

The translation of law enforcement and drug dealers' slang in "The Wire"

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU
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ODSJEK ZA ANGLISTIKU**

**DIPLOMSKI STUDIJ ANGLISTIKE
SMJER: PREVODITELJSTVO**

Luka Boričević

Sleng policajaca i dilera u prijevodima serije *Žica*

Diplomski rad

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UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
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GRADUATE PROGRAMME
TRANSLATION TRACK

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in *The Wire***

Diploma Thesis

Supervisors: Nataša Pavlović, PhD
Vinko Zgaga

2022

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Abstract

When translating slang, the subtitler must decide whether to preserve or standardize the expression. The decision is based on the time and space constraints, but also affected by paratextual considerations such as the type of client (public/private TV), their norms and instructions. This study was conducted to inspect their influence on slang preservation vs. standardization through a comparative analysis of the Croatian subtitles of *The Wire* S01E01 which aired on both a public (HRT) and a commercial (HBO) TV network. A specific focus was put on the vulgar slang, examining the proportion of preserved, toned down and omitted vulgarisms in the target texts. Seeing that HRT is a public broadcaster committed to promoting the Croatian language and culture, it is to be expected that standard Croatian is preferred and most of the profanity avoided in the subtitles. Therefore, it is hypothesized that more slang expressions are standardized, and more vulgar slang is omitted or toned down in HRT compared to HBO subtitles. The results have confirmed the hypotheses. HRT subtitles preserved ~30 % of slang expressions compared to ~45 % in HBO subtitles. Furthermore, in HRT subtitles ~66 % of vulgarisms have been omitted, compared to ~45 % in HBO.

Keywords: subtitling, slang, preservation, standardization, vulgar slang, *The Wire*

Sažetak

Prilikom podslovljavanja slenga, prevoditelj/ica mora odlučiti hoće li ga očuvati ili standardizirati. Na tu odluku utječe ograničenje prostora i vremena, ali i vanjskih utjecaja na ciljni tekst, kao što su vrsta klijenta (javna/privatna TV), njihove norme i upute. Ovo je istraživanje provedeno kako bi se provjerio njihov utjecaj na očuvanje ili standardizaciju slenga kroz komparativnu analizu hrvatskih podslova pilot epizode serije *Žica* koja je emitirana na javnoj (HRT) i komercijalnoj (HBO) televiziji. Istraživanje se fokusiralo i na pregled strategije prevođenja vulgarnog slenga, odnosno njegovog očuvanja, ublažavanja ili izbacivanja iz konačnog prijevoda. Budući da je HRT javna televizija čiji su ciljevi promocija hrvatskog jezika i kulture, može se očekivati da je u podslovima preferiran standardni hrvatski jezik, dok se vulgarni izrazi izbjegavaju. Stoga hipoteze predlažu da je više elemenata slenga standardizirano, a elementi vulgarnog slenga ublaženo ili izbačeno iz HRT-ovih u odnosu na HBO-ove podslove. Rezultati potvrđuju inicijalne hipoteze,

budući da je u podslovima HRT-a očuvano ~30 % slenga u odnosu na ~45 % u podslovima HBO-a. S druge strane, iz HRT-ovih podslova izbačeno je ~66% vulgarnog slenga, u usporedbi s ~45% koliko je izbačeno iz podslova HBO-a.

Ključne riječi: podslovljavanje, sleng, očuvanje, standardizacija, vulgarni sleng, *Žica*

1. Introduction

The inspiration for this study came from a [2009 article](#) (“Used subtitles to watch *The Wire*?”) in *The Independent*, which said that many British viewers had to use English subtitles while watching the show. The native English-speaking audience did not understand all the drug dealers' and law enforcement slang and non-standard expressions. Naturally, people have an inherent need to understand what is being said and even native speakers of English will take the path of least resistance and bridge the gap using standardized English (intralingual) subtitles when they find non-standard English slang difficult to comprehend. The fact that native speakers need subtitles to figure out non-standard slang expressions from the show also brings into attention interlingual subtitles translated for foreign audiences who (generally) know even less about English slang.

But first, in order to understand why the translation of drug dealer's and police officers' slang is such an interesting research case, we must take a look at the broader picture and understand why language is so essential to *The Wire*. With the end of the 1990s and the advent of the 2000s came the gilded age of crime-drama television shows such as *Law & Order*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Cold Case*, *CSI: Vegas/Miami/New York*, *Criminal Minds*, *Third Watch*, etc. Along with these “cop shows” came shows like *NYPD Blues*, *The Shield*, *Homicide: Life on the Street* and *The Wire*, which are distinguished by their realism and authenticity in displaying real, down-to-earth police work without glorifying their role in society and turning the focus on the socioeconomic nature of crime rather than “catching the bad guy”. A big part of this authenticity, especially so in *The Wire*, is the slang used by both police and criminals in their daily activities that sometimes made even the Anglophone audience feel like a stranger in the world of crime and police procedure. *The Independent* interviewed the show's producer and writer, George Pelecanos, who shared some serious critique about watching *The Wire* subtitled into standard language (“Used subtitles to watch *The Wire*?”):

We wrote it so audiences would have to work at it! (...) It [subtitling] kind of reminds me of scenes from that [1980 disaster film spoof] comedy, *Airplane!*, when two black guys speak, and subtitles appear on the screen.

Essentially, the goal of the show's realistic reproduction of Baltimore street slang was not only to realistically reproduce the Baltimore city streets, but also to make the audience struggle with the

language and force them to slowly get familiar with it as they get more and more familiar with the socioeconomic and sociopolitical context of the story.

In a show where slang is such an integral part of the characters and the story, subtitles that do not preserve slang in the target language and instead standardize it to cater to the target audience could break the famous “Show, don’t tell!” rule of storytelling, or as Chekhov put it: "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." (Yarmolinsky, 1954: 14)

Taking this into consideration, one can only imagine what an immense challenge it is to subtitle a show like *The Wire* into another language. If native speakers of English are expected to struggle with the slang that law enforcement and criminals in *The Wire* use both on the job and off duty without using English subtitles, what should the subtitles for a non-English speaking audience look like? This audience has no choice but to use subtitles which are essentially the main conduit of meaning since they do not understand the source language. But how should meaning be conveyed in a case like this? Pelecanos feels that using standard English subtitles is a shortcut that takes away from the process of foreignization and serves the audience everything on a platter. If the translator wants to convey the meaning as it was intended by the creators of the show, the optimal solution is to translate slang with slang (i.e., preserve it); however, this may not always be possible.

Translating slang is a challenge for any subtitler, professional or amateur. The choice between translating slang with slang (preservation) and translating slang with standard language (standardization) depends on multiple factors. One must simultaneously take into account the media-specific constraints of subtitling (such as time, space and usually fast-paced deadlines), but also the company/broadcaster guidelines on the general translation strategy. According to Adams (2009: 32), slang has some negative connotations and a certain social stigma because in the past it has been associated with low social strata. Therefore, it is to be expected that not all slang would be welcome rendered in subtitles (especially the vulgar kind) – even when there is enough time and space for it. This mostly depends on the target audience and the platform the show airs on. In some cases, the translator may simply decide that translation of a slang phrase with standard language or simply omitting it is the best course of action in their case based on the unique time and space constraints present in subtitling and, in some other cases, the translator may be forced to standardize the source material to comply with company guidelines.

