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Biondić, Josip

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University of Zagreb
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of English

Josip Biondić

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Subtitles:

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Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Kristijan Nikolić Ph.D.

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Abstract

Swearwords in subtitles have always been a hot topic in audiovisual translation (AVT). In Croatia, public broadcasters tend to censor them, while content providers such as Netflix do their best to include them in their subtitles. Previous international studies have found that gender, political orientation, and religiousness influenced the reception of swearwords in original language audience, but few AVT studies focused on how these factors impact the reception of swearwords. This research aims to fill that gap by examining how gender, political views, background (rural or urban), and religiousness affect Croatian university students' acceptance of swearwords in subtitles. A survey containing two film clips was distributed to students of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Students had to rate two subtitle variants, one with swearwords and the other without, on a 5-point Likert scale. While the results indicate that these factors do not affect reception across the entire respondent pool, they do reveal that, for certain segments of the population – specifically male respondents – religiousness and political orientation do influence the reception of swearwords in subtitles. These results underscore the importance of considering audience preferences to produce culturally sensitive and appropriate content.

Keywords: AVT, subtitles, swearwords, reception study

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1. Introduction

Swearing, often viewed as a taboo element of language, plays a complex role in communication, serving both expressive and social functions (Jay, 2000; Hughes, 2006). Its presence in the media, particularly in films and TV shows, has been on the rise and is as prevalent as ever (Kay & Sapolsky, 2004a, 2004b, 2009). The subtitling and translation of swearwords pose a unique challenge for translators, who must balance fidelity to the original dialogue with cultural sensitivity and audience expectations (Jesús Fernández, 2009).

The Croatian media landscape provides an interesting case study for examining the reception of swearwords in subtitles. Croatia, with its rich linguistic and cultural heritage characterized by its unique blend of Slavic roots, historical influences from neighbouring regions, and a strong tradition of folk art, presents a diverse audience, whose attitudes towards swearing may be influenced by various factors such as gender, political orientation, religiousness, and geographical background. Understanding these attitudes is crucial for Croatian media producers and translators working on media content, aiming to adapt it, in this case through translation, so that it resonates with local audiences, while maintaining the integrity of the original material.

This study investigates Croatian university students' reception of swearwords in subtitles, focusing on how different demographic factors influence their acceptance of swearwords in the media. By examining variables such as gender, political orientation, religiousness, and geographical background, this research seeks to understand how these factors shape attitudes, or reception, towards swearing in audiovisual translation.

To this end, a literature review will provide an overview of existing research on swearing in the media and translation, as well as the relevant sociolinguistic and media theories. The methodology section will outline the research design, including the survey used to collect data and the statistical methods employed for analysis. The results section will present the findings of the study, followed by the discussion that interprets these results in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key findings and suggest directions for future research.

2. Brief history of swearing and subtitling

2.1 History of swearwords

Swearing is a common phenomenon, varying greatly in frequency and intention. Most people, especially in Western cultures, have used swearwords at some point, often starting as young as two or three years old (Jay, 2000; Jay & Janschewitz, 2012). Today, swearing can be divided into two basic meanings: formal swearing, such as oaths in court, and informal swearing, which violates social codes (Hughes, 2006). This research will focus on the latter. Historically, swearing has interacted with religious taboos and taboos against bodily functions (Mohr, 2013). Different periods have seen varying levels of repression (Hughes, 2006). Swearing has evolved from invoking higher powers to expressing frustration and emphasizing points (Hughes, 2006). Romans significantly influenced modern Western swearing, associating obscenities with concealed body parts and actions. Their swearing reflected their social norms of dominance and submission in sexual acts and relationships (Mohr, 2013). In the Western world, the Bible also shaped swearing, particularly with oath swearing, which was seen as crucial for societal cohesion, and, if used wrongfully, could destroy the fabric of civil life (Mohr, 2013). During the Middle Ages, in English and most other European languages, swearing primarily involved oaths invoking God. Words like 'cunt' were not offensive, but saying bad words was believed to lead to immoral actions (Mohr, 2013). Throughout Europe, the Renaissance brought changes in swearing patterns due to shifts in social, religious, and architectural trends. As Mohr (2013) explains, privacy became more valued, and bodily functions became taboo. By the 18th and 19th centuries, obscene words replaced oaths as the primary swearwords, expressing strong emotions and shocking people. This shift was driven by the middle class's desire to differentiate from lower classes (Mohr, 2013). The World Wars further increased swearing, as soldiers' habits spread into print and popular media (Mohr, 2013), especially in the Anglo-American context. Despite modern demystification of many swearwords, they still carry significant stigma, with governments attempting to regulate their use in the media and public discourse (Hughes, 2006). Both ancient and modern societies have used swearing to express strong emotions and navigate social dynamics. Reflecting cultural anxieties about the stability of civilization, cycles of swearing often emerge during times of societal stress. Despite concerns about obscenity undermining civilization, swearing remains a fundamental aspect of human expression, fulfilling emotional and social needs.

2.2 History of subtitles

The history of subtitling is as significant as the history of swearwords. Motion pictures, invented in 1888 by Louis Le Prince, initially lacked sound, making translation unnecessary. With the release of the first sound film, Warner Brothers' "The Jazz Singer" in 1927, the need to translate dialogue emerged. Two main solutions were subtitling, where written text is superimposed on the screen, and dubbing, where dialogue is replaced with translated voices (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). Subtitles evolved from silent intertitles to translate dialogue and written information, appearing at the bottom of the screen (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). According to Díaz Cintas (2005), technological advances have significantly impacted subtitling practices and viewer perceptions. Early subtitling methods, like the photographic printing process, faced legibility issues, which were later resolved by chemical and laser subtitling methods (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). Subtitling evolved with pioneers like Suzanne Chantal and Herman Weinberg, who developed concise, timed subtitles (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). The introduction of time codes in the mid-80s allowed precise frame location, further refining subtitling practices (Díaz Cintas, 2005). Today, subtitles are created using sophisticated software that reads time codes, accesses waveforms, and identifies shot changes, allowing for near-perfect subtitles. Machine translation further enhances efficiency.

