named in this Gospel). And of course, in both texts Jesus addresses her as *γύναί*. But the address *γύναί* is in both cases exceptional and even unprecedented: in all Greek literature nobody ever addresses his own mother as *γύναί*.³ This implies that the use of *γύναί* in 19.26 is as problematic as it is in 2.4. In advance little more can be said than that *γύναί* in 2.4 is probably used in the same way or with the same meaning as in 19.26. So one may well—as Nida does—cite 19.26 as evidence for the meaning of 2.4, but then the exact nature of this use still has to be determined. Assuming in advance that it shows “neither disrespect or lack of love” (Newman and Nida 1980) is premature, to say the least. All in all, both New Testament parallels provided by Nida to support his claim that *γύναί* in John 2.4 is courteous (or at least shows no disrespect) fail to convince.

Wendland and Nida 1985, while bringing nothing new compared to former statements, has met with criticism, and rightly so. Not because the assertion “*γύναί* has an associative meaning which is more favourable than the English term *woman*” is necessarily incorrect, but because Nida fails to put forward any evidence for his opinion. Palmer writes, “While this [the alleged favourable meaning of *γύναί*] may be a completely valid conclusion, how did they reach it? How can associative meaning be measured given the limited corpus available?” (1993, 155).

From 1988 onwards Nida does not confine his arguments to New Testament parallels. He now (Louw and Nida 1988) refers to “Koine Greek” in general: here “*γυνή* was used in speaking politely to a female person.” Admittedly, he illustrates this claim again with the above-mentioned example from Matt 15.28, but the outlook has evidently become broader; New Testament use of *γύναί* is obviously part of common Koine use. And from 1992 we find an even broader scope: *γύναί* now is a respectful or affectionate term, witness “Euripides and Theocritus, as well as later papyri.” With Euripides we have set foot on the path of Classical Greek; Theocritus of course belongs to the Hellenistic age, while the “later papyri” most likely date from Roman times. These examples seem to come out of the blue, but Nida surely must have known them already for a long time. In 1945 Edward Goodspeed published a book devoted partly to the interpretational problems of John 2.4. This is what Goodspeed writes, “*Γυνή* . . . , the Liddell–Scott–Jones *Lexicon* states, is used in the vocative (the case used here) ‘as a term of respect or affection, “mistress, lady,” as in Euripides and Theocritus.’ The relevant passage in LSJ reads, “*γυνή*, . . . voc., as a term

³ Literally speaking, this statement is incorrect: in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, lines 624, 800, and 1054, Oedipus addresses his mother this way. But in those moments he isn't yet aware that the woman he has married is his mother.

of respect and affection, *mistress, lady*, E. Med. 290, Theoc. 15.12, etc.” And in 1952 *The Bible Translator* published an article consisting of extracts from Goodspeed’s book, among which was his study of γύναϊ (Goodspeed 1952). Given the fact that Nida (1992) produces exactly the same two sources for the alleged use of γύναϊ as—in his words—a “respectful or affectionate term” as Goodspeed and LSJ have done before him, both of whom call this use a “term of respect or affection,” it is not unreasonable to suppose that Nida obtained his information either from Goodspeed’s book or article, or from LSJ, and perhaps from both. Be that as it may, his early statement about γύναϊ indicating “more affection than if Jesus had used the more formal word ‘mother’” still remains unexplained. The source of this assertion is a mystery, especially as Goodspeed declared both in his book and article that γύναϊ is not “as affectionate as [mother].”

But what about the “late papyri?” They do not appear in Goodspeed’s book or article, nor in LSJ. Nida 1998 sheds some more light on the nature of these documents; he appears to be referring to “letters written home by schoolboys asking for help from their mothers.” Now this is a very interesting difference from any example he has given before: for the first time Nida provides the reader with evidence for the use of γύναϊ *in addressing one’s own mother*. Did he realize that all the alleged parallels he had provided thus far were not able to stand the test of criticism? Unfortunately Nida does not inform us about the exact name or location of the said papyri.

In 2003 (the last time Nida expressed his opinion on the use of γύναϊ) he almost literally repeats his statement from 1998, with the added claim this time of *frequent occurrences* in papyri of γύναϊ as an address to a mother. Unfortunately, Nida still presents no clue as to the identification of these important letters.