This study aims to compare the proportion of preservation vs. standardization of slang expressions in HBO's *The Wire* in the Croatian subtitles aired on the Croatian public broadcaster HRT and those on HBO's streaming platform. Another variable examined is whether slang is used by a member of law enforcement or a drug dealer/user in order to establish whether the type of character influences the subtitlers' choice between preservation or standardization. Additionally, considering the vast amount of derogative and vulgar slang expressions, the research will also analyze how the translators have dealt with vulgar slang expressions, i.e., whether they have omitted, toned down (still vulgar, but less so) or preserved them. These are the research questions:

- 1) What is the ratio of slang preservation vs. standardization in HRT and HBO subtitles?
- 2) What is the ratio of slang preservation vs. standardization depending on the speaker being a member of the law enforcement or a drug dealer (civilian) in HRT and HBO subtitles?
- 3) What are the proportions of vulgar slang that has been preserved, toned down or omitted in HRT and HBO subtitles?

2. *The Wire* (2002–2008)

Created by David Simon, a police reporter for the Baltimore Sun, *The Wire* is an HBO crime-drama TV series set on the streets and corners of Baltimore, a declining East Coast city with a majority African American population and a notoriously high crime rate – a problem still present, even nearly 20 years after the show started filming. *The Wire* deals with the Baltimore drug scene through the perspective of everyone involved in the War on drugs; from the bottom to the top – from the hoppers¹ and drug fiends² on the streets to the very top brass of the city law enforcement and politics. The show is considered “a particularly successful representation of social processes such as urban decay, political corruption, or criminalization of poverty” (Cvek, 2014: 5). McCollum (2008) has even dubbed it the Great American Novel of our time because it “dissected and explored the cultural, racial, political and economic strands that run through life in the city of Baltimore.” *The Wire* deals with the essence of modern United States of America, the downfall of American productivity and the corruption of the inner cities. Unlike the popular crime drama series like *CSI*, *NCIS*, *Bones*, etc., where the focus lies on solving individual cases and the “whodunit” puzzle to find the killer in each episode (Miller, 2012: 1016), policework in *The Wire* is deromanticized, tedious and boring. Members of the law enforcement do not work in some fancy skyscrapers with the most sophisticated technology and unlimited resources (unlike the FBI agents shown in the pilot episode as contrast). They sit around going through files of paperwork “following the money” and staking out phone booths for days waiting for the drug dealers to make a phone call and, in the end, justice is rarely fully served. The show's realism is dark and gritty, and the characters are far from black and white. Most of the drug dealers are simply kids from broken families who spend their time at Baltimore street corners instead of being at school. On the other hand, the police are often extremely flawed people; functional alcoholics, womanizers, workaholics and careerists who develop bad habits in order to cope with overwork in an underfunded police department, which takes a toll on their personal and family lives. They work in a faulty law enforcement system trying to cure the symptoms, while the city's disease goes on and even worse symptoms usually replace the old ones. This is why Tomić argues that the show transgresses the crime genre of a typical cop show (2010: 247) and focuses on the social context

¹ A child drug dealer.

² An addict.

of crime (2010: 252). The focus in *The Wire* is on the “whydunit”³, i.e., the socioeconomic nature of crime, much like in Scandi noir books and Scandinavian detective TV shows. When one takes into account all of this and the fact that characters use slang expressions like a *tester*, *collar*, *CI*, *title III*, *drop*, *hand-to-hand*, *buy-bust*, etc., it is easy to see why viewers expecting a cop show find it hard to watch and follow the plot. As a [2009 article](#) in The Telegraph (“The Wire: arguably the greatest television programme ever made”) states:

Baltimore's fallen world of drug dealers and urban decay will strike some viewers as a depressing subject, which it is. *The Wire* is deliberately dense, dark and difficult to watch. Storylines take the whole series to unravel, characters move in and out of focus – or are killed off without warning – as the labyrinthine plots develop, and some of the characters use street slang so impenetrable viewers are often forced to turn on the subtitles. David Simon, despairing of and despising most mainstream US television dramas, wants to force viewers of *The Wire* to concentrate and work hard for the show's rewards, just as they would when reading a challenging book.

Comparing popular cop shows and *The Wire* is like comparing apples and oranges. However, one could say that, when people who are used to eating apples try eating an orange, they eventually realize that it takes time and effort to peel them before they can enjoy the fruit.

³ A novel, film, etc, concerned with the motives of the criminal rather than his or her identity. (Collins Dictionary)

3. Slang

3.1 Dictionary definitions of slang

It is ironic, to say the least, that the word *slang* is American English slang for “to sell drugs, especially crack cocaine” (Dalzell, 2018: 716). However, if we look up the meaning of the word “slang” in some of the best general English dictionaries we see results such as:

- [Oxford English Dictionary](#):
A type of language consisting of words and phrases that are regarded as very informal, are more common in speech than writing, and are typically restricted to a particular context or group of people.
- [Merriam-Webster](#):
 1. language peculiar to a particular group: such as a : argot b : jargon
 2. an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech
- [Cambridge Dictionary](#):
very informal language that is used esp. in speech by particular groups of people and which sometimes includes words that are not polite
- [Collins Dictionary](#):
 1. obs. the specialized vocabulary and idioms as of criminals and tramps, the purpose of which was to disguise from outsiders the meaning of what was said
now usually called cant
 2. the specialized vocabulary and idioms of those in the same work, way of life, etc.
now usually called shoptalk, argot, jargon
 3. highly informal speech that is outside conventional or standard usage and consists both of coined words and phrases and of new or extended meanings attached to established terms: slang develops from the attempt to find fresh and vigorous, colorful, pungent, or humorous expression, and generally either passes into disuse or comes to have a more formal status

3.2 Adams's and Eble's take on slang

All of the dictionary definitions agree that slang is a type of informal language used by a certain group, and according to Eble (2012: 24), slang is primarily used to reinforce social identity and group cohesiveness. However, only some dictionaries say that slang is sometimes not polite. Eble (2012: 13) argues that because slang has been considered an anomalous, dirty language used by groups on the margins of society it has not been a subject of large-scale academic studies. Some of the dictionaries argue that it is more present in speech than writing and others use synonyms like argot, jargon and shoptalk to describe it. It is clear why in the preface of his book on slang, Adams (2009: vii-viii) claims that dictionaries are not compatible with each other regarding the definitive meaning of slang. Nevertheless, dictionary definitions of slang are still quite informative on the subject, and it is especially interesting to see the definition from the Collins dictionary that synonymizes slang with cant. This is in line with Eble's thoughts on groups such as criminals and drug dealers who "seem particularly adept at creating slang" (2012: 32), because cant is essentially what the drug dealers from *The Wire* use when doing business and saying things like *green top*, *one-on-one*, *tester*, *Tech Nine* or *two-and-two*, although, when the law enforcement officers do the same with words like *hand-to-hand*, *buy-bust*, *street rips* or *string*, it is the jargon of their profession. Therefore, in both cases, we have a group of people that use a sort of language on the job, they all understand each other, but someone outside the group will probably have a hard time picking up on the conversation. This is where the problem arises for the viewers of *The Wire* when they start watching the show and they are still not "in the know" regarding many of these terms. But what happens once the viewers pick up some of these terms and start using them in daily life because they want to sound cool or joke around after watching *The Wire*? Adams (2009: 9) argues that slang, argot (cant) and jargon are not characteristics of a word, instead, they apply depending on the user, context and intention as he explains it with the example of the word "mongo"⁴:

If art thieves strip your walls of mongo, mongo is argot; if sanitation workers pick up mongo at the curb, then mongo is jargon; when you and I talk about rummaging for mongo because we just read Ted Botha's book and we're all about the next big thing, then mongo is slang. (ibid)

⁴ Scavenged material (Dalzell, 2018: 528).