Technological advancements have made subtitling faster and more economical, meeting growing consumer demands for diverse content on demand. Initially limited to films, TV series, and documentaries, subtitling now includes soap operas, reality shows, interviews, and commercials (Díaz Cintas, 2005). These trends suggest that subtitling will continue to grow in importance and usage in the future.

3. Theoretical framework

From the brief overview of the history of swearing provided above, it is obvious that swearing is very common. Therefore, it is obvious that key sociolinguistic theories which tackle swearing should be explored. The next section aims to provide an overview of the position of swearing in some sociolinguistic frameworks, such as Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory and the speech act theory.

Although there is no specific theory surrounding Geoffrey Hughes' (2006) work, his insight into swearing is invaluable. As seen above, swearwords generate their offensiveness and all other social features from their taboo origin. Because of this, they are subject to social

restrictions and prohibitions. As such, swearwords serve as powerful linguistic tools that can express strong emotions, reinforce social bonds, and delineate group boundaries (Hughes, 2006). This adds a layer of intensity and transgression, making these words stronger and impactful in communication, as also noted by Jay (2000).

Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory might not be a sociolinguistic theory per se, but the role of swearwords in society can be interpreted through it. Swearwords can be seen as integral to group identity, reflecting how individuals align themselves with a particular social or cultural group. This is why social groups "attempt to differentiate themselves from each other" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 41). Being part of a group can give a person a sense of belonging, self-worth, and as the name of the theory suggests, identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Wanting to belong helps explain why swearing may be acceptable or even expected in some groups, while not so much in others.

Moreover, swearing can be looked at through the speech act theory. The founder of the theory, J. L. Austin, claimed that utterances perform actions, that is, "utterances attempt to do things, and just like other actions can fail for a range of reasons" (Levinson, 2016, p. 200). According to him, utterances can perform actions in three ways: first is the saying of words with their intended meaning, i.e. locutionary act; second is the speech act itself, i.e. ordering, advising, warning, etc., known as illocutionary act; and the third are context-specific consequences of the act, i.e. perlocutionary act (Levinson, 2016). Swearwords, in this interpretation, can function as expressive speech acts, conveying strong emotions such as anger, frustration, pain, surprise, etc. They can also be used to intensify the force of statements. Furthermore, swearwords can carry a perlocutionary effect in which the speaker or writer intends to insult or offend the addressee.

Examining the social functions, identity implications, and other factors of swearing can help us better understand the power of swearwords in our languages, why they are so controversial and still used.

Since this research focuses on the translation of swearwords in subtitles, it is essential to examine how audiences perceive and interpret this content across various media, such as films, TV shows, reality TV, and talk shows. Media and communication theories will be utilized to provide a theoretical framework for this study. More specifically, a brief overview of cultivation theory, and 'uses and gratifications' theory, will be provided.

George Grebner's cultivation theory arose from the want to understand how growing up and living in an environment dominated by mass media influenced people (Morgan et al., 2014).

The basic idea of this theory is that consuming mass media content and long-term exposure to it shapes the viewers' perception of reality (Romer et al., 2014). Since exposure to films and TV implies exposure to subtitles, this theory is relevant when looking at the impact of swearwords in subtitles on the attitudes and beliefs of the audience. When looking at swearwords in subtitles from this point of view, it can be posited that they influence viewers' perceptions on the acceptability of swearwords in real life, as well as how frequently they are used. The frequency or infrequency of swearword use in films and subtitles can have a mainstreaming effect (Grebner et al., 1980), in which swearwords are more accepted by heavy consumers of content containing them.

In addition to the cultivation theory, the uses and gratification theory focuses on the concept of active audience. This term "emphasizes the voluntaristic and selective nature of interaction between audience and mass media" (Levy & Windahl, 1984, p. 51). The meaning behind this is that the audience actively seeks out specific media to satisfy their particular needs.

Therefore, it can be assumed that the audience's response to swearwords in subtitles can vary based on their individual experiences, background, personal values, etc.

As this research deals with the translation of swearwords in subtitles from English into Croatian, a brief overview of some translation theories and concepts, as well as their stances on swearwords, should be included. The translation theories in question are Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence and Hans Vermeer's Skopos theory.

In dynamic equivalence, Nida argues that a translation should have a similar effect on the target audience as the original text has on the source audience (Nida, 1964). Here, the basic idea is that the translation should use those target language expressions, which would evoke the same or similar emotional and cultural responses as those in the source text (Nida, 1964; Kim, 2015).

Vermeer's Skopos theory took this idea a step further. Skopos theory argues that every text has been produced for a purpose and should serve that purpose (Nord, 2018). In an ideal situation, this purpose should be provided by the initiator of the translation, whoever that may be, in a translation brief. This brief should also explain the addressees, time, place, occasion, the medium of communication and the intended function (Nord, 2018). This brief should be viewed as a set of instructions for the translator, who is then free to carry out these instructions however they like. In the case of swearwords, the brief can specify how they should be translated, or the translator can interpret the brief to determine appropriate translation strategies. For example, if the target audience is young adults, the translator might

choose coarser language than they would for an older audience. However, it should be noted that the brief does not tell the translator how to translate the text, what strategies to use, or what translation type to choose, these are left to their responsibility and competence (Nord, 2018).