Conclusion

It is not easy to escape the conclusion that Nida has long failed to analyse adequately the problem of γύναϊ in John 2.4. His view of the meaning of γύναϊ seems to have shifted from “even more affectionate than ‘mother,’” through “not without love,” to “courteous,” and ending with “polite.” Now certainly no one can be blamed for changing his initial position. But it is also undeniable that Nida for a long time did not realize the real problem with γύναϊ, which is that its use in John 2.4 and 19.26 is without precedent in all Greek literature, and that therefore so-called parallels demonstrating *another* use simply cannot be used as evidence.

It was not until 1992 that Nida seems to have grasped the nature of the problem. This would explain why, from that time on, he illustrated his view

on the use of *γύναι* by referring to Egyptian papyri in which schoolboys supposedly addressed their mothers as *γύναι*.

Now a true parallel for the use of *γύναι* in John 2.4 (and 19.26) would be very welcome indeed. And since Nida promised more than one (papyri, letters, schoolboys, mothers), expectations might reasonably be high. Unfortunately, Nida left no clue whatsoever to identify these schoolboys, who are from an exegetical point of view so extremely important; nor did he leave any indication as to where to locate the papyri in which mothers of schoolboys are called *γύναι* by their sons. It proved impossible to track down even *one* papyrus that contains the vocative *γύναι*, let alone one written by a schoolboy addressing his mother that way. Could Nida have been mistaken? If so, the cause of this error may lie in comments like the one made by Michl (1955, 498):

In einem in Ägypten aufgefundenen *Papyrusbrief* aus der zweiten Hälfte des zweiten Jahrhunderts n. Chr., der jetzt im Britischen Museum zu London liegt, schreibt ein Sempronius *τῇ μητρὶ καὶ κυρίᾳ* und redet sie sogar direct an ἡ κυρία μου.⁴

(In a *papyrus letter* found in Egypt from the second half of the second century C.E., now in the British Museum in London, one Sempronius writes *τῇ μητρὶ καὶ κυρίᾳ*, and even addresses her directly as ἡ κυρία μου.)

Actually, there are quite a number of papyri with the address *κυρία*⁵ in combination with *μητρὶ*. Did Nida somehow confuse *γυνή* with *κυρία*? After all, *κυρία* (“lady”) is a “courteous, and even affectionate, form of address in the ordinary correspondence of the time” (Moulton and Milligan 1930, 364 s.v. *κυρία*). But at the same time, it is a far cry from *γύναι* (“woman!”), in terms of both form and meaning.

In any case, Nida’s schoolboys seem to have left the exegetical stage just as unexpectedly as they had entered it. Which leaves us right where we started: at an unprecedented use of *γύναι* in John 2.4 and 19.26, for which a parallel has still not turned up.

Recent views

Many exegetes nowadays tend to look at the way *γύναι* is used in John 2.4 (and 19.26) differently from the way Nida did. This is partly because, thanks to the investigations of Eleanor Dickey, we can now be fairly sure

⁴ Michl draws the example from Deissmann 1923, 159-61. The papyrus in question is now called P.Mich. 15 751. Emphasis in the quote is mine.

⁵ For *κυρία* as an address (but of course without *μητρὶ*), see also 2 John 1 and (in the vocative) 5.

that γύναι as an address is in fact neither polite nor impolite, and neither kind nor unkind. The opinion that γύναι is a term of respect or affection (thus LSJ) “seems to be more polite than the evidence warrants and was perhaps influenced by the way that early classicists felt that women ought to be addressed” (Dickey 1996, 86). The address γύναι turns out to have a neutral value, and therefore to be applicable in addressing any adult female in any context, with just the one exception: one does not address one’s own mother as γύναι.⁶ To do so would make the address sound aloof. Here a comparison with the use of the address Ἀνθρωπε is enlightening; this term has, like γύναι, a neutral value when directed to someone unknown to the speaker, but when used between people who know each other it is the opposite of polite (1996, 152).

