

The Subtitling Strategies Adopted to Render the Four-Letter Words *Fuck*, *Shit* and Their Variants in the French Version of *Orange Is the New Black*: A Corpus-Based Study



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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the translation strategies used to render swear words from English into French subtitles in Netflix Original Series. More specifically, we present the methodology applied to describe the translation strategies used to render 200 instances of the swear word *fuck* and 138 instances of the swear word *shit* in the first season of *Orange Is the New Black* (*OITNB*). All 338 instances were classified into six strategies, partly drawing on existing typologies of subtitling strategies. While the omission and standardization strategies have been borrowed from existing typologies, the definitions of the euphemism and maintenance strategies have been adapted. The textual analyses also allowed for the identification of two new translation strategies. Although less frequent in the corpus, these strategies, called direct compensation and pragmatic softening, are thought to better reflect French idiosyncrasies and complement existing typologies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the advent of video-on-demand streaming platforms has brought about major changes in the way viewers consume audiovisual content in general and TV shows in particular. One of these changes concerns interlingual subtitling, which has now become one of the most popular ways of reaching non-English speaking viewers, with streaming platforms such as Netflix broadcasting their subtitled content to millions¹ of subscribers worldwide (Nikolić 180).

In Audiovisual Translation Studies, this increasing demand for subtitled content has raised new research questions. In particular, the high frequency of swear words (and their translation) in film dialogue has been the focus of a growing body of studies (e.g. Ávila-Cabrera; Beseghi; Díaz-Pérez; Xavier). As both context-bound and cultural constructs, these terms can be challenging for subtitlers. In fact, they must consider parameters as varied as the technical constraints inherent to subtitling, in-house guidelines, or the context in which they are uttered to choose the most appropriate strategy to render them (Xavier “Corpus and questionnaire-based study” 2). Yet, so far, no studies have focused on the translation strategies used to render English swear words in French subtitles. Thus, this case study comes to fill a void by adopting a corpus-based approach to examine the subtitling strategies used to render 338 instances of the four-letter words *fuck* and *shit* in the first season of *OITNB*. The textual analyses are then used to develop a typology of translation strategies that is applicable, and somewhat replicable in the French context.

Before focusing on the methodological aspects in section 3, section 2 will focus on the definition of swear words and translation strategies. Section 4 will present and discuss the statistical results and textual analyses obtained following the different research steps described in the methodology section. Finally, section 5 will present some concluding remarks and suggest further research directions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. SWEAR WORDS

Although the subject of swear words only started to gain momentum in linguistics and other disciplines in the mid-twentieth century, it has now received considerable attention in the literature (Love 3; Xavier, “On norms and taboo” 6). In fact, over the last two decades, there has been a growing body of research on the swearing phenomenon (e.g. Wajnryb; Allan and Burridge; McEneaney; Jay; Ljung; Beers Fägersten; Goddard; Bednarek; Love). Yet, despite such increasing interest, swear words remain challenging to define.

First, the subjectivity of swearing makes it harder to establish an exhaustive list of swear words with pinpoint accuracy (e.g., Beers Fägersten and Stapleton; Bednarek; Love). What one considers a swear word is all relative and can vary according to age, culture, social background, context, and education (Jay, “Ten issues” 43).

Then, the lack of terminological consistency regarding the labels attached to swear words further complexifies their definition (Beers Fägersten, *Who’s swearing* 4; Bednarek, “Don’t say crap” 2; Xavier, “On norms and taboo” 6). In fact, some of these descriptors, used interchangeably by some scholars, are particularly problematic because they can “compromise an accurate depiction of swearing” (Beers Fägersten, *Who’s swearing* 5).

Labeling swear words as “offensive,” for example, can be both reductive and misleading as it *de facto* associates them with negative emotion, whereas “much everyday use of swearing is not aimed at aggression, impoliteness, or even the expression of negative feelings” (Stapleton et al. 8). To some extent, this is tantamount to denying the multifunctionality of swear words although their positive uses in what Jay (“Do offensive words” 89–90) calls “conversational swearing” have been demonstrated by many scholars (e.g. Wajnryb; Allan and Burridge; Dynel; Bednarek).

1 More than 282.7 million as of the third quarter of 2024.

Source: <https://www.demandsage.com/netflix-subscribers/#:~:text=Netflix%20subscriber%20count%20as%20of%202022%20is%20223.09%20million.&text=Netflix%20made%20%2429.698%20billion%20in%20revenue%20in%202021>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2024.

Then, *taboo* is another conventionalized descriptor for swear words. In many studies, the hyperonym *taboo language* is used to include swear words (swearing occurrences), expletives, profanities, and insults (Xavier, “On norms and taboo” 6). However, without denying the link between taboo and swear words, the term *swear words* was preferred to *taboo terms* in this study. Taboo is a shifting concept defined by what is culturally forbidden in society. As such, taboos are both culture-bound and ephemeral (Allan and Burrige 105–108). In fact, according to the 2016 Ofcom’s report on “Attitudes to potentially offensive language and gestures on TV and radio,” “discriminatory language” (i.e., terms targeting specific groups such as older people, religious groups, LGBTQ individuals, and ethnic minorities) is now seen as more problematic than “general swear words” (i.e., words linked to body parts, sexual references, and terms used as general-purpose swear words). Although the survey was carried out in the British context, it could be a sign that taboo language is now shifting towards unacceptable discriminatory words. However, in this study, we have followed Bednarek’s (“Don’t say crap” 3) definition and excluded derogatory terms such as *nigger*, *faggot*, *looney*, or *shiksa* as they convey a negative attitude towards specific referents.