4. Swearing in the media

Research on swearing in the media can provide important insights into the prevalence, context, and effects of offensive language in films, TV shows, talk shows, etc. This section reviews key studies that can help us understand swearword use in the media, the frequency and contexts of appearance of these words, audience perceptions and reactions to swearwords, their potential effects on audience behaviour and attitudes, and the implications these have for translators.

As seen in previous chapters, swearwords encapsulate many expressions we might not consider as swearwords at first glance. To put this in perspective, Cressman et al. (2009) analysed the prevalence of profanity in teen-oriented films over 26 years. The authors used 90 top-grossing teen films from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s and examined the prevalence of profanity in these films. In the 90 films they examined, they found 2311 instances of profanity. Broken down by decades, there were 1068 instances in the 1980s, 758 in the 90s and 485 in the 2000s (Cressman et al., 2009). As it can be seen, the use of profanity has decreased over these three decades. This longitudinal perspective gives us insight into the evolution of swearing in films. Kay and Sapolsky (2004a, 2004b, 2009) analysed the use of offensive language in prime-time television programs focusing on the years 2001 and 2005. Their results were quite different from Cressman et al. (2009). They measured the rate of 7.6 swearwords per hour in 2001, presenting an increase of 51% from the data they collected in 1997 (Kay & Sapolsky, 2004a, 2004b), and a further increase to 12.58 in 2005 (Kay & Sapolsky, 2009). Their 2004 study also examined the types of language used, programme genre, humorous or serious intent and, reactions to this kind of language (Kay & Sapolsky, 2004a). Most swearwords used were mild-other (e.g., ‘hell’, ‘damn’, ‘Christ’, etc.), 63%; excretory (human elimination products and processes, e.g. ‘poop’) was at 14.6%; sexual (those words which describe sexual body parts or sexual behaviour, e.g. ‘boobs’) was at 10.4%; strong-other (‘bastard’, ‘bitch’, ‘bullshit’, etc.) at 7.4%; and the remaining 4.5% were the seven dirty (‘shit’, ‘piss’, ‘fuck’, ‘cunt’, ‘cocksucker’, ‘motherfucker’, and ‘tits’). The greatest frequency of swearwords was in situation comedies, and after them, in dramas.

Surprisingly, there was more swearing in reality shows than in films. The majority of swearwords garnered a neutral reaction from the audience, at 55.3%, while 25.5% were met with a positive reaction, and the rest were met with a negative reaction. The swearwords were more often spoken in a non-humorous context. However, in situation comedies, 71.6% of them were in a humorous context, but 80.4% of the swearwords in dramas, films, and reality TV were in a serious context.

Further insight into audience's reaction to swearwords is offered by Sapolsky et al. (2010). In the study, respondents were asked to rate the offensiveness of words on over-the-air broadcast networks, non-premium cable networks and premium cable networks. The study reported that the respondents were most offended over swearwords heard on broadcast, moderately offended by those on cable television, and least offended by swearwords on premium cable. The respondents found these words as most offensive: 'cunt', 'motherfucker', 'cocksucker', 'fuck', 'pussy', and 'Goddamn' in all three contexts (Sapolsky et al., 2010).

The very name 'offensive language' points to the position these words have in the public eye. Some people think such words should be completely removed from television and the media. However, researchers believe they have cathartic effects and should be allowed (Jay, 2000). These contrasting opinions exist because of the social norms and their taboo status, as well as the negative effects that exposure to such language may have. Coyne et al. (2011) found that exposure to profanity on television and video games was related to more supportive attitudes towards using swearwords among adolescents. Furthermore, they suggest this exposure could internalize and solidify mental scripts and schemas in support of swearword use, which could lead them to increased use of such words in real life (Coyne et al., 2011). An obvious solution that the authors propose is better regulation of content containing such words. However, Jay and Janschewitz (2012) point out that it is inevitable for children to learn and use swearwords. It is unclear how children learn these words, but Jay and Janschewitz (2012) question the point of censoring children from the language they already know.

This division and debate on whether swearing in different types of media is acceptable or not also has important implications for translators. Since the contractor generally dictates how swearwords will be handled, translators should be familiar with different practices on how to handle such words. Jesús Fernández (2009) examined a translation of the show *South Park* from English into Spanish. She determines that swearing has traditionally been a problem in AVT, whether because of the need for lip-sync in dubbing, the lazy disposition of the translator, or the traditional established ways certain swearwords have always been translated (e.g. 'son of a bitch' translated to '*pasiji skote*' in Croatia). These translations often lead to

“artificial, nonspontaneous and euphemistic dialogue, plagued with calque constructions” (Jesús Fernández, 2009, p. 225). These calques are often used instead of better, more natural expressions. However, she concluded that this particular translation of *South Park* was a good example of proper swearword translation. On the opposite end is Ávila-Cabrera’s (2016) analysis of offensive and taboo terms in the Spanish subtitles for Quentin Tarantino’s film *Reservoir Dogs*. He found that in 38.8% of translation solutions containing swearwords, the offensive/taboo load had not been transferred, and the translator opted for neutralization in 8.7% of the cases and omission in the rest. Most of these omission cases were technically unjustifiable, that is 77.6% of them. Upon further examination, Ávila-Cabrera could not point to the reason for this (self)censorship. The three most used translation strategies used by this translator were omission (29.1%), literal translation (24.2%) and reformulation (22.3%). Ávila-Cabrera (2016) concluded that the softening and omission of swearwords put the translation at risk of “jeopardizing the intended function that they have in a given dialogue and on a given speaker” (p. 38).

This division of opinion puts translators in an awkward position, especially when their translation brief is unclear. They face pressures to conform to existing norms and traditions while striving to remain faithful to the original text, all while preserving the pragmatic intention of the swearwords.