The same can be said for the word “*tester*”⁵: if drug dealers hand out testers to attract new customers and keep old customers coming back for more product, then *tester* is argot. If the police make a street rip and seize a bag of *testers*, then *tester* is jargon. If a group of friends jokes around about scoring some *testers* after watching *The Wire*, then *tester* is slang. However, it is far from saying that the three are one and the same. Slang and jargon have long been confused for each other because they share some characteristics and overlap, but a line needs to be drawn (Dumas and Lighter 1979: 12-13, Eble 2012: 37). Simply put, jargon is a language of vocation and slang is not (Adams 2009: 17). However, Eble (2012: 37) argues that in some cases jargon spills out of a certain profession and establishes itself as slang in a wider group of people.

Since the focus of this study is not on the nuances in the meaning of slang, argot and jargon, but translation strategies such as preservation and standardization of such informal language in subtitling, all expressions that fit the argot (cant) and jargon category are included in the study, and the term slang is used as an umbrella term to cover all of them.

⁵ A free drug sample (Urban Dictionary).

4. Subtitling

4.1 What is subtitling?

Subtitling, along with dubbing and voice-over, is a form of audiovisual translation (AVT) (Nikolić 2012:10). Unlike the latter two forms of AVT, in which the translation is rendered through audio, in subtitling the translation is done by means of a written text that usually appears at the bottom of the screen with the goal to relay the original dialogue and any other elements that appear on the screen (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 8). Subtitling can be divided into intralingual and interlingual. Intralingual subtitles are usually done for the deaf and hard of hearing (Nikolić 2012: 11), but they are also often used by non-native and sometimes even native speakers of English who have a hard time understanding a certain dialect or slang and having subtitles, as is the case with police and drug dealers' slang in *The Wire*. Interlingual subtitles are translated from a source to a target language (ibid.) and are meant for a foreign audience – such as the audience of HBO shows streaming in various countries around the world or the audience of foreign shows televised by the HRT in Croatia. Today, especially since the rise of popular streaming platforms such as Netflix, HBO, Amazon Prime, etc. subtitles are the most widespread form of AVT and a part of everyday life that is often glossed over and taken for granted.

4.2 The constraints of subtitling

Subtitling is an incredibly complex form of translation because it entails a specific set of challenges and constraints that the translator must face (Nikolić 2012:12) owing to the fact that there is a shift from oral to written language (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 9, Nikolić 2012:12, Pedersen 2005:14), which the TV viewers take in simultaneously with the audiovisual material (Nikolić, 2012:12). According to Pedersen (2005:14), this shift from oral to written language leads to a “condensation” of the dialogue in the TT that affects as much as 1/3 of the source material.⁶ Unlike other forms of translation, such as literary translation where the target audience only ever see the target text, in subtitling, the target audience can read the target text, hear the source text (ST) and also see the picture, of course – which complicates the entire process. As Pavlović (2004: 386)

⁶ In Scandinavian countries.

notes, in subtitling there is a “requirement to match the TT with the language component, the picture component and the sound component of the source product which is a polysemiotic text.” Further, while translating a novel the translator is not nearly as restricted by time and space as a subtitler might be while translating the same dialogue in the movie based on the same novel. The literary translation of a dialogue between two characters can be as long as they need it to be, but the subtitler cannot continue a dialogue between the characters once the frame ends because the next frame might be showing an entirely different plot, completely unrelated to the two characters while their dialogue in the subtitles would be a clumsy immersion-breaking loose end. Because of the “infamous time-and-space constraints” (Gottlieb 2004: 219), it is impossible to render and fit the entire dialogue inside the screen long enough for the viewer to read and comprehend.

This is why there are set restrictions of characters per second and characters per line, which in turn depend on various company guidelines, broadcaster and in-house rules. Therefore, as Nikolić explains:

Something has to be sacrificed, and what actually is sacrificed depends on the choices made by individual subtitlers which may depend on their education, expectancy of what viewers may know, even prejudice... (2012:12)

What is left out depends on the media-specific constraints of space and time, the subjective choices of the subtitler and also the outside influence on the subtitler. Pedersen (2005: 14-15) calls this outside influence “paratextual considerations” such as those issues related to the skopos (national norms, in-house rules, client instructions, domesticizing/preservation norms), TT audience (age group, presumed specialist knowledge or familiarity with the subject), broadcasting (air time, broadcaster type – private/public), and pragmatic matters (deadlines, financial incentive). Nikolić (2012: 101) elaborates on the pragmatic matters and highlights that we also need to consider the translator’s physical/environmental conditions, long hours of toil as well as their motivation to do the job in the first place. In the end, even if the translator has the best skills and all the time in the world to do a job, they might simply not be that interested in the source material to do justice to its complexity.

5. Previous research

Hamaida (2007: 5) agrees with the dictionary definitions of slang as non-standard colloquial spoken language and further elaborates that slang is a language that originates in the subcultures of a society and serves to reinforce group identity between the members of a certain group. For Puşnei (2014: 75), slang is a “slippery concept”, because of the difficulty in its detection and the dissonance in scholars’ definition of it. Additionally, Puşnei differentiates general slang from “specific slang” (ibid.), analogous to this study’s discussion on the nuances of slang (see 3.2). Essentially, for Puşnei (2014: 76), “specific slang” is comprised of jargon, argot and cant used by the mafia in *The Godfather* (1972), which is equivalent to the drug dealers’ slang from *The Wire* in this study. The definition of slang might be “slippery” and ambiguous, but the sociolinguistic function of slang in society and culture is unmistakable. In *The Godfather* (1972), slang serves several sociolinguistic functions, which include intensifying the power of expression, expressing various positive or negative emotions, expressing informal and familiar attitudes towards the interlocutor, expressing sarcasm and to some extent vulgarity and racism, depending on the context (Puşnei 2014: 76).

Slang and language in general serve to construct the speaker’s identity:

[...] characterization is one of the main functions of spoken dialog in novels, plays and films and that a character’s use of language or idiolect, which may include slang and/or dialect, can be of fundamental importance in helping to establish the identity of a character. (Hamaida 2007: 5)

Concerning slang translation, Puşnei (2014: 75) highlights the dilemma that, as we have previously mentioned (see 4.2), subtitlers face when translating slang, between “toning down and neutralizing” and trying to “interpret slang”. In the present study the same dilemma is framed as the choice between standardization and preservation, as was explained in the introduction (see 1.). Standardizing all the slang expressions in movies like *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Full Monty*, *Trainspotting*, *La Haine* and *Brokeback Mountain*, where language and slang play a crucial role – similar to the role of slang in *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Wire* – could “lead to the loss of nuances of meaning” (Hamaida 2007: 5). Preserving slang, when possible, can mitigate the effect of standardization; this can be done by translating ST slang with slang expressions used by similar groups in the target culture and by direct translation (Hamaida 2007: 11).

