Sex, taboo, and swearing: Forbidden words in audiovisual translation

Gian Luigi De Rosa
Università degli Studi Roma Tre
Roma, Itália
gianluigi.derosa@uniroma3.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7938-5203

In the vast field of audiovisual translation, the delicate dynamic between linguistic accuracy and cultural sensitivity is further complicated when it comes to taboo language. The subtle challenge of translating and conveying the impact of explicit or culturally sensitive content requires a specific set of skills and considerations. This complex intersection is the focus of our special issue – which aims to explore the multifaceted world of taboo language in audiovisual translation, specifically considering the perspectives of subtitling and dubbing, and the unique challenges and requirements associated with them. While subtitling allows for a more direct representation of the original dialogue, dubbing requires the careful recreation of verbal nuances while maintaining synchronisation with the visual elements. Considered together, the two translation modes form a rich tapestry for exploring the dynamic world of language and cultural representation in audiovisual media.

When we talk about taboo language, we are referring to a set of words and behaviours that a particular culture, at a particular historical moment, has labelled as forbidden, prohibited (Ávila-Cabrera, 2013, 2014, 2020, 2023; Azzaro, 2005; Byrne, 2017; Díaz Cintas, 2001; Jay, 1980, 1992, 2000; Ljung, 2011; McEnery & Xiao, 2000, 2003, 2004; Pavesi & Formentelli, 2019; Pavesi & Malinverno, 2000; Stapleton, 2020).

The relationship between behaviour and language is very strong because taboo refers to "a prohibition of behaviour for a particular community of one or more persons at a particular time in particular contexts" (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 11) and can be characterised as "concerned with behaviour that is believed to be supernaturally forbidden or considered immoral or improper; it deals with behaviour that is irrationally prohibited or inhibited" (Trudgill, 2000, p. 18).

This set of words is associated with taboo images related to various lexical domains such as sex, scatology, sacred beings and death (cf. Allan & Burridge, 1991, 2006; McEnery, 2006), the use of which "has the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable or unacceptable in any given social context" (Beers Fägersten, 2012, p. 3).

Furthermore, linguistic taboos are attributed to forbidden words and substandard varieties, the latter being considered offensive even when they are not offensive due to the communicative, pragmatic and semiotic characteristics of their use and the context in which they are pronounced (De Rosa, 2022).

However, the expansion of the use of slang features as well as the re-elaboration of new symmetrical communicative spaces in informal contexts represent a constant innovative force from a lexical point of view, even if they are often ephemeral in nature. These innovative contributions, which influence the language used, also modify the linguistic standard of media and, above all, of the filmic language of the narrowcasting platforms, which act as a sounding board and disseminate acquired interactional strategies and substandard slang traits by deterritorialising and amplifying them. However, it should be noted that in recent years, with the proliferation of fictional products produced by transnational streaming platforms such as Netflix and Prime Video, filmic speech has increasingly incorporated slang.

This collection of studies seeks to unravel the complexities of dealing with taboo language in the context of subtitling and dubbing of films and television series. It recognises that taboo language not only varies from culture to culture, but is also deeply rooted in the social fabric of societies. The task of the audiovisual translator goes beyond linguistic precision to include a mastery of cultural understanding, social norms and the delicate balance between remaining faithful to the source material and adapting it for diverse audiences.

Our special issue - *Sex, taboo and swearing: forbidden words in audiovisual translation* - aims to provide a comprehensive platform for researchers, professionals and enthusiasts for exploring the challenges and innovations in audiovisual translation when faced with taboo language. In particular, it will provide a comprehensive exploration of subtitling and dubbing processes, covering various perspectives, methodologies, strategies, ethical considerations, and creative solutions.

The articles included in this issue are thematically grouped. The first six articles analyse the forms of taboo language captured in the filmic speech of series broadcast and translated by narrowcasting platforms, both in dubbing, interlingual subtitling and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH). These are followed by four articles that analyse the audiovisual translation of taboo language in films, and by a contribution on audiovisual translation from a gender perspective. Finally, the last two articles question the translation standards for subtitling both on narrowcasting platforms and on television.

The contribution by Silvia Bruti and Gianmarco Vignozzi, "Vulgarisation or non vulgarisation in dubbing from English into Italian? Insights from Netflix TV series" examines the representation and translation of swear words in a corpus of English Netflix series dubbed into Italian. The analysis undertakes a comprehensive examination of the occurrence, extent and function of swear words in the original texts, taking into account the variations between genres and semantic domains (Bruti & Vignozzi, 2024).

The second paper, "Estratégias tradutórias e plataformas Narrowcasting: legendando a linguagem tabu em seriados portugueses e brasileiros", by Gian Luigi De Rosa (2024), aims to analyse the most frequent forms of taboo language in the filmic speech of three series, two Brazilian and one Portuguese, and to study their representation in intralingual subtitling and interlingual subtitling in Italian and English. The aim is to find out whether linguistic and translation choices regarding the

use of taboo language are linked to the cultural norms or national-cultural identity of the linguistic community to which they belong (De Rosa, 2024).