The studies on swearing in media outlined above provide valuable insights into the prevalence, context, audience reception, and effects of offensive language in films and TV shows. These perspectives highlight the implications for translators who must navigate these factors when dealing with such language.

5. Translation of swearing

Swearwords are deeply embedded in cultural contexts and carry emotional, social, and sometimes legal implications (Hughes, 2006; Jay, 2000; Mohr, 2013). A more in-depth look into the challenges, translation strategies, impact on audience reception, and cultural and pragmatic aspects of swearwords translation is crucial for understanding how these implications are transferred from one language and culture to another.

The fact that swearwords are inherently tied to the cultural and social norms of a language community (Hughes, 2006) creates several challenges for the translator. The first is that of cultural equivalence. As previously established, most Western cultures and languages have similar outlooks on what is taboo and what is not taboo, and swearwords therefore follow suit

as part of our cultural heritage. The difference here is that tolerance for offensive language differs across cultures, both in everyday use and in the media. The translator should be careful to find a solution that respects the sociocultural context of the target language, without ignoring the meaning, tone, and register of the original expression (Jesús Fernández, 2009). Additionally, the translator should keep the context, such as plot dynamics, character development, and the intended audience reaction towards the expressions, in mind.

Furthermore, the translator should be aware of any legal restrictions or limitations regarding the language they may or may not use in the given translation task. This could be a particular problem in more conservative or regulated markets, such as Russia, China, etc.

To deal with these challenges, translators have several translation strategies that they can use to handle swearwords in AVT. Díaz Cintas and Rimaël (2007) mention six translation strategies for cultural references which can also be applied to swearwords: literal translation, explicitation, substitution transposition, compensation and omission. Ávila-Cabrera (2016) also adds reformulation. Literal translation, or calque, is the simplest strategy. It takes an expression from the ST and translates it word for word to the TT, e.g. translating motherfucker as *mamojebac*. When using explicitation, the translator uses either a hyponym or a hypernym to make the ST more accessible, either through specification or by generalization, e.g. translating ass as *šupak*. However using hypernyms contributes to the loss of specificity and the local flavour of the ST. Substitution can be seen as a variant on explicitation (Díaz Cintas & Rimaël, 2007) and is used when a longer term cannot be used due to special constraints, for example translating son of a bitch as *gad*. In transposition, a cultural concept from the source culture is replaced with a cultural concept acceptable in the target culture. This strategy is used when the audience might not understand the source reference if a calque was used, and an explicitation cannot be used because of spatial constraints. With this strategy, a conflict with the culture presented on screen is possible, so it is best used when the concepts in question are similar. However, this is becoming less of a concern because of the prominence of Anglo-American culture in the world. Compensation is when a translational loss in one part of the translation is made up for at another point in the translation. For example, this strategy is used when translating an expression containing no swearwords in the source text (ST) into an expression containing swearwords in the target text (TT), because expressions have been toned down in other parts of the translation. Omission is another simple translation strategy in which a part of an expression in ST is simply omitted in TT. It is a frequent strategy used in subtitling because of the spatio-temporal constraints. Omission encompasses the deletion of words, clauses and sentences.

The next translation strategy is reformulation. With it, the ST is rephrased to express an idea differently. The strategy of softening should also be added, in which milder terms are used to convey a similar but less intense meaning, for example translating *fucking idiot* as *idiot*. Translating swearwords involves more than just linguistic substitution and the use of translation strategies, it requires understanding the pragmatic and cultural dimension of language use, and swearword use habits of the target culture. Having a shared background knowledge of the source and target language audiences is crucial for the role of mediators that translators fulfil. The better the translators identify cultural barriers, the better their translation is (Martínez-Sierra, 2009). Pragmatics plays an important role for any translator. A translator needs to understand the situational context in which swearwords are used, including the speaker's intentions, the relationships between characters, and the reaction that the writer/director wants to elicit from the audience when those swearwords are uttered on screen. Swearwords contain a pragmatic intention that needs to be accounted for when translating. The translator must have intercultural pragmatic competence to successfully translate (Jesús Fernández, 2009). Besides that, the translator must understand that different cultures have different attitudes towards swearing. Some cultures might have a higher tolerance, others might view it as highly inappropriate. It is the translator's job to navigate these cultural norms to ensure that the target text resonates appropriately with the target audience. Furthermore, the translator must be aware of the translation norms in the given culture. For example, an audience might be used to toned down translations in their films, especially if they are broadcast on TV.

The way swearwords are translated can significantly impact how audiences perceive the content they watch. Swearwords often play a crucial role in conveying emotions (Jay, 2000). This can naturally be applied to characters in films or TV shows. The use of swearwords may be crucial in conveying characters' emotions and creating an immersive narrative experience. This is why effective translation strategies need to preserve this emotional engagement to keep the original and intended impact of the media. The proper use and translation of swearwords is crucial for the authenticity of the dialogue, which in turn plays a significant role in audience reception. Inaccurate or culturally insensitive translations of swearwords can break the immersion and reduce the perceived realism of the characters and the story. Furthermore, translations that resonate well with the cultural norms and values of the target audience are more likely to be received positively, as also pointed out by Ávila-Cabrera (2009).