As mentioned earlier ([see 4.2](#)), subtitling is a specialized and constricted form of translation; however, things get even more complex when it comes to subtitling slang. There are additional constraints to take into consideration, as noted by Rittmayer (2009: 6):

- A) There may not always be an equivalent slang expression in the TL
- B) They may be more than one equivalent slang expression in the TL with subtle nuances in meaning, forcing the subtitler to choose
- C) There is always some form of censorship, either performed of the translator's own volition or imposed by some outside party.

Censorship is an unavoidable part of subtitling. It is most often driven by the in-house rules and client instructions, but there is also a cultural aspect to the matter – words that are taboo in the target culture are also taboo in the subtitles, therefore there is a higher chance that either the translator will remove them of his/her own volition or that the client will request them to be removed. For instance, sexual expressions are often censored, reduced in repetition and replaced with euphemisms (Rittmayer 2009: 6). Considering the fact that in the data material of this study a variation of the word “*fuck*” comes up 103 times, the level of censorship applied in the target text can have immense consequences, as Puşnei puts it:

When choosing to neutralize slang in order to avoid rudeness and vulgarity, the subtitlers tend to use the softening technique that has as a consequence the change of register from non-standard to standard. It aims to make the target text look natural to subtitle readers though it might sometimes disappoint them. (2014: 76)

Furthermore, regarding constraints A) and B) from Rittmayer's dissection of slang translation constraints, translating slang into standard language bears consequences. Not only does the translation sometimes feel “combed through” and neutralized, but imperfect or faulty in some cases. Galván (2015: 219) studied the appropriateness of complex term translation in the Spanish subtitles of *The Wire* based on Fillmore's Frame Semantics Theory (1975), comparing the frames triggered by the ST slang and those triggered by the translation.

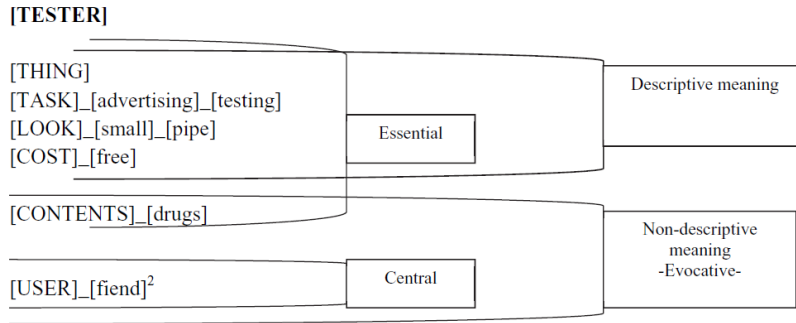


Figure 1: semantic frames of *tester* (Galván 2015: 221)

Figure 1 shows Galván’s (2015: 221) dissection of the slang term *tester*⁷ into semantic frames that the term evokes.

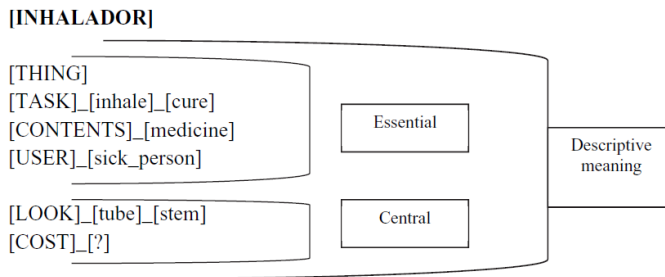


Figure 2: semantic frames of *inhalador* (Galván 2015: 222)

The Spanish subtitler translated *tester* into *inhalador* [inhaler]. Figure 2 shows the dissection of the semantic frames of *inhalador*, while Figure 3 shows the implied semantic frames of *inhalador* in the context of *The Wire*. It is clear that these do not reflect the original meaning that the word *tester* evokes in the ST.

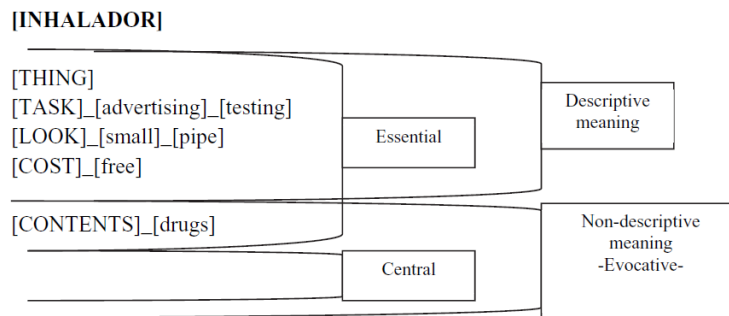


Figure 3: implied semantic frames of *inhalador* (Galván 2015: 222)

⁷A free drug sample (Urban Dictionary) - used by the drug dealers in *The Wire* to push new “products” and keep the “customers” coming back for more – similar to the perfume or hand lotion testers that can be found at a supermarket or drug store.

According to Galván (2015: 223), it is nearly impossible for the Spanish audience to perceive the word *inhalador* in a way the English-speaking audience perceives the word *tester*. Not only is it hard to imagine exactly how or why drug addicts would use inhalers to inject drugs, but we must also keep in mind the audiovisual nature of translation and the fact that the audience can see that what the drug dealers dispense does not even remotely look like an inhaler.

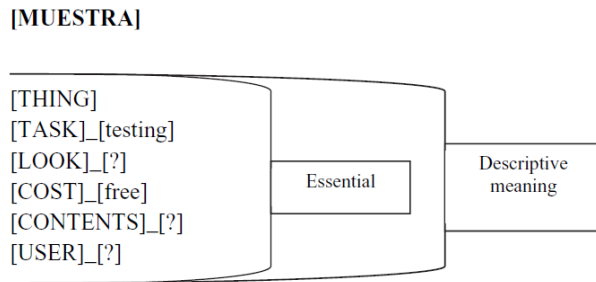


Figure 4: semantic frames of *muestra*, Galván’s (2015: 223) alternative translation

Therefore, Galván (2015: 223) offers an alternative to *inhalador* – the word *muestra* [sample] in Figure 4, which, owing to its vagueness, can fill the role quite adequately as Figure 5 shows.

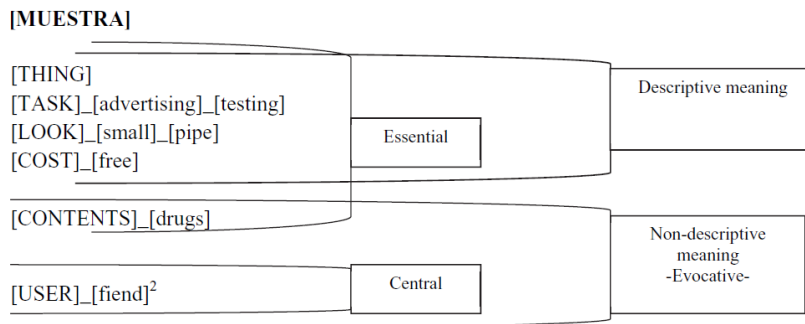


Figure 5: semantic frames of *muestra* with the addition of *tester* features (2015: 224)

It is hard to find an equivalent translation in the TL, sometimes impossible, and this is especially the case in TV shows like *The Wire* where “slang becomes vernacular” (Galván 2015: 224) and it is extremely important to fully understand what is being said.