The paper "Sexo, lengua y traducción: análisis de los subtítulos en español peninsular y en italiano de la serie Sex Education" by Antonella De Laurentiis and Laura Marra presents a contrastive analysis of the original dialogue of the British series *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019) and its subtitled versions in European Spanish and in Italian. It aims to determine whether the language used in the subtitles succeeds in normalising sexuality and promoting inclusion, as the original dialogues do. The discussion of the results will also take into account the challenges of subtitling a taboo language, as well as the technical constraints of subtitling (De Laurentiis & Marra, 2024).

The contribution by Giovana Cordeiro Campos (2024), "Tradução, insultos e streaming: um estudo de caso", focuses on translation for subtitling by comparing the translation of the film *Cobra* (1986), released on DVD (remastered copy of 2005), with the translation available on the streaming platform Amazon Prime, accessed in 2023. The paper focuses on the analysis of the insults present in the source text and translated into Portuguese, observing the degree of "softening" of the tone of insults in the two media (Campos, 2024).

Elisa Lupetti (2024), author of "Doppiare parole tabù: Insulti e imprecazioni nella serie tv *Lupin*", considers the categorisations of impoliteness available in the literature on profanity and conflict language. Basing on the artificiality of filmic speech, she systematises the most frequently used terms of French colloquial speech presented on screen, such as *putain*, *merde* or *foutre*, in all their variants, without neglecting insults, whose perlocutionary effect is certainly less strong, although they are often found in authentic everyday interactions.

In "*Call them by their names*: sexualidad, homoerotismo y traducción audiovisual", Ivan Villanueva-Jordán examines the translation of male homoeroticism through dubbing, discussing the differences between the dubbed versions for Spain and Latin America, particularly in relation to the concept of "neutral Spanish" that is predominant in audiovisual translation theory (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024).

Letícia Rebollo-Couto and Albert Rilliard are the authors of the paper "Variación pragmática, traducción audiovisual y estrategias conversacionales para el doblaje: léxico coloquial y palabras tabús", which aims to describe six categories of conversational lexical items, including nominal forms of address; discourse markers; intensification and attenuation of directive and expressive acts; diminutives and colloquial lexicon, which includes taboo words. The focus of this paper, based on the analysis of six dubbed versions of the animation *Inside Out* (2015), is on colloquial lexicon and taboo words and on how they reveal cultural specificities (Rebollo-Couto & Rilliard, 2024).

Beatrice Garzelli (2024), author of "Cortometrajes, habla soez y subtitulación: los casos de *Diez minutos* (2004) y *Dime que yo* (2008)", analyses a corpus of two contemporary Spanish short films belonging to a dramatic genre with some romantic overtones. Despite their different plots, the two films share a very recognisable juvenile colloquial language, which includes a massive use of vulgar expressions and coarse language.

The paper "A quantitative analysis of racist epithets referring to Italians and their translations in movie subtitles: The case of wop, eyetie and goombah", written by Serena Ghiselli (2024), analyses the translation from English into Italian of wop, eyetie and goombah, three racist epithets used to

refer to Italians or people of Italian origin. The data analysed were extracted from the English-Italian parallel corpus *OpenSubtitles*, a collection of parallel corpora consisting of translated film subtitles.

The presence of taboo words in Fatih Akin's German comedy *Soul Kitchen* (2009) is the focus of "Aggressive speech acts or expressions of friendliness? translating taboo words in Fatih Akin's *Soul Kitchen* (2009) into Italian subtitles", by Claudia Buffagni (2024). This article examines the pragmatic functions of taboo words in the original German dialogue of the comedy and in its Italian subtitles, along with the translation strategies chosen and the solutions adopted.

The last two articles included in this special issue deal with the topic of translation standards for fictional content on television and narrowcasting platforms. The first is "Palavrões e turpilóquios à vontade: os serviços de streaming e a atualização das normas de tradução para legendagem", by Sabrina Lopez Martinez, which aims to identify the explicit or implicit guidelines that justify a change of approach in the production of subtitles in Portuguese for streaming services, through a survey and an analysis of the general subtitling guidelines of two audiovisual content providers: HBO Latin America and Netflix (Martinez, 2024).

The second paper on this topic is "Tradutores audiovisuais e o tabu: um estudo de atitudes relativas à tradução para legendagem na televisão portuguesa", written by Catarina Xavier (2024). This study aims to describe the attitudes of Portuguese audiovisual translators towards the translation of taboo language in subtitles, in the specific context of Portuguese FTA (free-to-air, open-signal) television, in the 21st century, through the application of a questionnaire.

In conclusion, through rigorous analysis, insightful case studies and theoretical reflection, we hope to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges posed by taboo language and ultimately contribute to the development of best practices in this ever-evolving field. So join us on this intellectual journey as we navigate the uncharted waters of taboo language in audiovisual translation.

References

Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (1991). *Euphemism & Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. Oxford University Press.

Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language.* Cambridge University Press.

Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. (2013) Subtitling multilingual films: The case of Inglourious Basterds. *RAEL: Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada*, *12*, 87–100.

Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. (2014). *The Subtitling of Offensive and Taboo Language: a Descriptive Study*. [Tese de doutorado]. Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia.

Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. (2020). Profanity and blasphemy in the subtitling of English into European Spanish: Four case studies based on a selection of Tarantino's films. *Quaderns. Revista de Traducció, 27*, 125–141. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/quaderns.11

Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. (2023). *The Challenge of Subtitling Offensive and Taboo Language into Spanish: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*. Multilingual Matters.

Azzaro, G. (2005). *Four–Letter Films. Taboo Language in Movies*. Aracne.

Basso, R. M., & Souza, L. M. de. (2020). Puta: a sintaxe e a semântica de um controverso intensificador. *Diadorim*, *22*(2), 528–556. https://doi.org/10.35520/diadorim.2020.v22n2a34290

Beers Fägersten, K. (2012). *Who's Swearing Now? The Social Aspects of Conversational Swearing*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Bruti, S., & Vignozzi, G. (2024). Vulgarization or non-vulgarization in dubbing from English into Italian? Insights from Netflix TV series. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99173

Buffagni, C. (2024). Aggressive speech acts or expressions of friendliness? Translating taboo words in Fatih Akins' Soul Kitchen (2009) into Italian subtitles. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99177

Byrne, E. (2017). *Swearing Is Good for You: the Amazing Science of Bad Language*. Profile Books.

Campos, G. C. (2024). Tradução, insultos e streaming: um estudo de caso. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99610

De Laurentiis, A., & Marra, L. (2024). Sexo, lengua y traducción: análisis de los subtítulos en español peninsular y en italiano de la serie Sex Education. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99264

De Rosa, G. L. (2022). La sottotitolazione del turpiloquio nelle fiction e serie TV: il caso *Irmandade*. In M. S. Felici (Org.), *Glottodidattica della lingua portoghese in diacronia e sincronia* (pp. 99–116). Tuga edizioni,

De Rosa, G. L. (2024). Estratégias tradutórias e plataformas Narrowcasting: legendando a linguagem tabu em seriados portugueses e brasileiros. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99139

Díaz Cintas, J. (2001). Sex, (sub)titles and videotapes. In L. Lorenzo García & A. M. Pereira Rodríguez (Orgs.), *Traducción subordinada II: el subtitulado (inglés – español/galego)* (47–67). Universidade de Vigo.

Garzelli, B. (2024). Cortometrajes, habla soez y subtitulación: los casos de Diez minutos (2004) y Dime que yo (2008). *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99178

Ghiselli, S. (2024). A quantitative analysis of racist epithets referring to Italians and their translations in movie subtitles: The case of Wop, Eyetie and Goombah. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99464

Jay, T. (1980). Sex Roles and Dirty Word Usage. *A Review of the Literature and a Reply to Haas', Psychological Bulletin*, *88*(3), 614–621. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.88.3.614

Jay, T. (1992). Cursing in America. *A Psycholinguistic Study of the Use of Dirty Language in the Courts, in the Movies, in the Schoolyears and on the Streets*. John Benjamins.

Jay, T. (2000). *Why we curse: a neuro-psycho-social theory of speech*. John Benjamins.

Ljung, M. (2011). *Swearing. A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lupetti, E. (2024). Doppiare parole tabù: insulti e imprecazioni nella serie tv Lupin. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99721

Martinez, S. L. (2024). Palavrões e turpilóquios à vontade: os serviços de streaming e a atualização das normas de tradução para legendagem. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99146

McEnery, A. (2006). *Swearing in English. Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present.* Routledge.

McEnery, A., & Xiao, Z. (2000). Swearing and Abuse in Modern British English. In B. Lewandowska-Tomasczyk & P. Melia, (Orgs.). *Practical Application of Language Corpora* (37–48). Peter Lang.

McEnery, A., & Xiao, Z. (2003). Fuck Revisited. *Corpus Linguistics, 28*(31), 504–512.

McEnery, A., & Xiao, Z. (2004). Swearing in Modern English: the Case of Fuck in the BNC. *Language and Literature*, 13, 235–268.

Pavesi, M., & Formentelli, M. (2019). Comparing insults across languages in films: Dubbing as cross-cultural mediation. *Multilingua*, 38(5), 563–582. https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2018-0124

Pavesi, M., & Malinverno, A. L. (2000). Usi del turpiloquio nella traduzione filmica. In C. Taylor (Org.), *Tradurre il cinema* (pp. 75–90). EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste.

Rebollo-Couto, L., & Rilliard, A. (2024). Variación pragmática, traducción audiovisual y estrategias conversacionales para el doblaje: léxico coloquial y palabras tabús. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99158

Stapleton, K. (2000). Swearing and perceptions of the speaker: A discursive approach. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 170, 381–395.

Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. Penguin Group.

Villanueva-Jordán, I. (2024). *Call them by their names*: sexualidad, homoerotismo y traducción audiovisual. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99147

Xavier, C. (2024). Tradutores audiovisuais e o tabu: um estudo de atitudes relativas à tradução para legendagem na televisão portuguesa. *Cadernos de Tradução, 44*(Special Issue 2), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2024.e99685