The previous considerations demonstrate that defining swear words is challenging. Nevertheless, it remains essential to identify such words in corpora (Bednarek; Love). Thus, following in Bednarek’s (“Don’t say crap” 3) footsteps, we have applied specific criteria to determine which terms should be selected. Without being deemed “taboo,” all the swear words in this study can be classified into six semantic categories related to topics and subtopics traditionally regarded as taboo in the literature, as they are discouraged or stigmatized by social and cultural conventions (e.g. Allan and Burrige; Jay; Stapleton; Moïse; Bednarek). The main categories are sexuality, scatology and religion. The swear words included have both literal and non-literal meanings. In their literal sense, they can be deemed vulgar terms relating to so-called taboo topics, whereas figuratively, they fulfill various functions such as conveying abuse, humor, solidarity or emotion.

To sum up, we use *swear words* as an umbrella term for words that were once forbidden, because related to taboo topics. Although their use is still frowned upon in specific contexts, those swear words are now part and parcel of most informal speech and, as such, they fulfill different functions in TV dialogue.

2.2. THE SUBTITLING STRATEGIES USED TO RENDER SWEAR WORDS

In recent years, noteworthy studies (e.g., Pujol; Soler-Pardo; Ávila-Cabrera; Beseghi; Díaz-Pérez; Wu; Xavier) have examined the translation of swear words in films and TV shows. These terms, now frequent in film discourse, fulfill specific functions when used for characterization or comedic purposes for example (Bednarek, “The Multifunctionality of Swear/Taboo Words”; Xavier, “A three-layered typology”). The multifunctionality of swear words, together with constraints such as the spatiotemporal constraints inherent to subtitles (ÁvilaCabrera; Díaz-Pérez) or in-house guidelines (Díaz Cintas and Remael) can make the translation of swear words challenging. Netflix, for instance, has adopted a no-censorship policy regarding the treatment of swear words, which might partly explain why some of the results presented in section 4 differ from the findings of related studies.

According to Xavier (“On norms and taboo” 7), subtitlers have the choice to either omit, maintain or adapt the swear words in the subtitles. Xavier (“On norms and taboo” 8) and Díaz-Pérez (397) both note that in related studies, omission and euphemization strategies are predominant. However, because swear words fulfill “specific functions in the dialogic interaction, and by extension, in the film story, deleting them is certainly not the only or the best option available” (Díaz Cintas and Remael 190).

In fact, to choose the most appropriate strategy, subtitlers must evaluate the intratextual and extratextual functions of swear words (Xavier, “On norms and taboo” 8). In other words, they must determine whether a swear word is used to vent momentary emotion (expletive function), offend (abusive function), mark solidarity (social function), or convey humor (stylistic function) while also assessing the role that swear words play in the storyline, and more specifically in characterization (Díaz Cintas and Remael 180; Xavier, “On norms and taboo” 8).

For all the reasons listed above, the presence of swear words in cinematic fiction can be defined as a translation problem (Díaz-Pérez 393). Thus, subtitlers must implement specific

strategies that can, in turn, influence the viewers' experience. Similarly to Xavier ("Three-layered typology" 591), in this study, we adopt a product-oriented approach, and we borrow Chesterman's (86) working definition of strategies which we study through the observable textual manipulations at play in the target text (TT), i.e., the translation product, in comparison with the source text (ST).

2.3. NETFLIX'S NO-CENSORSHIP POLICY REGARDING THE RENDERING OF SWEAR WORDS

As mentioned in the previous section, Netflix's no-censorship policy regarding the translation of swear words can partly explain why some of our results differ from those of other studies. According to Bucaria (A60), the advent of streaming platforms has contributed to "a diminished tolerance for manipulation and censorship in AVT practice." More specifically, she states that "in the age of streaming [...] the decision to offer only a censored – or even too domesticated – localized version seems to go against the current trend, which is to not omit taboo words and/or tone down dialogue." Bucaria (A56) also argues that in-house guidelines provided by streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video "[reframe] taboo content for global audiences in a less invasive way when compared to the heavy-handed, textual manipulation that was common in dubbing and subtitling in the age of (exclusively) linear TV."

In the case of Netflix, the French Timed Text Style Guide (TTSG)² states that "dialogue must never be censored" and that "[e]xpletives should be rendered as faithfully as possible." AVT practitioners are also instructed, when dealing with potentially offensive language, to choose an equivalent in the TT that "replicate[s] tone, register, class, formality, etc."

Together with the instruction on repetitions and, to some extent, that on the maximum number of characters per line, these specific guidelines can serve to hypothesize about the choice to use one translation strategy over another. For example, the choice not to render a swear/taboo word in the subtitles might be explained by the repetition of the same swear/taboo word in the ST as Netflix's French TTSG recommends that subtitlers should "not translate words or phrases repeated more than once by the same speaker."

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this study is to shed some light on the translation strategies used to render the most frequent instances of the swear words *fuck* and *shit* in the French subtitles of the first season of *OITNB*.

Different research subquestions and steps were developed to describe and quantify these translation strategies. They can be summarized as follows:

- to select and classify the swear words into semantic categories traditionally described in the literature as referring to taboo subjects;
- to retrieve and classify all the instances of *fuck* and *shit* grammatically;
- to determine which variants of *fuck* and *shit* are the most frequent in the corpus;
- to describe and classify all the translation strategies implemented to render the 200 instances of *fuck* and the 138 instances of *shit* selected.