6. Croatian context

Understanding the Croatian context is essential for analysing Croatian university students' reception of swearwords in subtitles. As with many Western cultures/languages, swearing has a long-standing presence in Croatian culture and language, and is rooted in the historical, cultural, and social contexts. This history of swearing is closely connected with other South-Slavic languages, such as Bosnian and Serbian which share much of the same swearing traditions and swearwords. Đurin and Jovanović (2019) describe the term '*psovka*', meaning swearword, in Serbian, as metaphorical. This term and its meaning are the same in Croatian. The term has an etymological correlation with the noun '*pas*' (a dog) and a probable connection with the verb '*pišati*' (to piss) (Đurin & Jovanović, 2019). This is connected to Slavic mythology and language tradition, where dog barking was connected to swearing because it was thought dogs bark at the sky, and therefore at God (Opačić, 2013). Swearwords have been an integral part of many Slavic rituals, such as martial, agrarian, processional, and occasional rituals (Uspenski, 1994, as cited in Đurin & Jovanović, 2019), just as they were for many other Western cultures (Mohr, 2013). Today, swearwords in Croatian culture have evolved to their modern meaning, encompassing profanity and oath swearing, just as in English.

In Croatian, swearwords are established grammatical structures, repeatable in different contexts and with potential expressiveness, i.e. usable to show different emotional states directed at either the addressee, the subject of the conversation, or the speaker (Badurina & Pranjković, 2016). Swearwords are simple syntactic patterns, and their operational form ('*Da ti jebo pas mater!*') points towards their origin, oaths and curses (Badurina & Pranjkovic, 2019), once again connecting them to the broader European sociolinguistic heritage as described by Mohr (2013) and Hughes (2006). Euphemisms are common in Croatian because of the social unacceptability of swearwords, in the same way as they are in English. Badurina and Pranjkovic (2019) provide an example of '*kurac*' being replaced by '*kita*'.

Croatia's cultural heritage and predominant Roman Catholic religion play an important role in offensive language. The Croatian language features a rich array of swearwords and is characterized by a flexible vocabulary. This means that while the verb, typically 'to fuck' and its synonyms, remains constant, the subject and object can vary widely. This, in turn, encourages creativity and an ever-expanding register of new swearwords, as does Serbian (Đurin & Jovanović, 2019). Swearwords in Croatia are often considered funny and are used for humorous and satirical effect. Although, as far as I know, there is no official research into

the reception and opinion on swearwords in Croatia. The average Croatian can be presumed to share the cultural belief that swearwords are improper and frowned upon, especially in formal and religious contexts, and that they would greatly disapprove their use. This is especially true when considering the profound role the Church and religion play in the Croatian culture. This presents a clash with global media and cultural exchange influences. Younger generations, influenced by global media and exposure to foreign cultures, may have more liberal attitudes towards swearing compared to older generations. Croatian audiences are exposed to a wide range of media, including local production and international content. As already established, this portrayal of swearwords in films, TV shows, and music can influence their perception and usage, especially among younger people. The increasing effects of globalization can also be noticed in swearword use. Anglo-American culture and language in particular have a strong influence due to its dominance in entertainment industries and global media. As a result, English swearwords and slang, such as the ubiquitous ‘fuck’, are often used by Croatians.

7. Methodological considerations

Understanding various methodological approaches used in previous studies on swearing in the media, audiovisual translation, and audience reception is crucial for designing a robust methodology for this study. Key considerations include research design and data collection methods. Yves Gambier (2018) provides the foundational theoretical framework for studying how viewers receive and interpret audiovisual content with subtitles. Surveys using questionnaires, interviews, and group discussions are used to gather viewers’ opinions or perceptions on the content. He also suggests that using the experimental method can help us better control the variables through subtitle manipulation. A third approach, he suggests, is controlling the experimental procedures, both the medium and the viewer’s response. This approach is used to record and analyse optical pauses, pace of reading, line-breaks, presentation time, re-reading, types of attention, and techniques such as pupillometry, eye tracking, and bio-logging are used (Yves Gambier, 2018). Such studies can employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches.

Quantitative research often involves surveys, experiments, and content analysis. This approach is used, for example, when the researchers want to analyse the content of films and TV shows and quantify the frequency and types of swearwords used, or in surveys to measure

audience attitudes and perceptions of swearwords in audiovisual media. As things currently stand, most studies on swearwords use the quantitative approach or the mixed methods approach, where both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used.

For example, Pavesi and Zamora (2021) compared two groups of Italian and Spanish university students and their reception of swearwords in dubbed and domestic film clips using a survey questionnaire. Statistical tests were used to determine that both groups have a high tolerance for on-screen swearing, but that Spanish students were more accepting of swearing in domestic clips than in foreign productions, while the Italian group had the same levels of acceptance of both types of clips.

However, most surveys embrace a mixed method approach. An example of this is Briechle and Duran Eppler's (2019) study, where they wanted to discern whether swearwords are perceived as stronger in subtitles than in dubbed versions of the same films. They conducted a reception study using a survey questionnaire where participants rated the perceived strength of swearwords on a closed 4-point attitudinal scale, ranging from 'not strong at all' to 'very strong'. The main difference from Pavesi and Zamora's (2021) survey design was that Briechle and Duran Eppler (2019) added three open-ended questions where participants could write out whether the subtitle or dubbed swearwords had a stronger effect on them, answer whether the role genre played a part in swearword ratings, and finally provide general feedback. Contrary to their expectations, the participants perceived swearwords in subtitled films as of lower strength than those in dubbed versions of the films. The open-ended questions provided the reasoning for this, namely the inconspicuousness of the AVT, where the participants compared the ST and TT (Briechle & Duran Eppler, 2019).

Qualitative research uses interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic methods to provide insights into subjective experiences and meanings associated with swearing. For example, a translator can be interviewed for the researcher to gain insight into the reasons behind their choices in handling offensive language.

8. Key variables

This research aims to understand how different variables influence the reception of swearwords among Croatian university students. Gender, religiousness, and position on the political spectrum are key variables of this research.