Nida’s *a priori* assumption was that γύναι had to be an affectionate or at least polite address. This view stemmed from his conviction that it was inconceivable that Jesus would address his mother in a way other than courteous. But actually courteousness is a very improbable characteristic of the address γύναι to one’s mother, if only because it represents the exact opposite of one of the most common forms of politeness, that is, an “in-group identity marker.” Such a marker is a reminder to the addressee that she has a connection the speaker (Brown and Levinson 1987, 107-109). In Greek, precise kinship terms are used to mark in-group identity (Dickey 1996, 15). In the Gospel of John we evidently find Jesus addressing his mother in a way that cannot but have shocked the original audience, because one just should not address one’s mother in such an aloof manner. But having said that, we should realize that what in ordinary conversation would have been considered ill-mannered or even insulting may well have had a somewhat different impact in a literary setting. And after all it is this literary setting, i.e., the written stage of the tradition, that we are dealing with. Although this consideration does not suddenly turn Jesus’ address γύναι from rude to polite, finding out the reason for this odd address becomes all the more important. Not surprisingly, an important indication in this search comes from the context, as there is virtually no doubt that γύναι should be interpreted in the light of the preceding *Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί*, an expression with which Jesus, for whatever reason, creates a distance between himself and his mother. This makes it highly probable that the choice of the unheard-of

⁶ See Dickey 1996, 86ff. John 2.4 and 19.26 are the only instances in the Gospels where Jesus addresses his mother directly. (Luke 2.49 is directed to both his parents; besides, a vocative is lacking.) In Greek, if a vocative is used, the address to one’s mother is always μήτηρ or a diminutive of this word (Dickey 1996, 221).

γύναι aims to convey at least a similar detachment.⁷ As a consequence, the interpretation that Jesus—for one reason or another—downplayed Mary's motherhood, however unimaginable it may have seemed to Nida, is these days considered very likely. And Nida's objection to the translation "woman" (for *γύναι*), because this "could . . . be interpreted to mean that Jesus was denying that Mary was his mother," definitely can be maintained no longer.⁸

As a result, for most exegetes today the question is no longer *if* in John 2.4 and 19.26 Jesus addresses his mother as if she were not his mother, but rather *why* he does so.

Finally, what are the consequences for the translator? Some languages (e.g., Dutch, French, Spanish) have a common form of address for adult women that is too distanced to be used to one's mother ("mevrouw," "madame," "señora," respectively). It is evident that these terms provide a suitable translation of *γύναι* in John 2.4 (and other texts where this word is used). In other languages, such as English and German, similar forms do exist but are considered archaic ("madam/ma'am," and "gnädige Frau"). In these cases it is probably best not to translate *γύναι* at all, and leave it to the translation of *Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί* to create the distance required. But under no circumstances should *γύναι* be translated with a term meaning "mother," for this is exactly what the text so strikingly avoids communicating.

⁷ Among the exegetes advocating a distancing meaning for *γύναι* are: Brown (1966, 99), who points out that "to translate [*γύναι*] as 'Mother' would . . . cloak the peculiarity of this address." Schnackenburg (1979, 333) speaks of a "gewisse Distanzierung" (certain detachment). Collins (1990, 170) suggests that *γύναι* is "an indication that Mary is to be seen in a perspective other than her maternal relationship with Jesus." Witherington (1995, 79) says that *γύναι* "distances [Jesus] from his mother." According to McHugh (2009, 182), "the choice of this unusual form of address . . . confirms the view that . . . the evangelist wished to draw attention away from Mary's blood-relationship with Jesus, in order to intimate that she was to have, in the gospel story, a role very different from that of simply being Jesus' mother." Moloney (1998, 67) calls Jesus' response "sharp." See also Knepper 2015.

⁸ The influence of Nida's view is well demonstrated by Chaika (1994, 52), according to whom "Nida discovered that 'woman' was a common, highly respectful address form for 'mother.'" He allegedly did so by "researching other Greek writing of the day." Stine (2004, 44), in his book on the development of Nida's approach to translating, presents the latter's view on *γύναι* as an example of the "emotive content" of words: a translation "woman" (in John 2.4) might sound as if Jesus was "very cold" to his mother. Compare also Voinov (2002, 216-17), who stresses that "Jesus always treated Mary with proper filial respect as a fulfilment of the fifth commandment. . . . This is the case even in John 2, where he addresses her as *γύναι*." Voinov continues to explain that for the translation of John 2.4 in the Todzhin dialect it was deemed important that Jesus' remark should be interpreted "as extra-respectful, not distancing."

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Abbreviation

LSJ Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1996 (see References)