3.2. DESCRIPTION OF THE CORPUS

Our bilingual *ad hoc* corpus includes the transcripts of the English dialogues of the first season of *OITNB* aligned manually with the French subtitles on *Excel*. To avoid the problems associated with using online transcripts, the English subcorpus was compiled using the English (CC) subtitles .csv files that can be extracted from Netflix. The dialogues were subsequently checked against the video files and edited manually to include contractions, discourse markers, hesitations,

² <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/217351577-French-Timed-Text-Style-Guide>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2024.

and, most importantly, swear words omitted for the sake of saving space in the English (CC) subtitles (Bednarek, “The Sydney corpus” 115).

The maturity rating was the main selection criterion. On Netflix, *OITNB* has a 16+ maturity rating and is described as displaying violence and profanity. The level of profanity in *OITNB*³ has been deemed “severe” by the IMDB Parents Guide. Together with the genre (drama), those criteria were used to ascertain that enough swear words would be uttered in the episodes.

The first season of *OITNB* includes 13 episodes that last between 52 minutes and 61 minutes for a total running time of 12 hours and 25 minutes. The whole corpus includes approximately 140,632 tokens in total and 11,267 lines of subtitles were analyzed to retrieve and annotate the 1,958 instances of swear words (1,226 instances in English and 732 instances in French).

The size of the corpus was sufficient to serve the purpose of a pilot study aiming at defining the translation strategies used to render the most frequent instances of *fuck* and *shit* in French subtitles. Indeed, given the time-consuming nature of the transcribing and alignment process, similar studies typically focus on specific films (Ávila-Cabrera; Abdelaal and al Sarhani), movie series (Pattiselanno; Al-Zgoul and Al-Salman), films by a given film director (Soler-Pardo) or single seasons of a TV show (Yuan; Wu). To the notable exception of Díaz-Pérez’s analysis of an existing corpus of twenty-four films and Trupej’s (“Avoiding Offensive Language” 57) analysis of fifty movies, most of the corpora used to report on the subtitling of swear words include between one and ten films or episodes of a TV show.

3.3. SWEAR WORDS IN THE CORPUS

In this study, we classified swear words into six semantic categories traditionally recognized in the literature as related to taboo topics. Those categories were established drawing from Allan and Burridge’s definition of taboo words, i.e., words or expressions related to the taboo imagery, such as sexuality, scatology, the body and religion.

Although not analyzed in this study, terms of abuse were counted as swear words given that the abuse conveyed by some swearing occurrences was sometimes rendered through the addition of a term of abuse in French. Table 1 provides examples of English and French swear words from the corpus for each taboo category.

TABOO CATEGORIES	SWEAR WORDS IN THE ENGLISH SUBCORPUS	SWEAR WORDS IN THE FRENCH SUBCORPUS
Sexuality	Fuck (and variants), to come, to finger, to suck dick	Baiser, branler, enfiler, foutre, doigter, putain, enculer, bordel
Scatology	Shit (and variants), piss, fart	Merde (and variants), chier, foirer
Religion	God, Jesus Christ, damn, goddamn, hell	Bon Dieu, Bon sang, Nom de Dieu
Terms of abuse	Bitch, cunt, scumbag, fucker, dickhead	Enculé, enfoiré, salaud, salope, pétasse, connasse, con(ne)
Body parts	Ass, dick, tit, asshole, cunt, twat, cock, pussy	Cul, bite, nichon, trou de balle, chatte, couille
Cross-categorized instances	Holy shit, holy fuck	Bordel à queue, bordel de merde, putain de merde

Table 1 Examples of swear words from the corpus.

3.4. THE CATEGORIZATION OF *FUCK* AND *SHIT*

In this case study, we decided to investigate the most frequent instances of *fuck* and *shit*. First, the high frequency of the selected occurrences guaranteed that we could draw tangible conclusions regarding the translation strategies used to render them. Second, as the most versatile swear words from a syntactic and morphological point of view (e.g., Wajnryb 43, 97;

³ Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2372162/parentalguide?ref_=tt_stry_pg. Accessed 29 Sept. 2024.

Hoeksema 15; Mackenzie 60; Díaz-Pérez 396), these multifunctional terms and their translation can prove particularly challenging for subtitlers.

The classification of *fuck* was achieved drawing from McEnery's (27) categorization of bad language as well as Mackenzie's analyses of the syntax of *fuck*. In the case of *shit*, we mostly relied on Hoeksema's grammatical categorization.

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* (<https://www.oed.com/>) was also used as the primary tool to classify our occurrences. Moreover, as pointed out by Mackenzie (62), when dealing with non-standard terms such as swear words, it is sometimes necessary to complement traditional tools with unconventional ones. Following in his footsteps, we have also used the online *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (<https://greensdictofslang.com/>) and the *Urban Dictionary* (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/>) to classify certain instances.

3.5. THE TYPOLOGIES OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

All the instances retrieved were classified into six translation strategies. These strategies were established drawing from Xavier's ("Three-layered typology" 594) three-layered typology for the subtitling of taboo language, and Díaz-Pérez's (404) translation solutions.

In an existing corpus of 24 movies, Díaz-Pérez (398, 404) identifies four translation solutions: omission, de-swearing, softening and pragmatic correspondence, which he defines in terms of tone and pragmatic function. Xavier's ("Three-layered typology" 594) typology, on the other hand, is based on the register variations observed in a corpus of six movies, and encompasses six translation strategies: omission, standardization, euphemism, dysphemism, maintenance, and addition.