6. Slang translation strategies

The taxonomy model for slang translation strategies used in this study (Figure 7) is loosely based on Pedersen's model of translation strategies (Figure 6) for rendering culture-specific items in subtitles which could, as he said, be modified for the study of slang, idioms, proverbs, dialects, etc. (2007: 2).

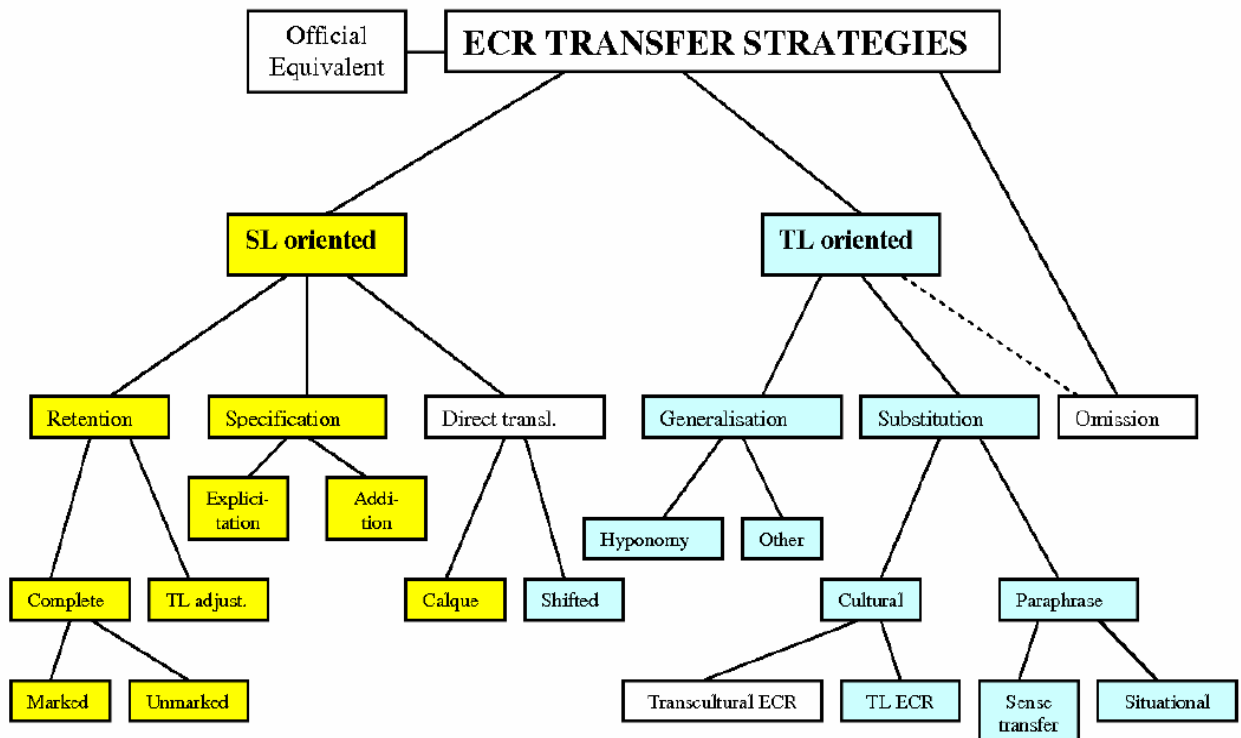


Figure 6: Pedersen's (2007) taxonomy of ECR transfer strategies

Pedersen developed his taxonomy in order to study culture-specific items in subtitling, therefore it is based on source language (SL) and target language (TL) oriented translation procedures (2007: 3). At first glance, it might seem appropriate for analyzing slang translation because it has all the standard translation procedures and the classic SL and TL orientation. However, this study aims to analyze slang preservation and standardization and those two categories do not equal SL and TL orientation, even though there is some overlap. The strategy of slang preservation, as defined in this study, is based on translating slang with slang. For instance, if a slang expression is

translated using an equivalent slang expression from the TL, it remains a slang expression in the TT, meaning that the slang form has been preserved. However, if a slang expression is translated using a standard expression or paraphrase, then there is no slang expression in the TT, which means that it has been standardized. Therefore, while substitution by a cultural equivalent is part of the TL-oriented strategies in Pedersen's taxonomy of ECR transfer strategies, in this study it is considered part of the preservation strategy, along with translation procedures like borrowing, calque and default translation. On the other hand, the slang standardization strategy includes only the aforementioned substitution by standard expression or phrase and the procedure of omission. Therefore, the following taxonomy of slang translation strategies will be used for the purpose of this study:

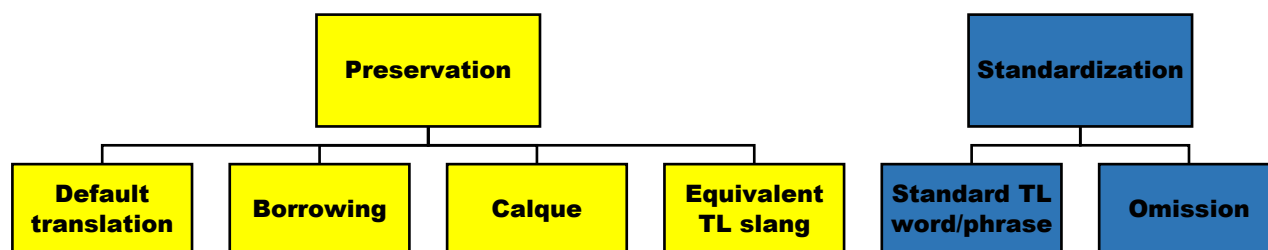


Figure 7: Taxonomy of slang translation strategies and procedures

6.1 Preservation procedures

The strategy of slang preservation comprises four main procedures:

Default translation is a procedure employed when the literal translation of a slang expression is also considered a pre-established translation via an intertextual corpus in the TL (Schmidt 2013: 543) or when a slang expression is simply the same in both the SL and TL when translated literally.

Here are some examples of default translation found in the subtitles:

man – čovječē

the same shit – ista sranja

he burned us for \$30 – skurio nas je za 30 \$

Borrowing is essentially the same procedure as retention in Pedersen's (2007: 4) taxonomy; it is the procedure closest to the SL since it either fully borrows or only slightly adapts the SL word to TL syntax. The term "borrowing" used in this study reflects the way the loan words work in a TL. If we take a look at the examples shown below, we will find that all these words have entered the Croatian glossary as borrowed loan words for things Croatian did not have a word for. Such "borrowed" words are generally used until such a word or phrase is coined that could replace them successfully and the speakers accept it and use it, as was the case with the word *offside* – *offside/ofsajd* – *zaleđe*.