Gender is one of the most significant factors in (socio)linguistic studies, possibly influencing

both the use of language and its reception, especially that of swearwords. It is a common presumption that men swear more than women. Societal norms and cultural expectations play a critical role in shaping this opinion. Traditionally, women might be socialized to use more polite language, have good manners, avoid offensive terms, etc. In contrast, men may be encouraged to use swearwords to display their assertiveness, dominance and masculinity. However, this is not necessarily the case today. Women have been found to swear at the same rate as men (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; McEnery, 2004). With that said, there is a difference between the reception of swearwords between men and women, with women rating swearwords in subtitles as significantly more offensive than men (Briechle & Eppler, 2019). Furthermore, women found swearwords to be more offensive in all contexts (Sapolsky et al., 2010). Therefore, translators must consider these gender differences when adapting media content for different audiences. Subtitles that preserve or alter the use of swearwords could have varying impact on male and female viewers and could be expected to influence their overall reception of the translated content.

Another crucial variable in this study is political orientation. Generally, individuals with conservative political views are thought to have stricter norms regarding language use and are more likely to view swearing as unacceptable. Verhof and Chan (2022) found that conservative consumers are more sensitive to the disgust emotion. AVT solutions with many swearwords in them might be expected to elicit more of that emotion in conservative people leading them to find them more offensive. Sapolsky et al. (2010) also confirm this, saying that “political conservatives consistently judged the [swear]words to be more offensive than liberals in all contexts” (p. 10). As it can be seen, political orientation can be expected to play a significant role in shaping individual and collective attitudes towards swearwords in subtitles.

It is possible that religious beliefs also play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards swearword use. Many religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, discourage or outright prohibit the use of swearwords. Religious individuals may therefore have an aversion towards swearwords in AVT. These ideas are in line with previous research, for instance, Sapolsky et al. (2008) found that the respondents who attended religious services at least once a month judged swearwords as more offensive than those who attended religious services less frequently or not at all. This means that for religious viewers, the presence of swearwords in subtitles might be expected to detract from their viewing experience, leading to lower satisfaction with the translation and the content itself.

Another variable to consider is the geographical background of the participants, particularly

urban vs. rural origins, which could also influence attitudes toward swearwords. Urban environments often expose individuals to diverse linguistic registers, including more casual use of swearwords, potentially normalizing such language. In contrast, rural areas may uphold more traditional views where swearing is less accepted.

9. Research aims and hypotheses

The goal of this research is to determine whether there is a difference in swearword reception among university students, depending on their gender, political orientation, religiousness, and their geographical background. The following research question and subsequent four hypotheses were formulated:

RQ = Do demographic factors, such as gender, political orientation, geographical background, and religiousness, influence the reception of swearwords in subtitles in Croatia?

H₁ = Male students are more receptive to swearwords in subtitles than female students in Croatia.

H₂ = Liberal students are more receptive to swearwords in subtitles than conservative students in Croatia.

H₃ = Religious students are less receptive to swearwords in subtitles than students who do not consider themselves religious.

H₄ = Students from urban areas are more receptive to swearwords in subtitles than students from rural areas.

10. Methodology

10.1 Participants

This research gathered data from students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. This group was thought diverse enough that it might provide data relevant for some parts of the Croatian student population, namely students studying in the fields of social sciences and humanities. In total, there were 53 valid responses, 35.8% of the respondents were male, i.e., 19 participants, while 34 of the respondents were female, or 64.2% of the respondents. There were 24 respondents enrolled in undergraduate, and 29 respondents in graduate programmes of the faculty. On the political spectrum, 30 respondents considered themselves liberal, 8 were moderate, and 15 of the respondents declared

themselves as conservative. When it comes to participants' geographical background, 32 came from an urban area, while 21 came from rural areas. Finally, 26 of the participants considered themselves to be religious, while the remaining 27 did not consider themselves religious.

10.2 Survey design

For the purpose of this study, a two-part online survey questionnaire was created. The first part of the survey included demographic questions, such as level of their study, gender, year of study, position on the political spectrum (liberal, moderate, or conservative), geographical background (urban or rural) and whether they considered themselves religious or not. Survey participants were asked if they were undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate students; they were asked to identify themselves as one of three gender groups, namely 'male', 'female', and 'other'. Their position on the political spectrum was determined using two questions. The first asked them to align themselves on the spectrum using terms more familiar to Croatians, i.e. left, left centre, centre, right centre, right, and the second asked the participants to select the party they voted for in the 2024 Croatian parliamentary elections, which was used as a control point for the first question regarding political orientation. Participants' answers on the first political orientation question were then compared with their answer on the second question. Participants whose answers to the first question had shown a discrepancy with the second question, i.e. they declared as positioned on the left of the political orientation spectrum, but have voted for 'DP i partneri', a party on the political right, were eliminated from the survey. The next question asked the participants whether they were from an urban or rural area, and the final demographic question asked them whether they consider themselves a religious person.

The second part of the survey contained four video clips with swearwords from four different films. Each clip was used twice. However, the respondents were randomly assigned only two video clips. The films and scenes were chosen based on the number of swearwords and taboo words in them, and critical and public acclaim was considered. It was important that the films had quality dialogue, meaning well-crafted exchanges between characters that effectively contribute to the storytelling and character development, and were popular with both the audience and the critics. The films chosen were Guy Ritchie's *The Gentlemen*, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. The clips were divided into two types. The first type included scenes with a neutral setting,