As explained in section 4.3, in this study, we have adopted a corpus-driven approach that led us to retain some of the strategies identified in Xavier's and Díaz-Pérez's respective typologies as such while sometimes adapting their definition. Moreover, as we chose to consider the grammatical function of swear words as one of the defining parameters of our strategies, we singled out two strategies that can be said to reflect the idiosyncrasies of French swearing.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To discuss our results, we first focus on the frequency of swear words by semantic categories in the English and French subcorpora (See subsection 4.1). Then, in subsection 4.2, we present the morphological variants of *fuck* and *shit* and their frequency in the English subcorpus. Finally, subsection 4.3 focuses on the translation strategies adopted to render the emphatic modifier *fucking*, the interjections *fuck* and *shit*, and the noun *shit* meaning "thing."

4.1. THE SWEAR WORDS BY TABOO SEMANTIC CATEGORIES IN THE WHOLE CORPUS

Figure 1 offers a comparison of the relative frequencies of swear words by semantic categories in both subcorpora. The swear words related to sexuality are the most frequent with 35.15% and 26.64% in English and French, respectively. The second most predominant semantic field is scatology with 24.06% of the swear words in English and 25.55% of the swear words in French falling into this category. This is in line with the results of similar studies (Pujol; Díaz-Pérez) analyzing the subtitling of those four-letter words in other languages. In the present English subcorpus, *fuck* and its variants account for 426 out of the 431 instances (See Table 2) related to sexuality whereas *shit* and its variants account for 286 out of the 295 instances related to scatology. Terms of abuse are the third most recurrent category, followed by the religion and the body parts categories.

Except for the sex-related category and the terms of abuse, the relative frequencies in both subcorpora are quite similar. This narrow gap possibly foreshadows that maintenance strategy could be predominant in a study including a different set of swear words.

Finally, in the French subcorpus, the proportion of swear words related to scatology (25.55%) is almost equal to the proportion of swear words related to sexuality (26.64%). Although this aspect falls outside the scope of this study, such a small difference could be the indication

of semantic shifts in the translation strategies. It could also indicate that a higher proportion of sex-related swear words is deleted or euphemized compared to swear words related to scatology.

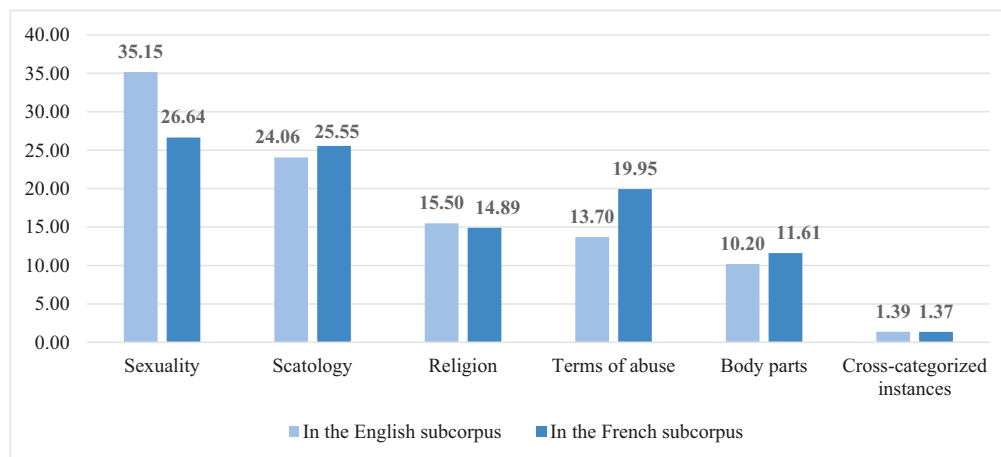


Figure 1 Relative frequencies of swear words by semantic categories in the two subcorpora.

SEMANTIC CATEGORIES	INSTANCES IN THE ENGLISH SUBCORPUS	INSTANCES IN THE FRENCH SUBCORPUS
Sexuality	431	195
Scatology	295	187
Religion	190	109
Terms of abuse	168	146
Body parts	125	85
Cross-categorized instances	17	10
Total	1,226	732

Table 2 Absolute frequencies of swear words by semantic categories in the corpus.

4.2. FUCK AND SHIT IN THE ENGLISH SUBCORPUS

As Figure 2 reflects, the most frequent swear word form in the English subcorpus is *fucking* (used as an adjective (14.61%) and as an adverb (10.11%)) which, in total, accounts for 24.72% of the 712 instances classified in this study. These results are in line with the findings of other studies (Pujol; Díaz-Pérez) that have established that *fucking* was the most frequent swear word in similar corpora.

The second most recurrent swear word is *shit* used as a noun with the general meaning of “thing,” which accounts for 12.08% of the instances. *Shit* used as an interjection, which accounts for 7.30% of the instances, is the fourth most recurrent term in the English subcorpus.