Here are some examples of borrowing found in the subtitles:

tester – *tester*

crack – *crack*

craps – *craps*

Calque is the procedure of literal translation, a word-for-word translation that could appear "exotic" to the target audience, according to Pedersen (2007: 4). Often, the syntax of calque translation does not have a natural flow and some calque expressions might seem odd or unusual in the wider context.

Here are some examples of calque found in the subtitles and the context in which they were used:

fuck me – *jebeš mene*

A police officer is using an old-style typewriter, she gets frustrated after making a mistake and says:

Fuck me, I cannot type. – Jebeš mene, ne znam tipkati.

fell out – ispao je

A police officer is pondering on the nature of death of a decomposing body, frustrated that it might be a murder – which means that he would have to work the case and the unit's successful statistics would go down, so he says:

*This motherfucker probably came in here – Tip se došao posrati i ispao je
to take a shit and just fell out.*

Substitution with an equivalent slang expression is the procedure of translating slang with an equivalent TL slang expression. In their culture-specific item (CSI) translation procedure taxonomies, Schmidt (2013: 542) and Pedersen (2007: 6) use the term “cultural equivalent” for a CSI translated with an equivalent TL CSI. The same principle can be applied to the taxonomy of slang translation procedures.

Here are some examples of equivalent slang found in the subtitles:

asshole – seronja

pal – kompić

fall out – krepati

6.2 Standardization procedures

Substitution with a standard word or phrase is the process of translating a slang expression from the ST with a standard word or phrase in the TL. In his CSI translation procedure taxonomy, Schmidt calls this procedure “absolute universalization” (2013: 542), while Pedersen has both “generalization” and “substitution with a paraphrase” in his arsenal (2007: 6-8). In all of these cases, the culture-specific item was replaced with a standard word or rephrased to convey its meaning; the same was done in the subtitles of *The Wire* where many of ST slang expressions were substituted with a standard Croatian word or phrase.

Here are some examples of standard words or phrases replacing ST slang found in the subtitles:

why you fucking with me – zašto me gnjaviš

shitbag judge – smrdljivi sudac

decomp – tijelo u raspadanju

Omission is a standard translation procedure of replacing a culture-specific item with nothing, according to Pedersen (2007: 9), be it out of lack of effort, space or a better solution. The same principle can be applied to slang expressions in this research; however, we must also take into account the paratextual constraints that the translator is facing ([see 4.2](#)) such as various in-house rules, client instructions or even broadcaster guidelines on the censorship of vulgar expressions and standardization norms as is the case with some national broadcasters.

Here are some examples of omission found in the subtitles:

who the fuck is Avon Barksdale – tko je _____ Avon Barksdale

do me a favor buddy – učini mi uslugu _____

come on, man – ma daj _____

7. Aims of the research and research hypotheses

The aim of this study is to investigate the strategies and procedures used for the translation of slang in subtitling for public and commercial television. More specifically, the strategies of preservation and standardization of slang expressions are examined on the example of a case study of the pilot episode (S01E01) of *The Wire*. A comparison is made between the two types of broadcasters (HRT vs. HBO) and between the two sets of characters in the series (police vs. drug dealers). The study also focuses on the treatment of vulgar slang in translation, i.e., its removal, preservation or toning down.

The ratio of preservation and standardization of slang expressions in the Croatian subtitles of the pilot episode of *The Wire* that aired on HRT and HBO will be determined. Additionally, the ratio of preservation and standardization of law enforcement and drug dealers' slang and the proportions of removed, toned down and preserved vulgar slang expressions will also be calculated. The results will be shown in a transparent statistical overview from which conclusions can be drawn to confirm or refute the following hypotheses:

- H1 – More slang expressions have been standardized in HRT than in HBO subtitles.
- H2 – Translators have preserved more of the drug dealers' than law enforcement officers' slang expressions
- H3 – More vulgar slang expressions have been omitted or toned down in HRT than in HBO subtitles.

The first hypothesis (H1) is that, since HRT is a public broadcaster and has certain commitments to the Croatian language, culture and target audience (Nikolić, 2012: 39), more slang expressions would be standardized in its subtitles than in those that air on an international commercial streaming network such as HBO. The third hypothesis (H3) is that more vulgar and explicit slang expressions would be toned down or removed in HRT subtitles than in HBO subtitles, which would have more vulgar slang expressions preserved. As Nikolić (2012: 39) argues:

One of the aims of Croatian Radio and Television, HRT, is to protect and promote the Croatian language and this is why subtitlers as well are expected to follow certain rules: the avoidance of expletives for instance and the use of standard Croatian whenever possible.

With respect to the second hypothesis (H2), it could be argued that the translator may consciously or unconsciously manifest prejudice against slang users by preserving more of the drug dealers' slang while standardizing slang used by law enforcement officers, since drug dealers and criminals are known for their adept and creative use of slang (Eble 2012: 32).

8. Methodology

In order to conduct this comparative study, English source text (ST) and Croatian target text (TT) subtitles were extracted from the pilot episode of *The Wire* (S01E01), which was used as the data material. Croatian HBO subtitles were transcribed directly from the HBO streaming platform, while HRT subtitles were transcribed from the episode that aired on HRT⁸. Just like subtitling, the transcription of subtitles required a lot of focus, meticulous work and time-consuming double-checking. Once the process was done, the ST and TT subtitles were placed in three separate MS Word files where they could be viewed, edited and coded separately. The first step from this point was to locate and mark all slang expressions that fit the slang criteria (including all argot and jargon as elaborated in section 3.2) in the English ST subtitles. They were marked by a yellow highlighter and coded using a simple code system that would enable quick and precise searching and calculation of all of the instances of slang expressions depending on their respective category – which was based on the research questions. The coding system was facilitated by the MS Word “search document” feature, which proved extremely useful.

Here is an example of analysis and coding of ST slang:

No fucking way, pal . /SLANG COP/ /VLG/ /SLANG COP/

The first expression is coded using /SLANG COP/ /VLG/, which means that it was uttered by a member of the law enforcement and that it is a vulgar expression, while the second expression was coded only using /SLANG COP/, which means that it was used by a member of the law enforcement, but it is not a vulgar slang expression.

Slang expressions used by drug dealers (civilians) were coded using /SLANG CIV/.

For instance:

Eastside, Westside, everybody beefing . /SLANG CIV/

⁸ The subtitles were extracted purely for academic purposes and will not be shared or used in any other way.

As demonstrated above, all slang expressions in the ST are coded using one or two sets of forward slashes. The content of the first set marks the user, while the second set is only used to mark vulgar slang expressions – if the expression is not vulgar, nothing is marked.

This way we can quickly calculate:

- a) the total amount of slang expressions in the subtitle by searching /SLANG
- b) the total amount of slang expressions used by law enforcement by searching /SLANG COP/
- c) the total amount of vulgar slang expressions by searching /VLG
- d) the total amount of vulgar slang expressions used by law enforcement by searching COP/
/VLG

By replacing COP with CIV, the same can be done to search and count all the slang expressions used by drug dealers (civilians). The forward slashes help avoid the same letter combination from parts of the subtitles showing up in the search, while the spaces in between the sets of slashes help keep things more transparent.