where the dialogue is casual and there is no tension between the characters, i.e. casual tableside conversations, chit-chat, etc., while the second type involved scenes depicting conflictual situations, in which tensions are high and the dialogue is more aggressive. There were two casual types and two conflictual types, as according to Briechle and Eppler (2019), scene types are likely to affect the acceptability of swearing. The difference between the two clips was in their respective subtitles. In the first instance, the swearwords and taboo words were translated into Croatian as faithfully as possible, meaning they were translated with swearwords and taboo words with similar strength to the original with the intent to provoke the same emotional reaction that was intended in the original, while the second instance was attenuated, either by omission or by toning those words down in the clips. The subtitles were manually produced for the purposes of this research by me. Here, the subtitles are the experimental variable that is manipulated. Much care was taken to ensure that the only difference between the two subtitles was the expletive part, meaning that only the swearing part, and the necessary grammatical parts, were changed in the toned-down clips. The clips contained scenes in which swearwords and expressions are clearly contextualized. The clips that the participants saw were randomly assigned to them. Each participant did not see the same clip twice, they only saw the clip with subtitles containing swearwords or toned-down subtitles. For example, if they saw the toned down version of *Pulp Fiction* first, they could not see *Pulp Fiction* for their second clip. All participants watched one toned-down clip and one clip containing swearwords. Participants were asked to rate the acceptability of subtitles in the clips on a 5-point Likert scale.

10.3 Data analysis

The Likert scales were converted into values from 1 to 5, where 1 represents the lowest degree of acceptability, while 5 represents the highest degree of acceptability. The participant groups were first analysed individually by comparing the two subtitled modalities, explicit vs. censored translation. In other words, the acceptability of swearwords was evaluated for different groups, including males, females, and individuals of various political orientations. This was done using the Paired-Samples T-test. For the purpose of this study, participants were grouped into three groups according to their political orientation. Left and left centre were labelled as liberal, those who selected centre as their political orientation in the survey were labelled as moderate, and those who selected centre right and right were labelled as conservative.

After individual group analysis, the groups (e.g. male vs. female) were compared using the Independent-Samples T-test or One-Way ANOVA.

11. Results

First a comparison was conducted on all participants, more precisely the question posed was whether there was a difference between the ratings of the two types of subtitles when looking at all the participants.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics - all participants

Paired Samples Statistics – all participants					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Censored Sub	3,74	53	,984	,135
	Explicit Sub	4,00	53	1,056	,145

Table 2. Paired Samples Test - all participants

Paired Samples Test – all participants									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
Pair					Lower	Upper			
1	Censored_Sub – Explicit Sub	-,264	1,375	,189	-,643	,115	-1,399	52	,168

As it can be seen from Table 2. there was no statistically significant difference ($t = -1.399$, $p = 0.168$) between the ratings of subtitles without swearwords and those with them.

The second category that was looked at was the acceptance of swearwords in subtitles among male respondents. Paired-Samples T-test did not show any statistically significant difference ($t = -1.505$, $p = 0.150$) between subtitle ratings for the two modalities of male participants.

However, male students on the conservative part of the political spectrum have shown a statistically significant difference ($t = 3.466$, $p = 0.008$) in the ratings of subtitles with swearwords when compared to the male participants on the liberal part of the political spectrum, where the mean score of these subtitles for liberal male respondents was $M = 4.45$, and for conservative $M = 3.04$.

When looking at the female respondents the Paired-Samples T-test also did not show any

statistically significant difference ($t = -0.442$, $p = 0.661$) between subtitle ratings, meaning that women gave approximately same ratings for both types of subtitles. Furthermore, no statistically significant differences were observed when looking at women's political orientation, background, or religiousness, meaning women's ratings were consistent for both subtitle types.

Taking a look at the political spectrum, there was no statistically significant difference in ratings between the two modalities for liberals ($t = -1.408$, $p = 0.170$), and conservatives ($t = 0.526$, $p = 0.607$), but moderate respondents did show a statistically significant ($t = -3.000$, $p = 0.020$) difference in their ratings of the two subtitle modalities. The moderate respondents rated subtitles with swearwords in them as more acceptable than the version where subtitles were censored, as seen in Table 3. and Table 4.

Table 3. Paired Samples Statistics - Moderates

		Paired Samples Statistics - Moderates			
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Censored_Sub	3,75	8	,463	,164
	Explicit_Sub	4,50	8	,756	,267

Table 4. Paired Samples Test - Moderates

		Paired Samples Test - Moderates							
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Censored_Sub - Explicit_Sub	-,750	,707	,250	-1,341	-,159	-3,000	7	,020

Respondents from urban areas did not show any statistically significant difference ($t = -0.656$, $p = 0.516$) between their ratings of the two subtitle modalities. The result outcome was the same for the respondents coming from rural areas ($t = -1.369$, $p = 0.186$).

The results for the religiousness variable were not much different from the background variable. There was no statistically significant difference ($t = -0.500$, $p = 0.622$) between subtitles ratings for religious respondents, nor was there any difference ($t = -1.365$, $p = 0.184$) in ratings for respondents who do not consider themselves religious.

When comparing men to women (Table 5 & Table 6), no statistically significant differences in ratings were observed for either the censored type ($t = -1.778$, $p = 0.081$) or the swearword-containing type of subtitles. Curiously, both men's and women's mean ratings of swearword containing subtitles were the same.

Table 5. Group Statistics - Men vs. Women

Group Statistics – Men vs. Women					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Censored_Sub	Male	19	3,42	1,071	,246
	Female	34	3,91	,900	,154
Explicit_Sub	Male	19	4,00	1,054	,242
	Female	34	4,00	1,073	,184

Table 6. Independent Samples Test - Men vs. Women

Independent Samples Test – Men vs. Women										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Censored_Sub	Equal variances assumed	1,491	,228	-1,778	51	,081	-,491	,276	-1,045	,063
	Equal variances not assumed			-1,692	32,281	,100	-,491	,290	-1,081	,100
Explicit_Sub	Equal variances assumed	,019	,890	,000	51	1,000	,000	,305	-,613	,613
	Equal variances not assumed			,000	37,945	1,000	,000	,304	-,615	,615

This means that the H_1 is not supported, there is no statistically significant difference between men and women in their reception of swearwords in subtitles.