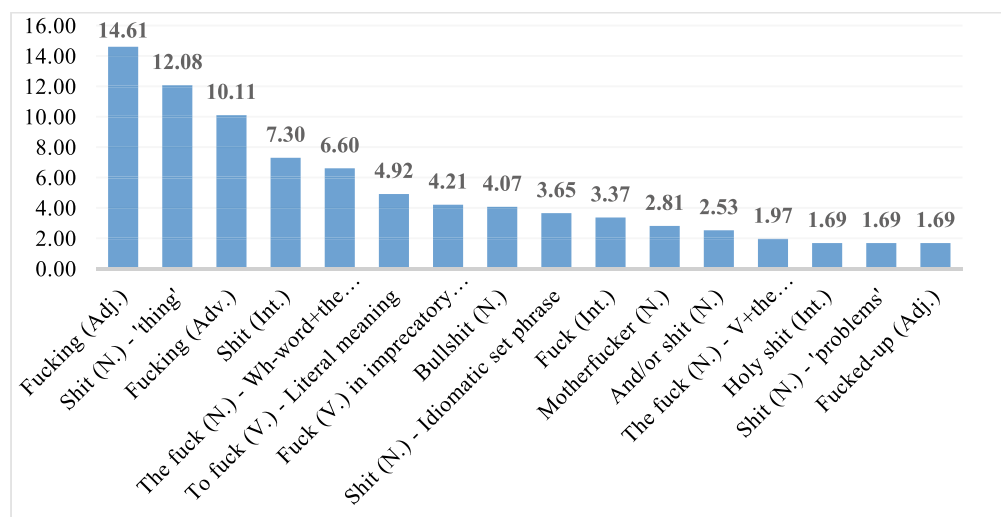


Figure 2 Frequencies of swear word forms in the whole corpus.

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, 426 instances of *fuck* and 286 instances of *shit* were retrieved in the corpus. Each table provides a classification of the different uses and forms of *fuck* and *shit* with examples from the corpus.

As an adjective intensifier, *fucking* accounts for 104 instances (24.41%) out of the 426 instances of *fuck* retrieved in the corpus. It is followed by *fucking* used as an adverb intensifier which was retrieved 71 times (16.67%). *The fuck* used as a noun in emphatic *wh*-questions was retrieved 47 times (11.03%) whereas *to fuck* used literally was retrieved 35 times (8.22%). Although not the most prominent instance in the corpus, *fuck* used as an interjection was also analyzed in this study to compare the translation strategies implemented to render it to those used to render the interjection *shit*.

Table 3 Forms of *fuck* in the English subcorpus.

USE	EXAMPLES	FREQUENCIES	RELATIVE FREQUENCIES
Fucking (Adj.) – Intensifier	<i>These women are fucking criminals.</i>	104	24.41
Fucking (Adv.) – Intensifier	<i>Who knew you were so fucking thoughtful?</i>	72	16.67
The fuck (N.) – Wh-word+the fuck – Intensifier	<i>Who the fuck told you there was a chicken in my yard?</i>	47	11.03
To fuck (V.) – Literal meaning	<i>I mean, I could have accidentally fucked her, right?</i>	35	8.22
Fuck (V.) in imprecatory and exclamatory phrases	<i>Fuck pizza, we're gonna have Tuesday tacos.</i>	30	7.04
Fuck (Int.)	<i>Fuck! My glasses fell off.</i>	24	5.63
Motherfucker (N.)	<i>I want that motherfucker taken out.</i>	20	4.69
The fuck (N.) – V.+the fuck+prep. – Intensifier	<i>Get the fuck out of here.</i>	14	3.29
Fucked-up (Adj.)	<i>You got some fucked-up priorities.</i>	12	2.82
To fuck with (V.)	<i>Don't fuck with my cooking shows. T!</i>	11	2.58
To fuck up (V.)	<i>You wanna fuck that up, that's on you.</i>	7	1.64
Fuck (Int.) – Before yes/no – Emphasis	<i>Fuck no, you don't care about the money.</i>	6	1.41
Motherfucking (Adj.)	<i>Take off your motherfucking shoes!</i>	5	1.17
Fuck off (V.) – In Imperative	<i>I got cake from Red, so fuck off.</i>	4	0.94
Fucking (Infixed)	<i>We are just funda-fucking-mentally different people, at a DNA level!</i>	4	0.94
Miscellaneous (3 ≥ instances)	–	32	7.51
Total		426	100

The word *shit* was used as a noun with the meaning “thing” 86 times (30.07%), whereas *shit* as an interjection was retrieved 52 times, accounting for 18.18% of all the instances of the word. The word *shit* as a noun was also used in 16 different idiomatic set phrases and was retrieved 26 times in the corpus, accounting for 9.09% of all the instances of *shit*.

USE	EXAMPLES	FREQUENCIES	RELATIVE FREQUENCIES
Shit (N.) – “thing”	<i>We did some illegal shit [...].</i>	86	30.07
Shit (Int.)	Shit. <i>I’m sorry.</i>	52	18.18
Bullshit (N.) – “nonsense,” “lies”	<i>Your fiancé might buy this bullshit [...].</i>	29	10.14
Shit (N.) – Idiomatic set phrase (16)	<i>You cannot lose your shit, okay?</i>	26	9.09
And/or shit (N.) – General extender	<i>Man, new bunkie’s trying to lay down all these rules and shit.</i>	18	6.29
Holy shit (Int.)	Holy shit!	12	4.20
Shit (N.) – “a bad, difficult, or unpleasant situation; problems”	<i>We all have our shit, Nicky.</i>	12	4.20
Shitty (Adj.)	<i>We’re all allowed to feel shitty about things in our lives that are shitty.</i>	9	3.15
Shit (N.) – “nothing,” “anything”	<i>But I can’t do shit with “I’m sorry.”</i>	7	2.45
Shit (N.) – “drug”	<i>My cousin paid you for that shit.</i>	6	2.10
To shit (V.) – Literal meaning	<i>I’m gonna have to shit it out.</i>	6	2.10
Shit (N.) – “rubbish, trash; something regarded as worthless”	<i>Oh, you saw that shit?</i>	4	1.40
Shit (N.) – “trivial, insincere, or untruthful talk or writing; nonsense; lies”	<i>[...] What makes you think I would’ve fallen for your shit?</i>	4	1.40
Like shit (“pronominal” form) – “very badly; awful, horrible”	<i>You look like shit.</i>	3	1.05
Shit (N.) – Literal meaning	<i>And the rat shit dust.</i>	3	1.05
Miscellaneous (3 ≥ instances)	-	9	3.15
Total		286	100

Table 4 Forms of *shit* in the English subcorpus.