The next step was to mark and code how all the slang expressions were translated in the Croatian subtitles. This was done using a similar code based on the slang translation strategy taxonomy developed earlier and described in [Section 6](#). The codes used can be seen in Figure 8.

SLANG > SLANG	PRESERVATION	
	borrowing	BOR
	calque	CALQ
	default translation	DEF
	equivalent TL slang	EQUI
SLANG > NO SLANG	STANDARDIZATION	
	standard TL word/phrase	STAN
	omission	OMI
NO SLANG > SLANG	*	
	compensation	COMP

Figure 8: TT slang translation codes

Vulgar slang was marked by three separate codes, depending on how it was translated. The vulgar slang translated utilizing borrowing, calque, default translation, equivalent TL slang and in some cases even replacing the word with a standard TL word/phrase was marked as preserved or toned down (still vulgar, but less so), while vulgar slang that was replaced with a standard TL

word/phrase or omitted was marked as removed. The codes are exhibited in Figure 9. The third option, “toned down”, was added because not all of the preserved vulgar slang was as vulgar as the original slang in the ST. For instance:

Motherfucker ain't have to put no cap in him though. /SLANG CIV/ /VLG/ /SLANG CIV/

Kreten ga nije baš morao metkom. /STAN CIV/ /VLG TND/ /STAN CIV/

Kill a man over some bullshit. 123 /SLANG CIV/ /VLG/

Ubiti ga zbog gluposti. /STAN CIV/ /VLG TND/

VULGAR > VULGAR		
	preserved	VLG PRES
	toned down	VLG TND
VULGAR > NO VULGAR		
	omitted	VLG REM

Figure 9: Vulgar slang translation codes

Similar to the coding process of the English ST, two sets of forward slashes were also used to code slang in the Croatian subtitles. The first set contains the code that marks the translation procedure and the speaker, while the second set contains the code marking the translator’s decision regarding translating vulgar and explicit slang. Once again, the second set of forward slashes is not used of the slang expression in the ST is not marked as vulgar. Two examples of the end result of slang coding are shown in Figure 10.

ST	HRT	HBO
<i>Fuck the paperwork.</i> /SLANG COP/ /VLG/	<i>Jebeš papirologiju.</i> /DEF COP/ /VLG PRES/	<i>Jebeš papirologiju.</i> /DEF COP/ /VLG PRES/
<i>Kima'll still be bangin' out her 24s on that old piece of shit.</i> /SLANG COP/ /SLANG COP/ /SLANG COP/ /VLG/	<i>Kima će dalje lupati izvještaje na toj starudiji.</i> /DEF COP/ /STAN COP/ /EQUI COP/ /VLG REM/	<i>Kima će i dalje tipkati izvješća na ovom sranju.</i> /STAN COP/ /STAN COP/ /DEF COP/ /VLG PRES/

Figure 10: Examples of slang coding

Using the two sets of code inside forward slashes makes it possible to quickly search both Croatian subtitles and quickly calculate:

- a) the total amount of slang expressions translated by any coded translation procedures by searching /EQUI, /STAN, /OMI, /DEF, etc.
- b) the total amount of slang expressions used by law enforcement and translated by a certain coded translation procedure by searching /EQUI COP/, /STAN COP/, /OMI COP/, /DEF COP/
- c) the total amount preserved, toned down or removed vulgar slang expressions used by the law enforcement searching COP/ /VLG PRES or TND or REM
- d) the total amount of specific translation procedures used to preserve, tone down or remove vulgar slang expressions by searching /EQUI COP/ /VLG PRES/, /STAN COP/ /VLG REM/

By replacing COP with CIV, the same can be done to search and count all the slang expressions used by drug dealers (civilians)

Even though the process of coding slang is painstaking and time-consuming and the end result might seem overly complicated at first glance, this process enables precise tracking, marking, correcting and counting more than 400 slang expressions found in the data material across three separate subtitles totaling in more than 1200 matches.

9. Results

9.1 Technical aspects of the data material

Since both subtitlers worked on the same audiovisual material, the effects of the media-specific constraints of subtitling (such as the shift from spoken to the written word and the time-and-space restrictions) act as controlled variables in the research. What differs the two sets of subtitles are the specific paratextual considerations such as the in-house rules and client instructions on the size and length on the individual subtitle.

The HRT subtitles have 568 lines, the characters per second (CPS) are capped at 15, the longest observed duration of the lines is ~7.000 seconds, the shortest is ~1.750 seconds. The longest row in HRT subtitles is 38 characters long, with several of them going up to 37 – the 38-character long row might have been an oversight or a one-time corner-cutting solution. HBO subtitles have 820 lines, while most lines have a CPS lower than 15, many go over the cap and some even into 20+ CPS. The longest observed on-screen duration of lines is ~5.000 seconds, while the shortest is only ~1.000 second. The longest row in the HBO subtitle is 37 characters and the rest only go up to 36. We may, therefore, consider 37 and 36 characters as a standard maximum row length in HRT and HBO subtitles of *The Wire* S01E01 respectively. Lastly, the minimal gap in HRT subtitles is the standard 0.500 and in HBO subtitles it is only 0.040 seconds.

All things considered, there are 250 fewer lines in the HRT subtitles, however, on average they are also longer in duration and include more text per row. This leads us to the best and clearest measure of the possible influence on the slang translation procedure of omission – the total amount of characters with spaces in each set of subtitles (HRT 24 587 – HBO 26 834). As Figure 11 shows, the numbers are much closer than what one would expect after viewing the rest of the technical aspects. Therefore, we can conclude that the HRT subtitler did not in all cases omit slang simply because there was no time or space for it. The differences in the final product are based on the paratextual considerations each of the subtitlers had to take into account – (national norms, in-house rules, various client instructions, domesticizing/preservation norms), target audience demographics and broadcaster related considerations.

	Lines	Max row	Max CPS	Max dur.	Min dur.	Min gap	Chars. w/s
HRT	568	37	15	7.000	1.750	0.500	24 587
HBO	820	36	15-20*	5.000	1.000	0.040	26 834

Figure 11: Technical aspects of the analyzed subtitles.

9.2 Research data

The research accumulated more slang expressions than initially expected from a single episode of data material. The pilot episode of *The Wire* (S01E01) yielded a total of 429 slang expressions. The results were processed using the codes described in the [Section 8](#) and extracted into an MS Excel file where they were juxtaposed, analyzed and prepared to be visually exhibited in the study. Figure 12 shows the results of this study, a cross-section of the total amount of slang expressions found in the English ST, the amount of slang expressions used by law enforcement officers and drug dealers, and the strategy of its translation in the HRT and HBO subtitles.