When comparing liberal participants' ratings with those of conservative participants, a statistically significant difference between their ratings of the two types of subtitles cannot be observed (Table 7 & Table 8). Therefore, H₂ is rejected, meaning liberal students are not more receptive to swearwords in subtitles when compared to conservative students.

Table 7. Group Statistics - Conservative vs. Liberal

	PoliticalGroup	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Censored_Sub	Liberal	30	3,73	1,202	,219
	Conservative	15	3,73	,704	,182
Explicit_Sub	Liberal	30	4,10	,923	,168
	Conservative	15	3,53	1,302	,336

Table 8. Independent Samples Test - Conservatives vs. Liberals

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Censored_Sub	Equal variances assumed	6,877	,012	,000	43	1,000	,000	,337	-,679	,679
	Equal variances not assumed			,000	41,743	1,000	,000	,285	-,575	,575
Explicit_Sub	Equal variances assumed	5,312	,026	1,688	43	,099	,567	,336	-,110	1,243
	Equal variances not assumed			1,507	21,269	,147	,567	,376	-,215	1,348

This trend continued when comparing urban and rural participants. There was no statistically significant difference in ratings between these two groups. This is the case when comparing religious and non-religious participants as well. Both H₃ and H₄ are therefore rejected. There is no difference in reception of swearwords in subtitles between students with rural

backgrounds and those with urban backgrounds. Furthermore, there is no statistically significant difference in swearword reception between religious and non-religious students.

12. Discussion

Even though all four hypotheses were rejected, this study offers an insight into Croatian university students' reception of swearwords in subtitles.

There is no statistically significant difference in subtitle ratings between male and female respondents, regardless of the presence of swearwords. This can be interpreted in two ways, the first is that there is a general acceptance of swearwords in subtitles among both genders, and the second is that there is a general indifference towards swearwords in subtitles among students of both genders. However, the key takeaway is that gender does not play a crucial role in the perception of swearwords in subtitles. This finding contradicts some previous research which indicated that males and females often perceive swearwords differently (Briechle & Eppler, 2019; Sapolsky et al., 2010).

While there was no significant difference in ratings among liberal and conservative students overall, this contradicts the findings of Sapolsky et al. (2010), who observed that conservatives judged swearwords as more offensive compared to liberals. However, a notable exception was found among male respondents. Conservative male respondents rated the subtitles with swearwords significantly lower than liberal male respondents. This suggests that conservative individuals may have stricter norms regarding language use, reflecting broader values of traditionalism and social propriety. Additionally, politically moderate respondents have shown a significant preference for subtitles with swearwords over those where swearwords were censored. This may indicate a more balanced view on language use compared to the polarized views of liberals and conservatives.

Neither urban vs. rural background, nor religiousness, significantly impacted the reception of swearwords in subtitles, contrary to Sapolsky et al. (2010) who found that religion influenced swearword reception in undergraduate students of two American universities. This may indicate that these variables may not be as influential in shaping attitudes towards swearwords in subtitles among Croatian university students.

These findings have several implications for AVT and media producers. Even though young audiences, such as university students, seem to be either indifferent or completely accepting towards swearwords in subtitles, just as Pavesi and Zamora (2020) found, the differences

observed based on political orientation highlight the need for culturally sensitive translation practices that cater to the diverse values and expectations of the audience, although it might not be to the extent originally hypothesized by this research.

This study also highlights the need for further research to explore the underlying reasons for the significant differences in swearword acceptance among different political orientations and to investigate other potential factors that might influence language perception in the media. However, the study does have several limitations. The relatively small sample size, especially the sample size for some subgroups may affect the generalizability of the findings. Larger studies may be needed to confirm these results. The study also focused only on Croatian students of humanities and social sciences, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other demographic groups. The study should be expanded to all faculties of the University of Zagreb, then to other Croatian universities, and finally to the general population of Croatia. Furthermore, self-reported data on political orientation could be subject to social desirability bias, as respondents might not accurately reflect their true attitudes and behaviours even with the election vote question serving as a control point for political orientation. The question of religiousness was not thought to suffer from self-report bias and no control questions were set for it. Another possible problem, detected by Briechele and Eppler (2019), was that the participants could have difficulty on rating swearwords, or lack of them, in subtitles because they may understand the original English audio. This could lead to participants comparing the SL and TL swearwords because of which the translation would not be inconspicuous. When comparing the emotional impact of swearwords in a mother tongue (L1) and a subsequently learned language (L2), Dewaele (2004) found that swearwords in L1 have a greater emotional force than those in L2. This suggests that Croatian swearwords in subtitles could elicit a stronger emotional reaction from the respondents. However, since this issue also exists in their regular viewing habits, it can be seen as a reflection of real-world viewing conditions. This could be remedied by repeating this study with both subtitled and dubbed clips. However, this should be approached cautiously because of Briechele and Eppler's (2019) observation that people were less receptive of swearwords in dubbed content when compared to subtitled content. Future research could benefit from a larger and more varied sample, the inclusion of objective measures of political and religious attitudes, and using dubbed clips.

13. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the acceptance of swearwords in subtitles among Croatian university students. While gender, geographical background, and religiousness did not significantly influence swearword acceptance, political orientation did seem to play a small role, particularly among male and politically moderate respondents. These findings underscore the importance of considering audience characteristics in translation and media production to ensure culturally sensitive and appropriate content. Future research should aim to expand on these findings by exploring additional variables and employing larger, more diverse samples to better understand the acceptance of swearwords in subtitles and the media as a whole.

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