4.3. THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

As explained in subsection 3.5, our typology of translation strategies was mostly based on Xavier’s (“Three-layered typology” 594) and Díaz-Pérez’s (404) typologies of subtitling strategies. In this subsection, we first define the translation strategies providing examples from the corpus. Then, we discuss the categorization and the choices we made to establish this typology.

ST	TT	BackTr
Shit , I’m in!	∅ <i>Je suis partante !</i>	∅ I’m in!
She’s fucking dangerous!	<i>Elle est ∅ dangereuse !</i>	She’s ∅ dangerous!
No, I tried that shit .	<i>Non, j’ai déjà essayé ∅.</i>	No, I’ve already tried ∅.

Table 5 Examples of the omission strategy.

4.3.1. Omission

As shown in the back-translated segment (BackTr), the swear word in the ST has been deleted in the TT. The examples in Table 5 introduce this strategy.

4.3.2. Standardization

The swear word has been replaced by a standard word/phrase in the TT, sometimes entailing a reformulation of the segment. Table 6 provides examples for this type of strategy.

ST	TT	BackTr
Shit ’s changing around here.	<i>Les choses changent ici.</i>	Things are changing around hee.
You’re a fucking waitress.	<i>T’es qu’une serveuse.</i>	You’re just a waitress.
I love you and I fucking ... hate you.	<i>Je t’aime et je te hais... de tout mon cœur.</i>	I love you and I hate you... with all my heart .

Table 6 Examples of the standardization strategy.

4.3.3. Euphemism

The swear word in the ST has been rendered in the TT by an informal or slang word/phrase that can either be negatively or positively connoted, pejorative, or neutral without being vulgar. As shown in Table 7, the euphemism strategy entails a grammatical shift and/or the reformulation of the segment.

ST	TT	BackTr
I have no fuckin' idea what that means...	Je pige que dalle à ce que tu racontes...	I ain't getting a [thing] of what you're saying.
Now go get your fucking sneakers.	Va récupérer tes grolles .	Go get your [shoes].
Dude fucking loves me.	Il me kiffe .	He digs me.

Table 7 Examples of the euphemism strategy.

4.3.4. Pragmatic softening

In this strategy, the English swear word has been translated into French by an informal or slang word that conveys informality without being vulgar. The examples in Table 8 show that depending on context and co-text, the word can be negatively or positively connoted, pejorative, or neutral, and it has the same grammatical function as in the English segment.

ENGLISH OV	FRENCH ST	BackTr
We can't even fill a fucking basement anymore.	On ne pourrait même plus remplir un pauvre sous-sol.	We couldn't even fill a miserable basement anymore.
It's fucking depressing.	C'est carrément déprimant.	It's downright depressing.
So if that's what you want, just try that shit again.	Si c'est ce que vous voulez, recommencez ce cirque .	If that's what you want, start that circus again.

Table 8 Examples of the pragmatic softening strategy.

4.3.5. Direct compensation

The direct compensation strategy refers to a double text manipulation in the TT; an omission, euphemism, or standardization strategy is immediately compensated by a dysphemism elsewhere in the line. This can be achieved by adding a swear word with a different grammatical function, or replacing a standard word by a swear word, or by a pejorative informal/slang term. Table 9 provides examples of this strategy.

ST	TT	BackTr
She's issued a fucking fatwa against me.	Elle m'a collé une Ø fatwa au cul .	She stuck a fatwa on my ass .
Bennett, it's not fucking working again.	Bennett, cette saloperie a encore planté .	Bennett, that bitch has crashed again.
That shit is horrible.	C'est de la merde .	It is shit .

Table 9 Examples of the direct compensation strategy.

4.3.6. Maintenance

As shown in Table 10, in this strategy, the swear word in English has been translated by a swear word having the same grammatical function in French.

ST	TT	BackTr
Oh, shit . I just got uninvited to the most depressing party ever.	Merde . Je suis plus invitée à la fête la plus déprimante au monde.	Shit , I'm no longer invited to the most depressing party ever.
Fucking Mendez.	Enfoiré de Mendez.	That asshole , Mendez.
This fucking election.	Putain d'élection .	Fucking election.

Table 10 Examples of the maintenance strategy.

To better reflect the text manipulations at play in the corpus and to take the idiosyncrasies of French into account, two translation strategies have been added to the translation strategies described by Xavier ("Three-layered typology" 598) in her typology for the subtitling of taboo.

The pragmatic softening strategy includes the instances of *fucking* used as an emphatic modifier that have been translated by informal or negatively connoted modifiers such as *sale*, *pauvre*, *carrément*, *méga*, among others. It also includes the instances of *shit* meaning “thing” that have been translated by informal or negatively connoted terms such as *trucs*, *saloperies* ou *cirque*. The term “softening” has been borrowed from Díaz-Pérez’s (404–405) translation solutions. He (405) defines it as “the translation of the [English swear words] by means of a softer or milder [swear word in the subtitles].” Given that the strategy defined in this study does not concern the rendering of an English swear word by a softer or milder swear word in French, we have decided to call it “pragmatic softening” as we argue that the subtitler might have opted for such strategy to avoid a translation that would have been unidiomatic or ungrammatical in context.