SLANG	TOTAL	LAW ENFORCEMENT	DRUG DEALERS
	429	254	175
HRT			
PRESERVED	128	82	46
	29,84%	32,28%	26,29%
STANDARDIZED	301	172	129
	70,16%	67,72%	73,71%
HBO			
PRESERVED	194	116	78
	45,22%	45,67%	44,57%
STANDARDIZED	235	138	97
	54,78%	54,33%	55,43%

Figure 12: ratio of slang preservation and standardization in HRT and HBO subtitles

Looking at the total results of the slang translation strategies from S01E01 of *The Wire*, a comparison must be drawn to Puşnei's results from the subtitles of *The Godfather* where 60% of slang expressions were standardized (2014: 77-78), since both studies point to a trend of slang standardization in subtitles. Both HRT and HBO translators standardized more slang expressions than they have preserved, 70.16% and 54.78 % respectively. However, as expected, there is a contrast between the two – the obtained results indicate a margin of 15,4 % between the two, i.e., 29.84 % of the total slang expressions in the ST were preserved in the HRT subtitles, compared to 45.22 % in the HBO subtitles. If the total amount of preserved slang expressions in the HRT (128) and HBO (194) subtitles are juxtaposed, we will find that there is 51.56 % more slang preserved in HBO compared to HRT subtitles. Which is consistent with the initial expectations of the first

research hypothesis (H1) that more slang would be standardized in the HRT subtitles than in the HBO subtitles.

It is also interesting to take a look at the oscillations between the overall slang translation strategy and the strategy utilized based on the speaker being a member of the law enforcement or a drug dealer (civilian). Contrary to initial expectations, the second research hypothesis (H2) that the translators have preserved more of the drug dealers' slang than that of law enforcement based on prejudice of slang users was not confirmed. The HBO translator appears to have manifested no conscious or unconscious prejudice against slang users while subtitling slang – the ratios of preservation and standardization of both law enforcement and drug dealers' slang are within <2 % of the overall slang translation strategy. In other words, the HBO translator's slang translation strategy did not differentiate based on the social background of the speaker. On the other hand, the HRT subtitler did the opposite of the expected in H2 and preserved more of the law enforcement slang than of the drug dealers' slang. The oscillation from the overall preservation strategy is ~6 % owing to the relatively low percentage of drug dealers' slang preserved.

To explain such a low rate of preservation of drug dealers' slang in HRT subtitles, we must factor in the strategy of vulgar slang translation that might have been influenced by the broadcaster guidelines, considering the fact that HRT is the Croatian public broadcaster. Therefore, we must take a look at Figure 13 which shows the ratio of vulgar slang translation strategies utilized in the Croatian subtitles of the show.

VULGAR SLANG	TOTAL	LAW ENFORCEMENT	DRUG DEALERS
	229	137	92
HRT			
TONED DOWN	8 3,49%	3 2,19%	5 5,43%
PRESERVED	70 30,57%	50 36,50%	20 21,74%
OMITTED	151 65,94%	84 61,31%	67 72,83%
HBO			
TONED DOWN	23 10,04%	15 10,95%	8 8,70%
PRESERVED	103 44,98%	64 46,72%	39 42,39%
OMITTED	103 44,98%	58 42,34%	45 48,91%

Figure 13: Ratio of toned down, preserved and omitted vulgar slang in HRT and HBO subtitles

The data clearly show that the HRT subtitler also removed more of vulgar drug dealers' slang (72.83 %) compared to that of the law enforcement (61.31 %). This entails the use of standardization procedures such as omission and substitution with a standard word/phrase (usually non-vulgar or simply toned down) – which, in turn, resulted with a lower overall rate of drug dealer preservation.

Furthermore, there is a larger amount of preserved vulgar slang in HBO subtitles (44.98 %) compared to HRT subtitles (30.57 %). Most of the vulgar slang in HRT has been removed (65.94 %) and only a minor part toned down (3.49 %). This means that only ~34 % of vulgar slang has been preserved in some shape or form in HRT compared to ~55 % in HBO subtitles (44,98 % + 10.04% toned down), thus confirming the third hypothesis (H3) that more vulgar slang expressions have been removed or toned down in HRT than in HBO subtitles.

10. Conclusion

The data produced by this study confirmed two initial hypotheses (H1 and H3) and refuted one (H2).

In total, more slang expressions were standardized in HRT (70,16 %) than in HBO subtitles (54,78 %) (H1). However, it must also be highlighted that both translators standardized more slang than they have preserved, which corresponds with earlier Pušnei's results (2014: 77-78). Nevertheless, the results suggest that the HBO subtitler had more creative liberty for slang translation and fewer constraints considering the in-house rules and broadcaster guidelines. Contrastingly, it is evident that the HRT subtitler utilized a strategy of slang standardization in order to adhere to client norms and instructions regarding the use of standard Croatian language.

As expected, more vulgar slang expressions were omitted or toned down in HRT (65.94 % + 3.49 %) than in HBO subtitles (44.98 % + 10.04 %), thus confirming the third hypothesis (H3). These results suggest that, in addition to having fewer constraints regarding general slang translation, the HBO translator also had more “wiggle room” when it came to vulgar slang expressions and their preservation.

The findings of this research, therefore, further reinforce Nikolić's claim that subtitlers working for HRT are expected to avoid using vulgar expressions and try to use standard language (2012: 39).

Lastly, the hypothesis that the translators preserved more of the drug dealers' than law enforcement slang based on prejudice of slang users (H2) has been proven false. The ratios of preservation/standardization of drug dealers' and law enforcement slang in the HBO subtitles are almost identical, which indicates that the impact of the social group of the speaker was not as strong as the impact of the type of network and their guidelines. On the other hand, the HRT subtitler had done the opposite of what was proposed in the hypothesis (H2) and standardized more of the drug dealers' slang than that of the law enforcement, although, this was most likely due to the vulgarity of drug dealers' slang, which is evident from Figure 13. The HRT subtitler removed more vulgar slang used by the drug dealers' than by law enforcement officers, resulting in an even lower rate of overall preservation of drug dealers' slang. This may be based on the substance of those vulgar slang expressions that were for some reason less acceptable to air on public TV than

the vulgar slang expressions used by law enforcement officers. Perhaps this part of the study could be a basis for a larger study of the translation of vulgar expressions in subtitles.

It would be interesting to see the results of a larger study of the translation of slang in subtitles that could overcome some of the limitations of this study. In particular, even though the study included a significant amount of slang expressions, it covered merely two translations of a single episode translated by only two subtitlers, meaning that it could have been influenced by their skill, experience, physical/environmental conditions, motivation and subjective choices. Besides that, an analysis of any other episode of the *The Wire* would have yielded quite different results. Ideally, a larger study could span an entire season of the show. Furthermore, one of the things that were not done in this study but may be advisable to consider in a broader study, with more resources at hand, is to measure the length of the line where omission was utilized and evaluate whether it was done due to limitations of time and space or because of paratextual considerations. This method could render a clearer picture of the use of omission as a translation procedure.

The overall quality of the subtitles was not in the focus of this study and it is hard to tell how much of an effect the slang translation strategy had on it. Hamaida (2007: 5), Rittmayer (2009: 7) and Puşnei (2014: 76) certainly argue that the standardization of slang expressions leads to the loss of nuanced meaning and the original flavor. In the end, it depends on those who writing, acting, producing, filming, airing and subtitling a TV show is all about – the target audience. Some viewers may find slang-laden HBO subtitles more vivid, juicy and challenging, while others may find them hard to follow and too explicit. Contrastingly, some viewers may find standardized HRT subtitles perfectly balanced for a relaxed, smooth and pleasurable viewing experience, while others may find them sterile and mundane. Perhaps a large-scale reception study on the demands of target audiences could influence the future norms of slang translation and the quality of subtitles in general.

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