

An Investigation into Culture-loaded Items Translation: A Case of Swearwords Subtitling

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Abstract: Due to cultural variances, the application of swear words varies significantly across languages. This necessitates a heightened level of diligence in their translation, especially in the context of Audio-Visual Translation (AVT). In film, subtitles are expected to convey the most pertinent information succinctly, a task complicated by the intrinsic constraints of AVT. The current research is dedicated to examining the English subtitling of Chinese swear words. It aims to identify the dominant techniques employed in translation and to explore the potential rationale behind translators' choices.

Keywords: Culture-loaded items; AVT; Swearwords

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Swear words, often perceived as impolite or offensive, have historically been overlooked in linguistic studies, especially in film, a medium with a broad audience base. Despite this, as Ljung (1984) asserts, swearing is a universal linguistic phenomenon, present in all languages. Swearing is commonly associated with derogatory or taboo elements, and is typically avoided in formal settings. However, Crystal (1995) argues that swear words are a natural component of language, effectively expressing strong emotions like frustration or anger. This suggests that swear words serve broader functions than merely being offensive; they are laden with emotional significance. Timothy Jay (1992) emphasizes the importance of studying this widespread phenomenon for psychologists, linguists, and communication experts. This leads to the challenge of translating swear words accurately across languages. Swear words are culturally specific, with each nation defining them uniquely. The translation of these words, particularly in audio-visual media, is complicated by additional contextual factors. While some translators opt for omission or euphemistic alterations, a comprehensive understanding of swearing, including context and cultural nuances, is crucial for effective translation.

Andersson and Trudgill (1992) define swear words as expressions related to culturally taboo or stigmatized concepts, emphasizing their use in conveying strong emotions and attitudes rather than their literal meaning. They argue that swear words fill linguistic gaps in situations where no other words seem appropriate. Timothy Jay's 1992 work provides a seminal psycho-linguistic analysis of American offensive language, categorizing swear words based on semantic domains such as sexuality, aggression, and racial slurs. However, this approach has its limitations in universal applicability. Wajnryb (2005) addresses this by considering the context in her research, identifying three primary functions of swearing-catharsis, aggression, and social connection-that transcend cultural barriers. Regarding the translation of swear words, particularly in films, challenges arise from temporal, spatial, and censorship constraints. Cintas (2001) discusses the complexities of subtitling offensive language, noting its significant role in character development and viewer impact. Chen (2004) observes that Chinese subtitles often under-translate swear words, leading to a loss of information. This inadequacy is attributed to linguistic, psychosexual, and religious differences between Western and Chinese cultures. Similarly, Cintas and Remael (2007) note that offensive language is often moderated or omitted in subtitles due to constraints. José Javier Ávila (2015) explores eight translation techniques for swear words in Audio-Visual Translation (AVT), aiming to understand their treatment within this field.

The research data was sourced from the official subtitles of the film *Mr. Six*. Analysis of the subtitles reveals a total of 2145 lines,

with 164 lines featuring swearing expressions. Notably, some lines contain multiple swear words, resulting in a total count of 173 swear words in the Chinese subtitles. The selection of target texts was guided by criteria outlined by Jiang (2000), who categorizes Chinese swearing into three types: 1) expressions containing swear words and their meanings; 2) swear words devoid of explicit meanings; and 3) expressions without swear words but conveying a swearing intent. The data collection adhered to these three classifications.

Table 1 Distribution of Swearwords in *Mr. Six*

Swearwords in <i>Mr. Six</i>	
Cathartic Swearing	42
Abusive Swearing	124
Social Swearing	7
Total	173

As illustrated in Table 1, the film contains a total of 173 swear words. Within this dataset, abusive swear words constitute the largest category, amounting to 124 instances. Cathartic swear words are also significant, comprising 42 instances. Swear words used for social connection are the least prevalent, with only 7 occurrences. This predominance of abusive swearing is indicative of the film's thematic focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Table 2 Translation Techniques of swearwords in *Mr. Six*

Translation Techniques Adopted in <i>Mr. Six</i>	
Literal Translation	6
Calque	-
Explication	-
Substitution	88
Transposition	-
Compensation	5
Omission	60
Reformulation	14

Analysis of the data presented in the aforementioned table indicates that substitution and omission are the predominant translation techniques employed in the English subtitles of the film. This distribution aligns with the inherent characteristics of Audio-Visual Translation (AVT), which is intrinsically constrained by time and space. Consequently, in AVT, detailed descriptions of the source text are often unfeasible in the target text, leading to the omission of information deemed minimally relevant to the audience's comprehension of the film. Additionally, when addressing culture-specific elements within the film, substitution is frequently utilized to cater to the preferences and understanding of the target audience.

Table 3 Abusive Swearing

Translating Abusive Swearwords		
Translation Technique	Number	Proportion (≈%)
Omission	41	33.1%
Substitution	59	47.6%
Compensation	5	4.0%
Reformulation	13	10.5%
Literal Translation	6	4.8%

Table 3 reveals that in the translation of the film, substitution and omission are the most frequently utilized techniques, accounting for 33.1% and 47.9% of instances, respectively. Additionally, reformulation is employed to translate 10.5% of abusive swearwords. Within the relevance-theoretical framework, these approaches, being target language-oriented, facilitate audience comprehension when direct translation of original linguistic properties is challenging. In *Mr. Six*, the 124 instances of abusive swearing exhibit varying degrees of offensiveness.

Table 4 Cathartic Swearing

Translating Cathartic Swearwords		
Translation Technique	Number	Proportion (≈%)
Omission	16	38.1%
Substitution	24	57.1%
Compensation	1	2.4%
Reformulation	1	2.4%
Literal Translation	-	-

The data presented in the table leads to the conclusion that substitution and omission remain the primary translation techniques, constituting 38.1% and 57.1% of cases, respectively. Compared to abusive swearing, cathartic swear words generally exhibit a lower level of insult or offensiveness, making it easier to identify equivalent translations. Consequently, translations of certain cathartic swear words with minimal insult can be justifiably omitted.

Table 5 Social Swearing

Translating Social Swearwords		
Translation Technique	Number	Proportion (≈%)
Omission	3	42.9%
Substitution	4	57.1%
Compensation	-	-
Reformulation	-	-
Literal Translation	-	-

Despite their less frequent occurrence compared to abusive and cathartic swearing, social swear words are equally significant in their function. Characterized by the lowest degree of offensiveness among the three categories, social swearing typically arises in familiar settings, often serving as intensifiers for adjectives or as markers of intimacy among close friends. When translating such swear words in films, the use of omission or substitution is unlikely to impede audience comprehension, given their contextual nature and function.

This study focuses on the translation of swear words from Chinese to English, utilizing bilingual subtitles from the film *Mr. Six*. The swear words are categorized based on their functions, and the analysis reveals a target language-oriented approach in the English subtitles. Results show that substitution and omission are the predominant translation techniques, with most swear words deemed effectively rendered.

Despite the apparent completion of this research, several limitations are acknowledged. Firstly, the data is sourced exclusively from one film, leading to a skewed distribution that may affect the choice of translation techniques. Additionally, the film's use of Beijing dialect may not resonate with audiences in Southern China. Establishing a more comprehensive database of swear words from various regions in China would enhance the study's validity. Secondly, as a non-native English speaker lacking specific expertise in the field, the author's interpretations may lack depth. Engaging in further reading and interaction with native speakers could significantly enhance the author's analytical skills and understanding of English swear words.

References:

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