The direct compensation strategy highlights the double textual manipulations at play in some segments. Although, only used for the translation of *fucking* and *shit* (meaning “thing”) in this study, it might have been used to render other swear words in the corpus. This strategy seems to have been implemented to convey the same degree of vulgarity as in the ST while preserving the idiomatic quality and grammaticality of the segment.

In this study, the definitions of the maintenance and euphemism strategies included in Xavier’s typology have been slightly adapted to account for the grammatical function of swear words. The maintenance strategy only concerns the instances in which the swear word has been translated by a swear word having the same grammatical function in both languages.

To mark the difference between pragmatic softening and euphemism, the latter has been defined as a moderation strategy entailing a grammatical shift or the reformulation of the segment. By contrast, the pragmatic softening strategy could be said to correspond to a moderation strategy that does not entail a grammatical shift as the swear word in English is replaced by an informal or slang word having the same function without being vulgar.

4.4. FREQUENCIES OF THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES IN THE CORPUS

As summarized in Figure 3 and Table 11, the predominant strategy is maintenance, which accounts for 26.63% of the overall translation strategies. This result, which contrasts with similar studies in which omission is the predominant strategy (Pujol; Ávila-Cabrera; Díaz-Pérez; Xavier, “Three-layered typology”), can partly be justified by the grammatical function of the swear words analyzed in this study. It could also be the result of Netflix guidelines regarding the treatment of “expletives.”

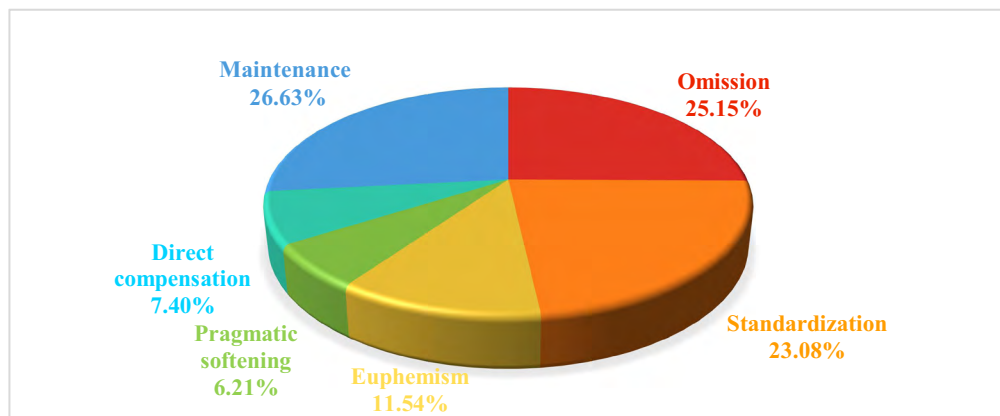


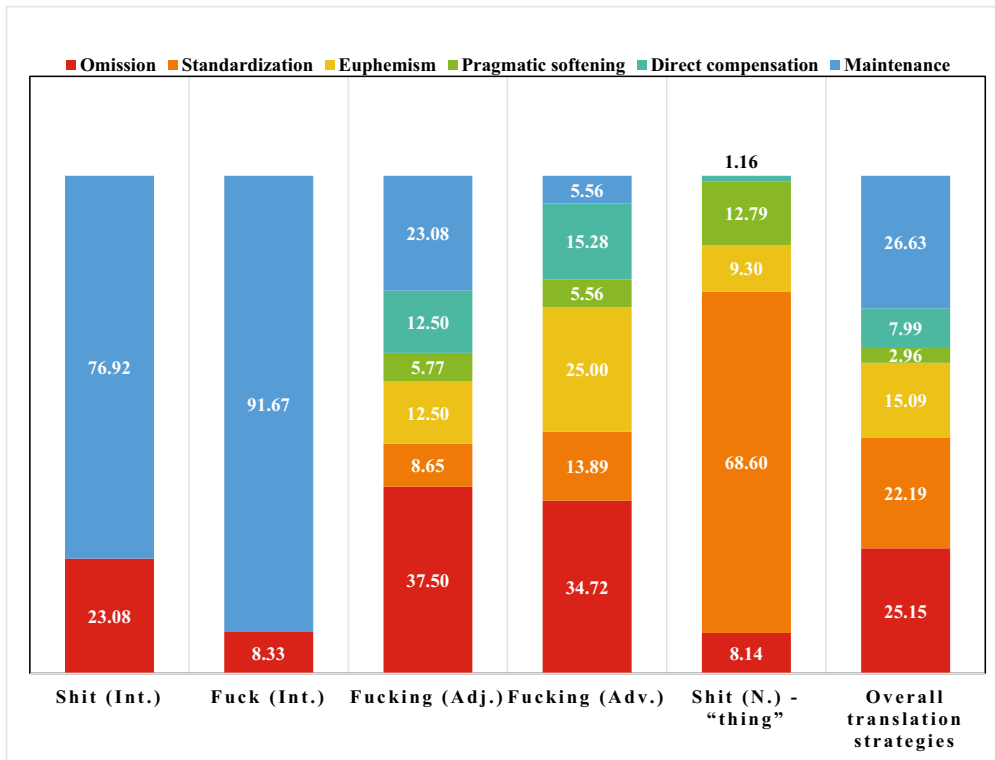
Figure 3 Overall translation strategies in the corpus.

	SHIT (Int.)	FUCK (Int.)	FUCKING (Adj.)	FUCKING (Adv.)	SHIT (N.) – “THING”	ABSOLUTE FREQUENCIES
Omission	12	2	39	25	7	85
Standardization	0	0	9	10	59	78
Euphemism	0	0	13	18	8	39
Pragmatic softening	0	0	6	4	11	21
Direct compensation	0	0	13	11	1	25
Maintenance	40	22	24	4	0	90
Total of instances	52	24	104	72	86	338

Table 11 Absolute frequencies of strategies in the corpus.

As Figure 4 shows, when the swear word is used as an interjection, the maintenance strategy accounts for 76.92% in the case of *shit* and 91.67% in the case of *fuck*. This high frequency is explained by the fact that those swear words were translated by direct equivalents such as *merde* and *putain* in the TT. Those direct and short counterparts in French also probably explain the low frequency of omission for those two swear words. Technical constraints could then justify the translator’s choice to omit those interjections. In fact, although not quantified here, primary observations show that these interjections were mostly omitted in particularly long segments (two-liners) or because of Netflix guidelines.⁴

Figure 4 Frequencies of translation strategies by form of swear word.



By contrast, the maintenance strategy only accounts for 23.08% in the case of *fucking* used as an adjectival modifier, and for 5.56% when used as an adverb. These relatively low frequencies can be explained by the fact that *fucking* as an emphatic modifier cannot always be translated by its French direct counterpart *putain de* which would sound unidiomatic or ungrammatical. This is further confirmed by the high frequency of omission observed for those two words. As shown in Table 11, 39 instances of *fucking* (Adj.) and 25 instances *fucking* (Adv.) have been omitted. This is in line with Díaz-Pérez’s (409) results on the translation of *fucking* into Galician, which he attributes to the lack of existence of “a direct equivalent” in the target language. In French, although this equivalent (*putain de*) exists, it was only used three times to render the adverb *fucking*, and 20 times to render the adjective *fucking*.

However, not all instances of *fucking* were completely omitted (See Figure 4). In fact, the analyses of the text manipulations implemented to render those two swear words (and the word *shit* as a noun) have led us to redefine the euphemism strategy used in existing typologies, and to highlight two new translations strategies, namely pragmatic softening and direct compensation. Combined, these three strategies account for 25.15% of the overall translation strategies, which is equivalent to the frequency of omission.

As explained earlier, these new strategies seem to have been implemented to consider French idiosyncrasies. In fact, in all three strategies, the translator uses non-standard words (informal, slang, pejorative or even different swear words in the case of direct compensation) instead of direct equivalent swear words as it is the case with the maintenance strategy. Based on the textual analyses, such strategies seem to have been used to avoid ungrammaticality, and to

⁴ In the French Timed Text Style Guide (<https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/217351577-French-Timed-Text-Style-Guide>), subtitles are instructed not to translate words or phrases repeated more than once by the same speaker. Accessed 29 Sept. 2024.

preserve idiomacy while matching the tone of the original content. This hypothesis should be tested on a larger corpus and in studies focusing on different sets of swear words.

Finally, standardization accounts for 23.08% of the overall translation strategies classified in this study. This frequency can be explained by the inclusion in the set of swear words under scrutiny of *shit* as a neutral noun. The swear word was translated by pronouns such as *ça*, *c'*, *tout*, *la*, etc. 42 times. In this case, the high frequency of standardization (68.60%), together with the low frequency of omission (8.14%), can also be attributed to the grammatical function of the word. Indeed, although considered a swear word for the purpose of this study, *shit* used as a neutral noun is not a swearing occurrence, but a vulgar term that could be replaced with the standard word *things* in most instances. As such, unlike swearing occurrences which can easily be omitted in lines without hindering the message, the vulgar term *shit* is referential and can rarely be omitted. In fact, in most instances of omission, *shit* (N.) is still implied in the subtitles such as “Non, j’ai déjà essayé [ça]” for “No, I tried that shit” or “Y aura rien de plus flippant [que ça] dehors” for “Nothing out there gonna be scarier than this shit.”

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study presented the methodology used to define and analyze the translation strategies implemented to render 338 instances of specific swear words in the French subtitles of the first season of *OITNB*.

A corpus-based approach was used to adapt and expand upon existing subtitling typologies established by Xavier’s (“Three-layered typology” 594) and Díaz-Pérez’s (404). The proposed typology considers both the grammatical function of swear words and the register used in the subtitles to classify the instances and describe the translation strategies. To better reflect the idiosyncrasies of French, two new translation strategies, pragmatic softening and direct compensation, were introduced. Pragmatic softening entails the rendering of the swear word by a word having the same grammatical function and conveying informality without being vulgar. The direct compensation strategy encompasses segments in which a dysphemism has been added in the TT to compensate for the omission, standardization or euphemizing of the swear word in the ST. Both strategies seem aimed at avoiding ungrammatical or unidiomatic translations. Additionally, we adapted Xavier’s (“Three-layered typology” 594) maintenance and euphemism strategies by adding grammatical function as a criterion to differentiate them from direct compensation and pragmatic softening, respectively.


The limitations of this study provide further avenues of research. Although the size of the corpus was considered appropriate to define the translation strategies used in French subtitles, a larger corpus, including more translators and focusing on a larger set of swear words, would be needed to test and complement the proposed typology. It would also allow for stronger conclusions regarding the overall translation strategies used to render swear words in the French subtitles of Netflix TV shows.

Further textual analyses and extratextual data on the translators’ behavior towards the treatment of swear words are also needed. This second layer of analyses should help determine if the translation strategies observed can, to some extent, be the result of Netflix guidelines, which state that dialogue must not be censored. The triangulation of textual and extratextual data could then help formulate norms regarding the subtitling of swear words in the French version of Netflix Original Series.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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